

"From Fear to There"

Text: Hebrews 12:18-24

Grace, mercy and peace be yours from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

It took me awhile, but I think I finally have a handle on the difference between empathy and sympathy. Sympathy is feeling sorrow for another person's plight. Empathy goes farther. It is projecting yourself into another person's problems. It is learning to feel what they are feeling by putting yourself mentally or emotionally into their existence. This morning we are going to try to empathize with a certain group of people. It's for a good cause – your own.

The people in whose shoes we will attempt to stand this morning are the Jews, as they gathered before Mt. Sinai and witnessed that awesome and terrifying display of the power of God.

This is not going to be as easy as it might sound, mostly because we have very little (if any) experience with that sort of terror. In fact, most of us have very little experience with any sort of fear at all. We tend to be less familiar with fear than citizens in many other countries. We're not talking about relatively minor things, like fear of the dark or being spooked by some scary movie. We are referring to the fact that most of us have never known the sheer terror of war. We've never had a plague decimate entire cities, or awakened to an enemy army camped outside of our city walls threatening unimaginable horrors. Few if any have ever known the fear of starvation, civil war or genocide. In fact Americans tend to get downright indignant whenever we do experience fear.

All of this tells us that we will also probably have a difficult time empathizing with the Jews in the first part of our text for this morning. No one here has ever seen or experienced such a thing. No one has ever witnessed the terrible spectacle of God's righteous wrath over against sin and rebellion. No one here has ever witnessed such a demonstration of the raw anger of the Living God.

Yet if we are to rightly understand and appreciate the full import of the message of not just our text for this morning but of the Christian faith itself, we need to be able to do just that. We need to put ourselves at the foot of that terrible mountain cloaked in gloom, smoke, fire, and tempest – a sight that made even Moses (who enjoyed such an intimate relationship with

God) tremble with fear. There you and I need to stand for a time this morning, and there we need to know true, raw, terror.

Carry yourself there then this morning. Hear the terrible sounds, see the sights, feel the fear. Only by doing so will you gain the full significance of the message from your God in our text for this morning. That text is found in the New Testament Book of Hebrews, the Twelfth Chapter:

^{ESV} Hebrews 12:18-24 *For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and 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, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.*

What a blessing to know that these words are the words of God himself, and are therefore infallible in every way. With complete confidence in every aspect of these words, so we pray, **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

Did you feel the fear that is meant to be portrayed by the opening words of our text? My guess is probably not. Not really. Our imagination can never do justice to the real thing. Why is this important? Because we need to understand where we have been - our past and what it was really like - if we are to have an accurate appreciation for where we are and where we are going. All depends, at least to a certain extent, on recognizing where we once were in our relationship with the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth – the One True Living God.

We find it so easy to be superficial here, don't we? *"Oh, sure, we've sinned, and God doesn't like sin, but..."* There's always that "but" – that awareness that the payment for sin has already been made and that you and I already stand forgiven and beloved in God's sight. While that's obviously the very best of news, we tend to dull that news over

time when we fail to return in our minds to the way things really used to be, the utterly terrifying position we were born into when we existed as God's enemies and knew nothing of his grace and mercy.

The bottom line is that we can't really know the joy and relief of who and what we are without first remembering who and what we used to be – if we cannot first envision life without Jesus Christ.

This is one of the things that the Book of Hebrews does so well. It takes pictures from Jewish history and uses them to make divinely inspired comparisons to the lives of New Testament Christians, which obviously includes you and me today. Our text pictures the progress of the Children of Israel from Mt. Sinai to the Promised Land, and eventually to Mount Zion, the location of their capital and temple in Jerusalem. It is also a picture of you and me as we progress from where we were to where we are, and finally to where we will be – from death to life to life eternal. Our journey from fear to there.

When God established the Jewish race through Abraham, he made it clear from the beginning that this was to be a people and a religion based on faith rather than works; a nation whose comfort was to be centered on the promise of a faithful, yet unseen, God. This was therefore a people and a religion "set apart" from the idol worship that had captured the hearts of sinful man. To this end (and as a telling example) no child was given to Abraham according to the normal course of life. Instead he was given the *promise* of a child after he and his wife had long passed the normal childbearing age. By faith Abraham and Sarah were to accept this promise, just as by faith they were to trust in God's promise that *the* Savior would be born centuries later from their own bloodline.

Yet God knew this people. He knew that they would be infuriatingly stubborn and rebellious. He knew that this people would carry itself into spiritual destruction if left to their own devices. God therefore gave them a stern and fierce master to keep them from self-destructing before the time set for the promised Savior to appear. This harsh, unsmiling nanny we know as the Law, and it was first given in written form on Mt. Sinai to Moses as he led this people from Egypt to the land that God had prepared for them.

This is where our text takes up the history. From its very introduction, the Law terrified the Children of Israel, and this is the setting in which we need to imagine ourselves this morning. The spectacle must have been terrifyingly awesome – a mixture of blazing fire, darkness, gloom, smoke,

tempest, and noise. With thunder and blaring trumpet blasts and the terrifying voice of God the Law was given.

This was the fierce taskmaster that was put in charge of God's chosen people to keep them in line until the Savior could be born. There was, and is, nothing kind and loving about this cold, unyielding overlord. The Law offers neither encouragement nor comfort. It does not console us when we have done wrong, does not forgive us when we have erred, does not pick us up when we have fallen. It only accuses, threatens, and then punishes all who disobey. It never softens, never lightens our load, never gives in. It is rigid, strict, unwavering, and – when you and I finally come to really understand it – absolutely terrifying.

And this was also *your* keeper, your master. Each one of us was placed under its control when we were conceived and born. Every man, woman and child who has been "**born of a woman**" has also thereby been "**born under the law.**" Remember, this law knew nothing of kindness, gentleness, and forgiveness. It offered two options and two options only: A. Obey perfectly, or, B. Suffer the punishment. The only punishment it knew was death. That means that from the moment we came into this world our soul could know not one moment's rest, for always there was sin on our part, and always there was condemnation on the part of the Law. What is more, there was nothing we could do to free ourselves from the domination and curse of the Law. As sinners, we tried everything to free ourselves. We tried turning to other gods. We tried denying that God even existed. We tried to satisfy what the Law was demanding of us by "being good." Nothing ever satisfied either the guilt of the heart or the nagging condemnation of the mind. Each time we fell into sin we heard the clear and ringing condemnation of God's Law. We tried to simply "do our best," yet an honest evaluation led us always to admit that obeying the law *part of the time* would do nothing in the way of satisfying the perfection demanded by the Law *every single time*.

That was where we were, but that is not, thank God, where we are now. Now, our text says, "**we have come to Mount Zion**" - a much different mountain from Sinai and the Law. The Law has served its purpose, for it was "**placed in charge to carry us along until Christ (came).**" (Galatians 3:24) We have come to a much different place, for this new place is gentle, kind, and forgiving. We cannot touch this new place where our God has brought us, but not because of its threatening punishment. We cannot touch this "mountain" because this is a place seen only with the eyes of faith. We have come to the "**heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.**" The Greek term

here - **"you have come"** - indicates that this is a place we will never leave. Here we have arrived and here we will stay. It speaks of a connection to our loving, merciful God that will never be broken. It also assures us that there is nothing beyond or superior to this connection we now have with our God. The Christian faith is not a temporary fix for sin; it is a permanent solution. Where once we were God's enemies, awaiting only his eternal wrath and condemnation, now we stand holy and forgiven in his sight. There is then no truth or comfort that transcends this place where we now stand. We have been brought to a place of peace, comfort, safety, and forgiveness. Where once we lived in abject fear of death, now we have life – a life that will never end, though our surroundings must change.

Our text tells us as much, for it pictures that final destination to which we must travel. Again, the life we have been given remains, but our surroundings must change. Our text concludes by showing us images of heaven - **"innumerable angels in festal gathering... the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven... God, the judge of all... the spirits of the righteous made perfect... and Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant"** What a difference. What a sharp contrast to the fear of Mt. Sinai. This is the heaven that our Savior has earned for us, and this is the place he has gone ahead to prepare for us.

Note especially how the word **"perfect"** here teaches us that there is nothing *beyond* this faith, this place. There is nothing nobler or better for which we ought to strive, for there is nothing beyond "perfect." What an amazing life we have been given! Who would ever want to return to the other place – to Mt. Sinai and the Law? Who would ever want to return to the condemnation, anxiety, oppression and fear of that place where the impossible demand of perfection is leveled against every single human being and eternal torment threatened for all who fall short? That's exactly what mankind chooses whenever he imagines that he can save himself through his works, his own personal effort to keep the law and earn heaven for himself. Who would ever want to go back to that place?

Our text concludes by telling us that we have come **"to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."** You remember Abel, the righteous man killed by his brother Cain. The "word" spoken by Abel's blood was **"vengeance"** - revenge for his brother's sin. You remember the Lenten Hymn stanza: **"Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies..."** Do you also remember how that stanza concludes? **"But the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries."** The blood of the new covenant is Jesus' blood. Jesus was also murdered, yet though his blood was shed by sinful man, his blood cries out for *mercy* instead of

revenge. In fact it is through the shedding of Jesus' blood (his life innocently given) that we have been brought to this *perfect place*; a place where peace and forgiveness reigns.

This is where we want to stay – in the peace and forgiveness that is ours through faith in Jesus Christ. To this end therefore we pray: *Dear Father, remind us often of where we once were, and thereby also work to preserve each one of us in this saving faith which you yourself have created in our hearts. The place to which you have brought us is perfection, as we can now stand before your holy throne clean, pure, and without condemnation through faith in Jesus' righteousness. Having delivered us from fear, preserve us, we pray, in this saving faith and carry us finally there - to our eternal existence in your glorious presence. Amen.*

Scripture Readings

ESV **Isaiah 66:18-24** "For I know their works and their thoughts, and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see my glory, ¹⁹ and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory. And they shall declare my glory among the nations. ²⁰ And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. ²¹ And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the LORD. ²² "For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your offspring and your name remain. ²³ From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the LORD. ²⁴ ¶ "And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."

ESV **Luke 13:22-30** He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. ²³ And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And he said to them, ²⁴ "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. ²⁵ When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.' ²⁶ Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' ²⁷ But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' ²⁸ In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. ²⁹ And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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The 11th Sunday after Pentecost – August 25, 2019

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 360 (Stanzas 1-5) (Red Hymnal)

"Oh for a Thousand Tongues to Sing"

The Order of Service – Hymnal page 15ff. (Red Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Isaiah 66:18-24) As gentiles we really have no right to take for granted that the Lord Jesus also came to suffer and die for us. He had every right to reject all mankind and to seal us in the fate we have earned by our evil deeds. Yet great is his mercy toward all mankind, as we read in this lesson. Thanks be to God for his undeserved love, which he lovingly extended to people of all races and nations.

The Second Lesson: (Luke 13:22-30) In our New Testament Lesson, a man asks Jesus the same question that is still being asked today: "Are only a few people going to be saved?" We are often condemned for answering as Jesus answered: "**Many are invited, but few are chosen.**" Give thanks to God that, though millions die in unbelief, he has brought you to everlasting life through faith in Jesus Christ. Do not doubt the blessing that has been given to you; rather resolve to share your faith, that others may enjoy eternal life with you.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 22. (Red Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 380 (Red Hymnal)

"Thy Works, Not Mine, O Christ"

The Sermon – Text: Hebrews 12:18-24 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"From Fear to There"

The Offertory – page 22. (Red Hymnal)

The Prayers of the Day, Followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 276 (Red Hymnal)

"Come Unto Me Ye Weary"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Red Hymnal page 24ff)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis (Red Hymnal page 30)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 360 (Stanzas 6-7) (Red Hymnal)

"Oh for a Thousand Tongues to Sing"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (28) Average (38)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee hour
	-11:30 a.m.	– Outreach Committee Meeting
Next Sunday	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee hour

CLC News – Prince of Peace of Loveland has called Pastor Michael Wilke. Immanuel Lutheran High School opens its school year tomorrow.

Church Council Meeting Notes – Five members of the Church Council, plus the Pastor, were present for the August 18 meeting. The Treasurer's report showed a \$1,681 deficit in July and a \$408 deficit year-to-date. The Audit Committee (Mark Redlin and Mick Johnson) has completed its work and reported the financial records to be in good order. The Council thanks them for their work. The copy machine contract was renewed, and after securing a competitive bid, the Council voted to retain Church Mutual as our insurer. The next Council meeting is scheduled for September 15th.

Outreach Committee – The Outreach Committee is scheduled to meet this morning during the fellowship hour.

Parents of Confirmation Students – The parents of this year's confirmation students are asked to meet briefly with the Pastor immediately following the service this morning.

Looking Ahead – Next Sunday is the last day of our summer schedule. We resume our regular schedule beginning on September 8, with Sunday School and Bible Class at 9am and worship service at 10am.