

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 14 -- August 22nd and 25th, 2013

Hebrews 12:18-24 (NIV – 1984)

You did not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.” The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

In the name Jesus, the mediator of our new covenant:

There is a phenomenon among mountain climbers known as “false summit”. The false summit phenomenon happens when you’ve been hiking all day, and hungry, thirsty, and borderline headache from the altitude looming, you think you’re about to summit. It looks like the peak is right before you and you’re going to bag it and merrily make your way down the mountain. But just as you reach the so-called peak, you realize it is not actually the summit. Rather it is a false summit, and behind it looms the actual peak previously hidden from view by the lesser mountain. That false summit might have appeared high and impressive viewed from below, but it does not equal the majesty and grandeur of the true summit. The problem is that you have wasted all your time and energy climbing the wrong mountain and there is not enough day left to enjoy the view from the true summit.

No one is really sure who the Author of the Letter to the Hebrews is. But looking at our lesson for today I wonder if he spent some time in the mountains and was familiar with false summits. Today we are presented with two mountains. The first, Mount Sinai appears high and impressive but it does not equal the majesty and grandeur of the true summit of Mount Zion. So let’s listen to make sure that we:

Theme: Climb The Right Mountain

- 1. The Law of Mount Sinai is a false summit**
- 2. The Gospel of Mount Zion is our true destination**

The letter to the Hebrews is written to a people who were under pressure from their family friends and government to reject Salvation by grace alone. The author wants to encourage believers who place their faith in God’s grace. In chapter 11 the letter reaches its peak where the author lists Old Testament heroes of faith who placed their trust in God’s grace. And believers are reminded that they are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses who encourage them to do the same. In chapter 12 the author makes a final plea to hold on to the grace of God. He writes, run with perseverance the race marked out for us, enduring hardship, strengthening feeble arms and weak knees, making every effort to live in peace with all men... because ... you are climbing the right mountain.

The author writes, “¹⁸ **You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm;** ¹⁹ **to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them,** ²⁰ **because they could**

not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.” ²¹ **The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”** The obvious image that the writer is trying to put in the minds of his readers is that of Mount Sinai. At Sinai Moses led the people to meet God. As the people stood at the foot of the mountain they saw it was covered with smoke because God had descended on it in fire. The whole mountain trembled violently and trumpets blasted and God spoke. So horrific was the voice of a holy God in the ears of a people stained with sin that they begged no further word be spoken to them. Moses you go and speak with God for us and then you tell us what he says... It was at this mountain that God would give to Moses the Ten Commandments. Mount Sinai for the reader of Hebrews was the mountain of God's law.

There was no mercy, peace, or forgiveness at this mountain only justice, judgment, and punishment. And yet the Hebrew believers were tempted to climb this mountain. They imagined that they could keep God's commands and save themselves. They wanted to go back to the Jewish ceremonial laws, customs and traditions that were full of false promises of righteousness found in works.

But you can identify with that. You are occasionally tempted to gaze upon the slopes of Sinai and imagine that you can crest her summit. After all you are pretty good people. You make a few moral mistakes here or there but you generally try to do what is right. I mean you are members of St. Luke's Lutheran Church! You didn't join some terrorist cell or become members of some drug cartel. You are good church going people. And you might even be a pretty good neighbor the kind that picks up your neighbors trash can when the garbage men leave it in the street. So maybe you could climb Mount Sinai? Maybe you could be good enough to be saved?

But the question is, 'how good are you?' Sinai is not a mountain of gentle rolling slopes. Sinai is a vertical cliff wall all the way to the summit. When climbing a cliff face how many mistakes is the climber allowed to make? Zero, right? If you slip you fall. So it is with God's law you do not have the luxury to dismiss your sins as a mistake that you won't do again. If you have slipped just once you have fallen. In **James 2:10** we read, **“Whoever keeps the whole law, and yet stumbles at just one point, is guilty of breaking all of it.”**

Also when climbing a mountain anything short of reaching the summit is considered a failure. So even if you were a really good climber but came just feet short of the summit you would have failed right? So the same can be said of God's law. God does not commend us for our efforts. He does not say that as long as you try he is satisfied. To even the best of men the most "good" among us God says, **"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."** (**Matt 5:48**) In other words if you want to climb Mount Sinai you must reach the top or you have failed. You cannot be "good enough" you must be perfect.

Satan has guided many to the slopes of Sinai convincing them that this is the right mountain for them to climb. But do not be deceived by this false summit. Look again to make sure you are climbing the right mountain. Are you being tempted to exchange salvation by grace alone for works and deeds done by you? Be careful, such legalism creeps into the way you speak, "I have to go to church" yes you *have* to if you are climbing Sinai but if you are saved by grace you *want* to go to church. It creeps into your actions when you view offerings and church service as a duty that must be done instead of privilege that by God's grace you are given. It creeps into your thoughts when we for a moment you start to believe that you are better than the person who is less active at church and more of a jerk in the home.

Beware of Satan leading you to the slopes of Sinai. It is for you, a false summit. There has only been one man who has climbed to the top of Sinai, your Savior Jesus **“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.”**(**1 Peter 2:22**) not one slip, not one mistake. Jesus is the only man to have ever earned salvation by perfectly keeping God's law. But Sinai is not the only Mountain that Jesus has climbed. In his love for you he climbed mount Calvary too. There his body was crucified as if he were dashed against the rocks of Sinai. There Jesus suffered for every "slip" and "mistake" that you and I have made, for **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God.”** (**2 Cor. 5:21**)

Jesus climbed both Sinai and Calvary so that the true summit may be visible to you. That's why the author of Hebrews is able to write, ²² **But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly**

Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” The true Summit is revealed to us. It is atop mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. It is the mountain of God’s grace. Sinai cannot compare to the majesty and grandeur of Zion. On Sinai the mountain of God’s law no living thing neither animal nor priest could stand. But on Zion the mountain of God’s grace the heroes of faith are made perfect. On Sinai trumpets blasted and the ground shook in warning. But on Zion thousands of angels are joyfully singing. On Sinai were written the Ten Commandments, which show us our sin, while on Zion our names are written in the book of life because we have seen our Savior. God’s grace has brought you to this mountain.

I have joked before that once you understand what it truly means to be Lutheran you are stuck because you are not willing to settle for anything less. And what I mean by that is once you begin to see the beauty of God’s grace all other ideas of salvation by works or deeds done by me just don’t cut it. To put it more poetically, once you have seen the view from the true summit of Zion you just can’t settle for anything less. And by the grace of God you don’t have to.

As Moses described Sinai John describes the view from the top of Mount Zion in **Revelation 21**, **“² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”** Jesus has now brought you to the true summit the higher summit of Mount Zion. So run with perseverance the race marked out for you, enduring hardship, strengthening your feeble arms and weak knees, making every effort to live in peace with all men... hold on to God’s grace because you are climbing the right mountain. Amen