



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 11 Proper 16 (C)

Set Free by the Holy God

[RCL] Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

Three mountains stand within our scripture reading—Sinai, Zion, and Calvary—and on these mountains of God, we learn how we can find healing and wholeness. Only Zion is named in the reading, but all three of these mountains overshadow the words in Hebrews. While these are real places that you can go visit today, the author of Hebrews is talking about spiritual geography. Each mountain presents a fuller picture of God without superseding the image that came before it.

The first mountain is Sinai, the mountain of Moses and the ten commandments. Sinai was in the wild, untamed expanse of wilderness the Hebrews crossed as they left Egypt. This is the place our reading from Hebrews describes, saying, “You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken them.”

That is a tightly packed description of Mount Sinai using images taken from the Exodus account of God’s teaching being given to the people through Moses. God’s teaching, called the Torah, is for Judaism the means to commune with a personal and loving God. Yet, the encounter with God on Mount Sinai is an encounter with a mighty and dreadful presence, the unseen deity atop a mountain. The people do not approach God themselves, but through Moses, who serves as a mediator.

The second mountain in our reading today is Zion. This mountain inside the city of Jerusalem has long been associated with the Temple Mount. Zion is the premier place to worship the God of Israel. At the Temple on Mount Zion, the priests served as mediators between God and the people in their role of offering sacrifices to God.

The author of Hebrews calls Zion the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. Unlike Sinai in the wilderness, Zion was a known hill within the walled city. God’s presence had moved from the unknown to the familiar. The knowledge that God’s presence was felt in the Temple in a powerful way never kept the people of Israel from thinking that God was everywhere. In the same way, we can feel God’s presence in a

particular way in church, but we do not have to go to church to feel God's presence. Beyond this and just as important, God's presence is more dependable than our feelings.

The third mountain is Calvary. The author of Hebrews refers to Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant, which brings us to the mountain where Jesus was crucified. Jesus sealed the new covenant with his blood shed on Calvary, ending the need for the Temple sacrifices on Zion and connecting us to God as the earlier covenant on Mount Sinai had done. No longer do we approach God through Moses or the priests. Jesus is our mediator and advocate.

Our reading from Hebrews says that we have come, "to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." Genesis tells the story of Cain killing his brother Abel. God tells Cain, "Listen! Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!" Abel's blood cried out for revenge. But the blood of Jesus was a much more worthy offer. Jesus was God in human flesh and as a human was, like Abel, killed unjustly. And yet, Jesus' blood shed on Calvary cried out not for vengeance, but for love and redemption. Jesus' sprinkled blood cried out "enough" to the sacrificial system, saying that his death paid the price of sin, once and for all.

The author of Hebrews would say that we stand ready to receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken, as the kingdom of heaven is beyond the sifting that takes place in this world. And as we gather here to worship, we are, in the words of Hebrews, to "give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire."

In the C.S. Lewis series of children's books, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the lion Aslan is a kind of Jesus figure. One of the children in the books asks if Aslan is safe. He is told, "Course he isn't safe. But he's good." Yes, we can sing, "What a friend we have in Jesus" and mean it, but a true encounter with the Holy invokes reverence and awe.

We see this goodness in the Gospel reading where Jesus finds the woman who is suffering is more important than the Sabbath rules which would have her continue in pain. In a few sentences, a showdown is sketched out: "Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight." In that brief setup, we know that some will stand up for rigidly following rules and that Jesus will act on grace and mercy. We are not surprised when Jesus sees her, knows her pain, and sets her free. Jesus moves beyond the rules that bind to healing and wholeness that liberate. This is the Holy One who was present on Sinai, Zion, and Calvary, who is with us now. This is the God who chose not to merely stand back as a righteous judge.

There was a gap and God bridged it in Jesus. The story told with those three mountains is of God moving closer to people so that there is no barrier between you and God. In worship, we gather before the Holy Trinity who entered into creation in Jesus to bring healing and mercy. You are in the presence of the living

God even now. In reverence and awe, offer up all that is broken, trusting that God who is faithful and true will bring liberating love to all that you face in your life.

Then we can leave our worship today as they did in the Gospel reading. After the woman found healing, the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that Jesus was doing. So, too, we give thanks that God has entered into creation, sees our needs, and wants to set us free.

***The Rt. Rev. Frank Logue** is the Bishop of the Diocese of Georgia. He previously served on the Executive Council of The Episcopal Church and was the church planter for King of Peace Episcopal Church in Kingsland, Georgia.*