

## Hebrews 12:4-24

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
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Two Mountains

The Word of the Lord from Hebrews 12:22: “But you have come to Mount Zion.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Out in the wilderness in the book of Exodus, the Lord made Himself known to the people of Israel in a couple of different places.

One of those places was the top of Mount Horeb: that’s where He descended in a cloud of glory to give the Ten Commandments to Moses. That’s the mountain that you hear about in our epistle, where the Lord came “in a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet.” Limits were set all around the mountain, and the people were warned not to touch it – if they got too close to Holy God, they would die. Furthermore – and this is something often missed, I think – when God first gave His Ten Commandments, He didn’t give them to Moses alone. He spoke them to all of the people. That’s something that many wish for – no preacher, no Bible, but God speaking in an audible voice directly to them. But what was the peoples’ response? As soon as the Lord finished the Ten Commandments, they turned to Moses; and they begged him not to let God speak to them anymore. “You speak to us, and we will listen,” they said. “But do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (Exodus 20:19).

It’s not exactly a warm and fuzzy picture of God meeting His people whom He had delivered. They were terrified of Him, and the reason is clear. God appeared in His power and holiness; and between that and the Law that He spoke, the people were acutely aware of their sinfulness, their unholiness. People often express comfortable ideas about meeting God, confident that He’s a friend who will certainly overlook their sin and just love them for who they are. It’s as if they believe they’ve tamed God so that He doesn’t care about righteousness anymore. But our epistle and Exodus warn that it is not so: when sinners come into the presence of Holy God, it’s not a pleasant encounter for them. It’s not just that they can’t be in His presence and live; but further, they want to get away from Him. They can’t bear to be near Him with their sin. Like bugs when the light is turned on, they want to scurry back into darkness.

You’ll be tempted to become complacent about sin, to think that God doesn’t care about it – or that He only gets mad at “big” sins. But our epistle says otherwise: without holiness – without perfect sinlessness, you cannot see the Lord or be in His presence and live. It is why our text commands you to strive to be at peace with everyone, because the antagonism that arises from pride and selfishness is sin; and that sin will kill you before God. It is why the text warns against a root of bitterness, because bitterness at one’s situation leads to the abandonment of God in favor of worshiping idols. It is why you are warned against all sexual immorality and unholiness. All of this sinfulness separates you from God. Try to get close to Him stained with sin like that, and you’ll be struck down at the foot of the mountain. That is why, of the sins in our text, the worst one is to fail to obtain the grace of God.

And that's really the theme of all of our lessons today: the warning of trying to come into God's presence in heaven for eternity by your own works, by your self-justification. By nature, you'll believe that it is left to you to atone for your sins, to do enough good things so that you make up for the bad. Worse, by nature you'll believe that you can actually do this. But keep Mount Horeb in mind, and note what our epistle says. God didn't command, "Try to climb if you want, and the more holy you are, the further up you'll get." He said, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." You're not going to get to heaven and live in the presence of God by your holiness. Don't even think about climbing that mountain by your good works, and repent whenever you do.

God drew near to His people at Sinai in one other place. Away from the mountain and outside the camp, Moses pitched a tent. We have no record of its size or appearance, but one man was apparently able to set it up and there's no reason to think it was particularly big. But Moses would go to this tent on occasion. When he did so, God would come in that cloud of glory and enter the tent, too. He would speak His Word to Moses so that Moses would then speak it to the people. It was there, even after the people worshiped a golden calf, that God declared that He would faithfully deliver His people to the Promised Land. He wouldn't do so because of their holiness and obedience, but because He had promised to do so.

That tent, the Tent of Meeting, may not have looked like much. But it pointed to another tent – the tabernacle, which would soon be constructed. The tabernacle would be the place of worship for Israel in the wilderness. God would descend in His cloud of glory and dwell in the inner chamber, in the Holy of Holies. There, sacrifices would be made to God; and because sacrifices were made, the high priest would be able to enter the Holy of Holies. He would be able to stand in the presence of God. Where the message of Mount Sinai was, "Don't come up here!" the message of this tent was, "You may come into My presence *if* the sacrifice is made." That tabernacle pointed to the temple, the building that would stand in Jerusalem, on the hill called Zion.

All of this pointed to Jesus. So that you could come into God's presence and dwell with Him forever, the Son of God became flesh, born of the Virgin Mary. He lived a perfect, sinless life, free of bitterness and immorality and unholiness and all sorts of defilement. Had He been in the flesh at Sinai, He could have climbed the mountain and lived. But He climbed a different hill instead, one outside the city called Calvary. There, the Son of God died for the sins of the world. Your sins, too.

In other words, remember the tabernacle, where the high priest could come into God's presence after the sacrifice was made. Jesus made the Sacrifice for all; and because He has made that Sacrifice, you can come into the presence of the Lord. You can come to Mount Zion, says our text: not because of your works or holiness, but because of Jesus.

Not only *can* you come to Mount Zion, says our text, but you *have* come to Mount Zion. "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better Word than the blood of Abel." Zion isn't a hill in Jerusalem or a tent in the desert. Zion is where Jesus is, and Jesus is here. He is present here with you, to give you life and salvation. By His Word and by His Supper, He gives you forgiveness for all of your sins.

He sanctifies you, makes you holy – and if you are holy, you can dwell in God’s presence forever. He renews His promise that He has made you beloved sons of God – so you know that while God still disciplines you to keep you in the faith, He does not punish you for your sins because He has already punished Christ in your place. You have come to Mount Zion this day, and you are surrounded by “innumerable angels in festal gathering, and...the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” – for Christ is with them in heaven, and the same Christ is here with you. That is why you sing tonight with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven.

Zion doesn’t look like much to the eyes of man. Mount Horeb was an awesome, terrifying sight; but the Tent of Meeting was just a tent on the outskirts of camp. The tabernacle was a nicer tent, and the temple nicer still; but they were just temporary structures. Many will view an A-frame church at the corner of Orchard and Cassia much the same way – one more building, one more attempt to reach God. But this is Zion in this place. Jesus comes to you, and you obtain His grace because He gives it freely; and because He gives it freely, heaven is yours.

In our Gospel lesson for this week, Jesus warns that the way to salvation is through a narrow door. It sounds troubling, but the good news is that there is a door to salvation, and that door is Jesus. There are many ways up a mountain: but any way up to God on Mount Horeb would only lead to death as you tried to climb by your own work and efforts. There was only one door to the Tent of Meeting, but inside was God and His faithfulness. There is only one cross and Savior for your salvation, but it is in Jesus that you find God’s faithfulness to you. Rejoice, dear friends, for you have come to Zion, and your Savior greets you with grace and life.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen