

Hebrews 12:18-24

**Hills of Lent: Mt. Zion**

Have you ever been in the hallway or the waiting room outside a couple offices where two different meetings were taking place? From behind one door you could hear lots of laughter and a good time? And behind the other you could hear – nothing. When the doors opened people poured out of the one room filled with energy and vitality! But from the other room people exited looking discouraged, no chatter among themselves, most were gloomy.

Which of the two rooms would you have been happier visiting?

As we make our way to the final “Hill” of our 5-week series today, we’re comparing two different mountains. We visited the first a couple weeks ago, Mt. Sinai, the place Moses brought the people after leaving the tyranny of slavery in Egypt; the place where the ten commandments were delivered.

But we’re reminded that Mt. Sinai isn’t our final destination!

[READING Hebrews 12:18-24]

<sup>18</sup> You have not come to a physical mountain, to a place of flaming fire, darkness, gloom, and whirlwind, as the Israelites did at Mount Sinai when God gave them His laws.

<sup>19</sup> For they heard an awesome trumpet blast and a voice with a message so terrible that they begged God to stop speaking. <sup>20</sup> They staggered back under God’s command: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.” <sup>21</sup> Moses himself was so frightened at the sight that he said, “I am terrified and trembling.”

<sup>22</sup> No, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to thousands of angels in joyful assembly. <sup>23</sup> You have come to the assembly of God’s firstborn children, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God Himself, who is the judge of all people. And you have come to the spirits of the redeemed in heaven who have now been made perfect. <sup>24</sup> You have come to Jesus, the one who mediates the new covenant between God and people, and to the sprinkled blood, which graciously forgives instead of crying out for vengeance as the blood of Abel did.

<sup>25</sup> See to it that you obey God, the one who is speaking to you. For if the people of Israel did not escape when they refused to listen to Moses, the earthly messenger, how terrible our danger if we reject the One who speaks to us from heaven! <sup>26</sup> When God spoke from Mount Sinai His voice shook the earth, but now He makes another promise: “Once again I will shake not only the earth but the heavens also.” <sup>27</sup> This means that the things on earth will be shaken, so that only eternal things will be left.

<sup>28</sup> Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be destroyed, let us be thankful and please God by worshiping Him with holy fear and awe. <sup>29</sup> For our God is a consuming fire.

There are seven images describing the first mountain, Mt. Sinai:

- The mountain cannot be touched
- burning with fire
- darkness
- gloom
- a storm or whirlwind
- a trumpet blast
- and a voice delivering somber words

Well, it was terrifying to the people. At Mt. Sinai, Moses was commanded: **“Set boundary lines that the people may not pass. Warn them, ‘Be careful! Do not go up on the mountain or even touch its boundaries. Those who do will certainly die! Any people or animals that cross the boundary must be stoned to death or shot with arrows.’”**

Think about this desert barrenness ...erupting with burning fire, the blasting sound of a trumpet – and the word that made them all shudder, “Let no one cross the boundary – lest they die!”

The whole scene was meant to terrify! God is heard saying, “Stay away!”

It’s a teaching moment: there is a holiness about God that can not be penetrated by the efforts of mere mortal man. God calls one ...to come forward, and Moses admits his own fear and panic.

Those who gathered at Mt. Sinai begged that God not speak to them anymore.

Now, there’s something different at this other mountain. Mt. Zion is described as a joyous festival! You see, we have not come to the dreadful mountain, but we have come to

- the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God!
- We have come to thousands of angels in joyful assembly.
- ...to the Church of the firstborn children
- You have come to God Himself
- No longer is God hidden or distant! You are escorted into the presence of a mighty God who enjoys your companionship!

The frightening description of blazing fire, darkness, and gloom, the pandemonium of whirlwind, trumpets blasting, and the threatening command ...fades before the joyful praise of angels and Christian followers! The bible describes a festive day!

To be sure we understand: these two mountains present two ways of relating to God!

Sinai was God’s presence without a Savior, without a cure for sin. On one mountain you have a trembling Moses and people who cry out, “We can’t stand to hear His words!” and on the other mountain you have Jesus, the High Priest, who says *what?*

Come! You belong here!

Mt. Zion reminds us of our conversion, our faith in Jesus Christ! And Jesus brings us past that other mountain, into the living room of our heavenly Father!

Too many times, we find believers who rejoice with Christ, set free from fear – the fear of death, the fear of judgement, the fear of failure ...only to return to Mt. Sinai, demanding that others take on that heavy load *no one* could carry – the expectation of perfection!

Friends, we come into the sanctuary of the living God – not because of anything *you* have done – but because Christ Jesus broke the power of sin and death, and I mean your sins – from yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

I don’t really think we *shock* or *surprise* God ...with *tomorrow’s* flaws and failures.

God *loves* you! And He chooses to overlook your sin – when you yield your life to Jesus Christ and follow Him! *That’s why* we find the festival of a thousand voices singing praises on Mt. Zion! Yes! You can rejoice because you have come to a God of kindness, mercy, forgiveness and love! Amen?

Those who misunderstand the gospel of Jesus Christ go back to Mt. Sinai, relying on the rules and laws – to feel like they’ve accomplished something. And trying and trying and trying to earn God’s blessing brings misery because you *never* measure up!

When the bible says “you have come to Mt. Zion, the city of the living God...” it refers to

your spiritual rebirth – because you believe in the kindness, mercy and grace of God!

You have come to something that cannot be touched, but it is real! We are still a pilgrim-people; still on the journey – but we have “arrived” at the destination God arranged for us!

Do our ministries and messages, our teaching and our lives reflect this good news? And does our song and worship declare to new friends the festive joy of Mt. Zion?

That raises three questions for the Church today:

1. Are we calling people to grace and kindness?

At the beginning of his book *What’s So Amazing About Grace*, Philip Yancey tells of a personal meeting that brought the power of this question home: A prostitute came to him with terrible problems: homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through tears she told him the most revolting story. It sickened Yancey. At last he asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. “I will never forget the look of pure, naive shock that crossed her face. ‘Church!’ she cried. ‘Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.’”

Yancey goes on to reflect that people, the worst of people, always seemed to be drawn to Jesus rather than repelled by Him. In fact, it seems the lower and more miserable a person is the more they are attracted to Jesus. How is it possible for the Church, then, to repel the same people who are so drawn to Jesus?

In certain seasons of our Christian life we seem to latch onto the idea that it’s more important to drag people to Mt. Sinai, pulling their hair to hold their heads back, forcing them to face the storm, to feel the red-hot flash of lightning, and tremble at the booming Voice, screaming, “Isn’t this great?”

Most unholy people can’t stand Sinai and cry out, “I don’t want to listen to that voice anymore!”

What I’m saying is that we can run the people God wants to attract most ...in a different direction when they see us approaching. It’s a shame if people never hear the music of joy in the heavenly city because the thunder from the ominous cloud drowns it out!

Are we calling people to God’s grace and kindness?

2. Are we calling people to a relationship?

Dear Abby received a letter from a couple who had retired and moved to Florida, telling about a sad experience that is becoming all too familiar. They had chosen to live in a small town because of its beauty and slow-paced lifestyle. They hoped to find a new network of friends and so they joined a Church, but they found the network within the Church was already “closed” to new comers. After months of trying to reach out ...they gave up. The advertised motto for the Church said: “Come and Belong,” but their experience told them it wasn’t possible to “belong.”

You know, it’s important that we examine how easy – or how difficult – it is for people to feel like they *belong* here. One of the ways we’ve chosen to help people find a place to belong is through a small group support-network, where we can *listen* to each other and get to know one another and pray together and encourage each other’s families through the drought and storms of life. In fact, I hear stories from others here who have grown into such meaningful friendships – for the first time in years – through their small group.

The challenge for those groups is how we can multiply that opportunity to embrace *more* in the festival at Mt. Zion! Believers should especially understand the urgency to love – and yet •we can be the most resistant.

The idea is to connect with new friends – but the problem is the connection we have with

old friends! Can we invite others to “Come” to God who has an open door at Mt. Zion?

Are we calling people to a relationship?

3. Are we calling people to joy?

In the book *Smoke on the Mountain*, the author describes the Sunday Sabbath as an anthropologist, as one who studies the habits and values of a “tribe” ...playfully using a Martian visiting and observing what happens on this planet.

You know, Sunday is a unique day in America. It doesn't have the same pattern as Monday through Friday. The Martian notes that across the United States there seems to be an activity of sun worshiping. He notes that on this third rock from the Sun, this one day in seven is set aside for religious worship of the sun. S-U-N. He observes the sometimes rowdy ritual conducted in open air, drawing large crowds to stadiums or to bodies of water. Some of the religious followers focus on a holy ball, striking it with a wooden stick and others chasing the ball across the yard. Others go down to the ocean's edge, stripping almost naked and hurling themselves in ecstasy into the water while others, apparently exhausted, anoint their bodies with holy oils and lay flat on the ground, surrendering completely to the deity.

Now the Martian also identifies a small group of unbelievers who have rejected sun worship. They dress rather soberly and gather behind closed doors in stained-glass buildings, obviously designed to keep the sunlight out. Their faces and gestures demonstrate none of the religious devotion practiced by the sun worshipers. In fact, they seem to appear passive, nearly sluggish, as though blank of all thought or emotion.

Is the Martian wildly wrong, or fantastically right?

Is God jealous of the enthusiasm your favorite team creates?

Have you come to Mt. Zion, where you celebrate God's grace and kindness, His mercy, His acceptance, and His love? Are you rejoicing in the majesty of Jesus Christ so that others are in awe? Will people point to that Church on the Hill, to that incredible faith and optimism, and say, “They've got something I need!”

Maybe you've spent too much time on Mt. Sinai, and you need a clearer view of Mt. Zion, to hear the courageous songs sung by confident believers who know beyond a shadow of a doubt that our God is great!

Where *are* we finding “joy” in our Church?

When I look around at those who are talking about the experience they're having with their small group, and the relationships to which God is bringing them – they beam with joy!

When I hear about the connection people are making with friends in the community through the Shared Blessings food pantry, and the friendships developing between those engaged with our children here or in the schools, I see the joy!

When neighbors move beyond their own isolation into new friendships, they experience joy!

When I hear friends describe how God has touched them ...because they understand for the first time what it means to be loved and accepted, I hear the joy!

And when God's people are stirred by the words of the songwriters so that they want to lift their hearts in praise – we're all touched by joy!

“Come! Come to Mt. Zion...”? We want to love you as we have been loved. We want to open our hearts to you as we have found God's love stretching down from heaven ...with thousands of angels in joyful assembly. Yes! You are invited to the assembly of God's firstborn children, whose names are written in heaven; to God Himself. And you have come to the spirits of the redeemed in heaven who have now been made perfect.

Rejoice, give thanks! And sing!

INVITATION: Come to confession. Confess that you are powerless over temptation and sin. Ask Jesus to come again, to fill your heart and your life with His Spirit. If you need help breaking free from the habits that bring you down, ask God to break the power sin has had over you!

I'm begging God for His help in my life – because I can't change on my own! But I have found His power and kindness is sufficient – for He is our strength!