

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 15, 2019

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Hebrews 12:18-14 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 to death." **21** The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

22 But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. 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, to the spirits of the righteous 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.

"Journey Joyfully with Jesus"

They are about to hit the trailhead as the sun is just peaking over the horizon. Two sisters decided to do this little expedition together. But it wasn't the first choice for both of them. Jenna agreed to go, but felt like she was forced to do it against her will. Stepping out of the car and grabbing her pack from the trunk, she takes a deep breathe and exhales slowly. She's not real sure about this. She's a little fearful about what they will face on the trail ahead. In her mind she's agonizing over what it will do to her back and knees. She's worried she didn't bring enough water or snacks or sunscreen or rain gear in case they get stuck in a storm. And yet she's already anxious that she is carrying too much weight, that the pack will dig into her shoulders and make her sore, that all her gear will weigh her down and slow her progress, maybe even prevent her from reaching the top.

Her sister, Anna, bounds out of the car, slings her pack over her shoulders and skips off in the direction of the trailhead. To the apprehensive sister, it's almost nauseating how eager Anna is to get going. Not overly concerned. Confident in her trekking abilities. Not intimidated by the trail and the unknowns they face ahead. Filled with optimism at the thought of reaching the top. Taking a great selfie on the peak and soaking in amazing views along the way. It's insane how chipper she is about getting up and back down with enough time to celebrate. And what's that? She's even whistling "Follow the Yellow Brick Road" as they reach the sign marking the trailhead.

We know our journey through life can be a bit intimidating. Frightening even. We want to be realistic and not naive. But in these verses from Hebrews chapter 12, God wants us to understand where we are and the destination to which we are heading. When we realize we have Jesus right now and we have the rewards of his grace waiting for us at our ultimate destination, God wants us to embark on this journey with freedom from fear. A greater awareness of our current reality can propel God's people forward confidently. Knowing God's power going along with us fills our hearts with his energy and build anticipation to

reach his destination. As we come to a deeper appreciation of God's good news for us in Jesus we get to journey joyfully with Jesus.

Hebrews chapter twelve takes on a journey of two different approaches to God. There is the path of obedience. That way is represented by Mount Sinai. That mountain was the location where God made his presence known to his people when he unveiled the Ten Commandments to them. Hebrews describes Mount Sinai in terms that would have been familiar to his audience who knew the description from Exodus and Deuteronomy as the mountain that couldn't be touched, that covered God's annihilating glory with darkness, gloom and storm. It was a sensory overload with a horn blast and God's booming voice. Even Moses was terrified.

According to experts, anxiety is one of the biggest issues plaguing the health of Americans today. One definition states that "anxiety is apprehension over an upcoming event. We anticipate the future with sometimes scary predictions that don't necessarily have any basis in truth."¹ This is not the kind of mountain anyone looks forward to reaching. Instead of being drawn to this mountain, people are intimidated. They feel themselves pushed away. So much of this reluctance is rooted in the reality that comes from self-awareness. People realize how badly they fail to measure up to God's standards of perfection. We are like Dorothy cowering before the great and mighty Oz. We shrink back because of the realization that based on our own efforts to measure up to God and get what we want from him, we are completely unworthy.

People can come up with healthy ways of dealing with anxiety. But sometimes they just mask the anxiety they feel. They think they are coping. But they are actually just avoiding painful realities. Deep in our hearts every human being has anxiety over journeying to God's mountain and face our Judge. And so people turn to unhealthy alternatives to avoid facing the reality of God's wrath. Some addictions are rooted in this feeling of unworthiness and not measuring up. And not just the obvious addictions to meth or vodka. Addictions to self-improvement and education and career are just as common. We get wrapping up in enjoying the good things in this life to take our minds off the pain in our hearts. We spend all our time with a girlfriend or surround ourselves with family. We are consumed with books or TV or home projects or the Dallas Cowboys. And these things aren't sinful. At least most of them. But they can all be symptoms of our efforts at avoiding God. They are rooted in the same impulse behind deadly addictions and sinful substitutions.

So much of these efforts at avoiding the painful reality of our relationship with God is based on a false reality. Hebrews tells us "**You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire.**" (Hebrews 12:18) The group of Christians this book was originally addressed to felt pulled to abandon their Christian faith. They were experiencing troubles because of their Christian faith, not just incidental to their faith. So they were tempted to go back to everything they were doing under God's law without a Messiah who came in fulfillment of that law. So Hebrews was written to show them Jesus is better. Jesus is better than the law-giver Moses, because Jesus came in fulfillment of the law.

¹ Schreiber, Katherine. "10 Unexpected Stressors that Are Wrecking Your Health." © Greatist.

That's why Hebrews tells us we aren't being drawn to Mount Sinai, where God's commandments were handed down. We are in a different location: **"But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem."** (Hebrews 12:22) Instead of wincing and cringing in fear from all the commands coming from God, people in the new covenant have freedom and joy.

Before you can decide where you're going, it helps to understand where you are. Instead of having the dread of stumbling onto a dangerous military installation where weapons are being tested, you are part of the throng of people parading up to the Super Bowl. When Hebrews says you have already come to Mount Zion, it means you get to come into God's presence without fear. There is no longer any anxiety to approaching your God. As pilgrims used to march up toward Jerusalem and joyously join their voices in song on their way to the temple, God's people get to rejoice on our journey because we already have God's presence and we will soon be able to celebrate God's goodness without any interruption.

I find it interesting some of the things the expert recommend to combat anxiety. They seem almost too simple. Advice like getting enough sleep, smiling, eating healthy and breathing deeply. Then there are some logical steps like planning ahead to tackle your tasks and visualize positive results. They seem to fall into two categories. Take simple steps in the present to handle what might be causing stress in the future. And then focus on your current situation. Change what you can about the moment you are in without getting caught up in the things you can't control.

Let's talk about your present reality with Jesus. Jesus came to do away with that all order of things where people had to fear the consequences of their failures before God. Jesus puts us on Mount Zion because he is the Mediator of a new covenant. This covenant is all about what God has done for you in Jesus without any contribution on your part. Jesus saw the fear coming from Mount Sinai and tackled all those commandments as your substitute. Jesus stepped in to face the darkness and gloom and storm of God's wrath over unfulfilled obligations. Jesus lived up to all of God's expectations perfectly. Instead of a covenant where God's response is dependent on your obedience to him, this new covenant rests completed on the completed work of Jesus on your behalf.

But there is more to life under this new covenant in the perfection of Jesus. You have God's forgiveness to face a messy future. You can face the future armed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Hebrews says: **"You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect."** (Hebrews 12:23) Through Jesus, you can approach the righteous Judge of all anticipating a favorable verdict. You have God's approval in Jesus. You have God's vindication in Jesus. Your present reality is part of the **"church of the firstborn"** since you share in the glory and holiness of Jesus and now enjoy his inheritance. (Hebrews 12:23) You have a citizenship through faith in Jesus where your **"names are written in heaven."** (Hebrews 12:23)

A lot of the people you meet will have conflicting attitudes toward God like those two sisters about to embark on a journey up a mountain. When you can take a step back and realize your identity is rooted in your relationship with God through Jesus, it makes an

impact in your life. When your future is determined by what God is causing you to become, it removes fear and replaces it with joy. You are not your sin. You are not your struggle. You are not your addiction. You are not your failure. You are a child of God washed clean in the blood of Christ.

And this place of gathering for God's people can take on an important role in your life. The people inside here are just like the people out there is so many ways. This is a place where all people are welcome. This is a safe haven for souls who are struggling. This is an assembly of support for people who have been beaten down by life. This is a group of forgiven sinners who can offer to others the wellspring of spiritual relief we find under God's new covenant.

And when we still battle our feelings of anxiety, Jesus invites us to enjoy a present procession. We stream toward his altar with our guilt and our fears. We hold in our hands the body of Jesus and take into our mouths his blood shed innocently on the cross. And we hear the announcement Jesus made: **"For the forgiveness of your sins."** (Matthew 26:28) Through Jesus you have God's pardon and approval. You have his cleansing and consecration.

The truth is, you don't have to climb any mountain. You don't have to go on any hike. You have **"Jesus the mediator of a new covenant."** (Hebrews 12:22) You can joyfully draw near to God because of your new covenant reality. You can head out for your spiritual destination devoid of fear. You have cause to celebrate what you have and where you are going. Journey joyfully with Jesus. Amen.