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“Where are we and why are we here?” Sermon on Hebrews 12:18-29

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We are reading once again from Hebrews this morning. As we have said in weeks prior, Hebrews is less of a book and more of a sermon to a Jewish Christian congregation that was worn out. “Put a fork in me, I’m done.” Questioning their faith, “What are we doing? Why are we here?”

Our passage this morning comes near the end of the sermon. In it, the preacher will take us on a journey to visit two mountains. The first is the one that only Moses was to touch. The holy mountain of lightning and thunder. On the mountain, God is the just judge and righteous executioner. The second mountain is that of Mount Zion. The heavenly Jerusalem is personified in Jesus Christ. But God is on Mount Zion and is both fiercely righteous and fiercely loving.

We aren’t choosing one mountain over the other. Our journey is to both. Both are God, but we end our journey on Mount Zion with Jesus. The heavenly Jerusalem.

Hebrews 12: 18-29

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. ²⁰(For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death. ²¹Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’) ²²But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³and 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, ²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

25 See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! ²⁶At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.' ²⁷This phrase 'Yet once more' indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; ²⁹for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

I read this week where the number of people in the U.S. who describe themselves as Christians is now at 63%, down from 75% a decade ago. The number of people calling themselves secular Americans is up 10% from a decade ago. Meanwhile, the number of people attending worship has fallen below 50% for the first time in the U.S. We've lost a lot of young people.

That being said, T.J. came into my office this past week and was talking about revamping the Confirmation class. Confirmation: a process that leads to young people confirming the vows of their baptism. A public profession of faith. Adding their names to the rolls of members.

Confirmation. It is also the answer to the joke about the meeting of pastors who had problems with bats in their belfry. The Baptist pastor said, "We tried noise and cats to no avail." The Lutheran pastor said, "We had the whole place fumigated to no avail." The Presbyterian pastor said, "Our Session voted to confirm the bats, and they haven't been back to church since." There's some truth to that.

Back in the day when my hair was of a different color, I was in charge of a confirmation program, attempting to get across the doctrine. "Name the two sacraments." "What is predestination?" "How are we different than the Baptists?" All important things to know if you're a Presbyterian. But I felt as I aged, that confirmation really doesn't happen at a session meeting, or in a class, or with words repeated in the Sanctuary, so much as it does when a young person says a prayer, knows a prayer will be heard, and falls in love with God. The young person shares their vulnerability, what their life means, who God is, what God is, and how the Spirit works. And this happens. It happens. I've seen it happen at youth conferences, meetings on the beach, or at a retreat or mission trip. It's so powerful.

So, T.J. and I were talking about revamping Confirmation, and this got me thinking about how we share our faith. And now that worship attenders are a minority in this country, how do we persuade others of our faith?

Maybe the question is, "Why are we here?" I think the answer for many of us is that we're here because of our parents. If our parents were Jewish, we'd probably be at the synagogue. If our parents were Muslim, we'd be at the mosque. If our parents were atheists, we'd be on the golf course. What do atheists say when they shank a ball?

Why are we here? Our parents!

But neither is that very inspirational nor is it very persuasive. The proof of that is found in how many of our children are not here on a Sunday morning. You may have persuaded your children to attend the same school as you, to cheer for the same teams you do, or to be in the same political party. You've been very persuasive, they've adopted your lifestyle, but for some reason, church won't stick. They don't see the need.

There was a time when the preacher could persuade with the threat of eternal damnation. I like to call that time "the good ol' days," back when preachers had power. Now preachers are put into dunking booths.

The reformation is, of course, to blame for the loss of eternal damnation. The advent of amazing grace that saved a wretch like me. "There is nothing we can do to make God love us any more, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us any less." What the reformation did was lift high the cross. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is reconciling all things. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And if we can think of something that can separate us from the love of Christ Jesus, we need to be worshipping that, because that is the most powerful thing in the world.

And we do! If you ask me, that's why we've lost our mojo. It's why we lose to Starbucks and an iPad on Sunday morning. It's why they leave after Confirmation class and never return. It's why we're at each other's throats. It's why we're gearing up for civil war. It's why we have no welcome for the other. It's why we're so afraid of what's coming next. It's why we're coming apart at the seams.

We have found other gods.

We have found some little political person who only wants another term. We found some god of fear, some arrogance, some molehill to kill and die over, some justice that will cut everyone down in our way. Whatever it is. We quit drinking the blood of Christ and began drinking the Kool-Aid out there. We believe it to be more powerful than the love of God, the truth of God, the grace of God, the mercy of God. The worship of God!

The preacher of Hebrews says, "...we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; ²⁹for indeed our God is a consuming fire." That's a different kind of worship! That's worship that you know why you're doing it. You give an acceptable gift of thanksgiving.

Thank you, God. Not because you have to, because you want to.

If someone buys you a cup of coffee, you say thank you. If someone gets you a job, you might take them out for dinner. If someone gives you a kidney, you might weep in their arms. If someone saves you from getting hit by a car, you might find an acceptable sacrifice that wells up in your heart and you pray they understand that it is all of you. You are so thankful.

So, here's the hard-to-answer question: What has God done for you lately? Can you think of anything? If you can, you can't keep it under wraps. You can't!

I recently watched an hour-long documentary on Angela Merkel. I live a pretty exciting life, don't I? How do you finish up a bike ride across Iowa? With a documentary on Angela Merkel. If you need to catch your breath, I understand. Aside from being the Chancellor of Germany, I knew nothing about Angela. We would pronounce it differently, with a soft "g". Angela. "Angel," a messenger from God. Her parents saw her and named her that.

Her father was a Lutheran minister who, after WWII, was sent over to East Germany to serve as pastor. Communist East Germany. Communist. No room for God in East Germany. He was sent. Angela grew up in that home, in a country where being an informant for the government was nearly everyone. You didn't know whom to trust, certainly not your neighbor. How do you suppose you talk about Jesus Christ in that kind of environment? Does Jesus just shrivel up and die in that environment? No. When everything is dark and fearful, light shines. And people are drawn to it, like to water in a desert. They thirst for it.

When Merkle was the German Chancellor, Germany was the wealthiest country in Europe. Greece and Italy needed a bailout. Syrian refugees began pouring into the country. And Angela Merkel, a politician, got up and said, "Our party is the Christian Democratic Union. The word "Christian" is in our name. It is time for Germany to prove that because of our history, we cannot get this wrong. We need to live into our name.

Now I don't know much about Angela Merkel. She may have done a million things in her career that were terrible. I dare not make idols of any political leader. But I was inspired by that moment where she said the name of Jesus Christ and that the call is to live into it. She knew who she was and where she was – she knew God is a consuming fire and you can't push him to the side. You live into it. God takes over you in Jesus Christ. "The word 'Christian' is in our name." You can't walk by the stranger on the side of the road and do nothing. You can't stone the woman, an adulteress, because you are a sinner, too. You can't let the multitudes go hungry. You can't. Not when you know who you are!

Now, I suppose if I was born in Syria, my parents and I might be Muslim. I suppose if my parents were not a fan of Bashar al-Assad, I might not be a fan either. I suppose if I was caught up in that civil war, and I had a choice of dying or living, I might choose life. I suppose if I loved life, I might get in a raft and flee my homeland. And if I happen to be lucky, I might land on dry land, and I might press my luck and aim for the wealthiest nation in Europe. Knowing me, that's what I'd do.

And, if I got through the sea and over the land, if I came to a land and was welcomed by someone who didn't look like me, didn't worship in the way I worship, and they welcomed me, invited me in and sacrificed their love, I might have the answer to the question, "What has God done for me lately?"

Whatever is dying that is called the church in America, is probably dying for all the right reasons, because it isn't worth a blessed thing. Its gods are self-preservation, bigotry, self-righteousness, and not worth anything.

But if there is a people who believe that love is more important than whims of the political climate, if there is a people who know that every person on earth might be their savior in disguise, if there is a people who knows that God is mercy and they should be healing mercy, too, if there is a people who believe that justice isn't justice unless it is justice for all people, if there is a people like that, I suspect they know who they are and why they are here, and they have nothing to worry about.

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