

REKINDLE THE FIRE

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Hebrews 12:18-29

As we have made our way through the Epistles for the last several weeks, over and over we've been reminded that the early Christians expected Jesus' return ANY DAY NOW". The longer the delay in his return, the more uncertainty and doubt crept into their thoughts and the fire they initially felt within the core of their very being grew dimmer, and for some, the fire was gone! For these reasons, the Apostles wrote to them letters to encourage them, to strengthen their faith, and to rekindle the fire of the Holy Spirit that dwelt within them.

As I read and re-read this passage from Hebrews, the words of a song echoed over and over in my mind: "So, light the fire in my weary soul, fan the flames, make my Spirit whole; Lord, you know where I've been, so light the fire in my heart again."

As human beings, followers of Jesus Christ in the 21st Century, we have the tendency to do the same things...over and over again...We get in a rut...in our lives...in our worship of God...in our relationships with one another and with God. The fire grows dim and we become mediocre at best.

At one church that I served, in a meeting with four of our young people who had expressed a desire to be baptized and their mentors, each of the young people were given an opportunity to share why they desired to be baptized and what baptism meant to them. The three girls went first, offering very nice views of baptism and in one form or another expressing their desire to grow closer to God. Turning to the only young man, I asked, "Jake, why do you want to be baptized and what does baptism mean to you?" After a moment's pause, Jake cleared his throat and offered, "Well, I just hope to learn the answer to some of my questions, like why does the God in the Bible seem to be two different personalities? One God is kind, loving, forgiving and pleasant and in other instances God is angry, punishing, and judging? Without hesitation, his mentor spoke up, "Jake, we're going to have a good time and lots of great discussions. Keep asking the tough questions."

In this passage the author of Hebrews gives us two distinctly different and powerful images of God, and describes God's mission and work in the history of salvation with two images for two mountains first, God as just judge and righteous executioner, and second, God as love and forgiveness personified in Jesus Christ. Jake is not the only one who observes these sorts of contradictions in God as portrayed in scripture.

Today's readings almost yell..."This is your final warning!" These words, full of gravity and danger, are familiar from television and film or perhaps from our own experience as children or as parents. These bracing words tell us that we have reached a limit, that immediate action is required to change course. Our current path will bring consequences.

In some sense, these words of sharp rebuke are also an apt heading for this passage from Hebrews. Throughout this written sermon, the author has been warning us against neglecting our salvation (2:3), hardening our hearts (3:7-4:13), falling away (6:4-7), and shrinking back (10:38-39). As he comes to the end, he issues one last warning.

As he has done before (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 10:38-39), the writer uses a contrast to develop his warning. Here two mountains, Sinai and Zion, form the basis of comparison. The writer reminds us first of the experience of the Israelites at Sinai: the flames of fire, the mist and gloom, the trumpet blast, and a Voice too terrible to endure (12:18). Drawing on later Jewish interpretation of the event in addition to the Pentateuch, the writer informs us that fear extended from the people to include their leader Moses as well (12:21).

But we have not come to worship at this frightening, inaccessible, isolated mountain. Instead, we have come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22). A marvelous company gathers in this city of the living God. There are countless angels who have come to join in celebration and worship. There is the congregation of the first-born, the brothers and sisters of Jesus the firstborn (1:6). There is a judge, one who is God of all. There are the spirits of righteous people, the godly dead. There is Jesus, who mediates a new covenant (8:6-13), making possible a new access to God and divine blessing. Finally, there is the sprinkled blood of Jesus that seals the new covenant and proves effective for reconciliation in contrast to the blood of Abel that cried out for vengeance (Genesis 4:10-11).

This contrast (12:18-24) underscores the advantages we gain from the new covenant Jesus makes possible: a new access to God and communion with others in a vibrant city of joy. With these benefits in view, the writer turns to the heart of his admonition. We must not disregard the One who speaks to us, warning us from heaven (12:25). The Israelites did not escape God's word spoken on earth (12:25-26). How much more ought we to listen now that God speaks from heaven! At Sinai, God's voice shook the earth. But now God's voice shakes both earth and heaven, as promised to the prophet Haggai (12:26, quoting Haggai 2:6).

While we move forward with courage instead of shrinking back, we nonetheless approach the Holy One with reverence and awe. The goal of our worship is not entertainment, nor do we consume worship as a commodity. To worship is to encounter God, to hear God's voice, to be transformed.

Are you transformed by worship? In this hour of your week, will you be made new again? Will the fire in your soul be rekindled? Do you worship God in reverence and awe? Do you believe that God has the power to transform your life, make you whole? Is God an all consuming fire in your life?

In 1986, Texas gem dealer Roy Whetstine was pawing through a Tupperware bowl of cheaply priced rocks at a mineral show in Arizona when he came across a lavender-gray, potato-size stone that looked a bit special. "You want \$15 for this?" Whetstine asked the amateur collector. "Tell you what," replied the collector. "I'll let you have it for \$10. It's not as pretty as the others."

Whetstine walked away with the world's largest star sapphire, later valued at as high as \$2.28 million! He planned to sell his 1,905-carat bargain in its uncut form for \$1.5 million and put the profits in trust for his two sons, each of whom had given Dad \$5 to bring back a little something from the gem show (*Newsweek* [11/24/1986], p. 75).

If you don't know what you possess, you may disregard it or let it go for something worth far less. Esau did that—he didn't appreciate the value of his birthright, which entitled him to the blessings of God's promises to Abraham, and so he traded it for a bowl of stew. He gave away eternal blessings for instant gratification. Bad trade!

But that's what the original readers of Hebrews were in danger of doing! Under the threat of persecution, they were tempted to abandon Christ to return to their Jewish faith. So the author here contrasts the terrors of Mount Sinai, representing Jewish life under the law, with the glories of Mount Zion, picturing the joy of life under the new covenant. He wants us to know that right living flows out of right knowing. If you know the riches that you possess in Christ, you won't want to go back to the empty, fleeting pleasures of the world.

Do you know the value of God in your life? The all consuming fire that is God wants to be the transforming power in your life.

Let us pray: come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit that we may be created and you will renew the face of this earth. O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit, instructs the hearts of your faithful, grant that by that same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever rejoice in the power of your love. Amen.