

"The Kind of God We Worship"
Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year C
August 22, 2010
Text: Hebrews 12:18-29
Dr. David T. Howeth

The writer of Hebrews employs in this passage a technique that experts in the art of rhetoric have long practiced, the drawing of sharp contrasts. We do the same thing all the time, such as when we talk about people being as different as night and day. What the author of this epistle is trying to do is to help the audience he is addressing appreciate the fact that because of what God has done in and through Jesus Christ, God's approachability has fundamentally changed. The new covenant with God that Jesus has mediated brings with it accessibility to God that was not possible before.

And so our passage for this morning begins with "how things used to be." One commentator has stated that "the writer's point is unavoidable: The conditions under which the old covenant was given were dread, fear, distance, and exclusion (Exodus 19:23)" [Craddock in *NIB*, p. 158]. The God that appears on Mt. Sinai, where the terms of the covenant were offered to the people in the form of the Ten Commandments, is a scary God. In fact, the people were so terrified of the Lord, they could not stand to hear what he had to say to them.

This basically is the picture of a God who cannot be approached and who is not, in reality, accessible. You really don't want to get too close to this God, for fear that something awful will happen to you.

It is extremely important to keep in mind that the writer of Hebrews is not drawing this sharp contrast between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. It's the same God, a God who is loving and caring, forgiving and merciful, patient and kind, steadfast and true. He is the rock of ages. As the psalmist claims, this God is a rock and a refuge, a strong fortress, who always works to save those who are devoted to him.

There was a reason, a good reason, why the newly liberated Hebrew slaves in Egypt got introduced for the first time to a God who was all power and might, shock and awe, glory and majesty. It probably was crucial that the people's first response to this revelation of God was to tremble. God needed to get their attention. God needed the people to do as he instructed. God needed the people to obey him, even if it was out of fear. It was for their own welfare. If God, through Moses, was going to lead this people through the wilderness and into the promised land, God needed to make sure that the people respected him enough to trust him with their lives.

But that was then and this is now. That may have been how it used to be, but it's not that way any longer. Instead of coming to Mt.

Sinai, we now have the opportunity to come to Mt. Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. In this latter description of God, notice that he is surrounded by *living* creatures—angels dressed to the nines, an assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, the spirits of the righteous made perfect. Last but not least, Jesus the crucified and raised, representing the very best of humanity as well as divinity in his willingness to submit completely to the will of God by sacrificing himself to deal with the sins of the world once and for all.

This second vision is not of a God as an untouchable mountain. This is not God as a voice too hard to listen to. This is not God the terrifying, causing fear and trembling in his presence. Unfortunately, some people still imagine God that way, a God more interested in death and destruction than anything else. But the writer of Hebrews says, in essence, that this is not the kind of God we worship. Thanks to the person and work of Jesus Christ and the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, we worship a living God, more interested in life and celebration than anything else.

The God we worship is a God who invites us and welcomes us into his presence. He wants to be in relationship with us, the essence of a covenant. All that he has done through Christ and by the Spirit is for the purpose of being able to relate intimately with us. God wants to be as close to us as our next breath, and God wants us to breathe easily

when we approach him. *We are the righteous made perfect, because of the sprinkled blood of Jesus. We who have faith in Christ have unrestricted, unimpeded, uninhibited access to God. We have absolutely nothing to fear as we approach God.*

That is good news indeed, but it comes with a twofold warning. First, we are never to forget our responsibility to listen to God. As the writer of Hebrews says, we are not to refuse the one who is speaking. There is the hint that since we graciously and mercifully are given the kind of access to God we are, it would be considered even worse for us than it was for our ancient Hebrew ancestors if we did not take full advantage of the ability to approach God we have been offered.

If we are given a backstage pass to get to see God whenever we want and then don't use it, or worse yet abuse it in some way, we stand condemned of rank stupidity at least. There is a reason we can come into the presence of God with such ease and confidence: to be in a better place to listen to God and then to heed what he has to say to us.

There is another warning as well. We are never to forget that God is a consuming fire. God remains something to fear in the sense of having the utmost respect for him. As one of my seminary professors reminded us, fire is always the same. Yet, it can have a different effect on us, depending on how we choose to relate to it. Fire can burn

us, burn us completely if we get too close, thereby consuming us. But fire also can warm us, if we treat it with the respect it deserves to have.

However, if we play with fire, treat it too casually and too carelessly, fail to recognize its power and use caution and good judgment in relation to it—we are liable to get hurt, perhaps even killed. But if we relate to it out of great appreciation and with the utmost reverence and awe, we will experience all its benefits. Perhaps that is what the writer of Hebrews is trying to tell us about the kind of God we worship.

And because that is the kind of God we worship, *we need to make sure that our worship is of a kind that recognizes what the writer of Hebrews has said about God.* The God of Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion deserves and even demands reverence and awe. We may worship God in a more traditional way or in a more contemporary way, but however we choose to do it, it needs to be acceptable. Acceptable worship. By using such a phrase, the writer of Hebrews suggests, as the Old Testament does over and over again, especially through the prophets, that certain worship is not acceptable to God.

So considering the kind of God we worship, what is acceptable worship, the kind that is most appropriate? The writer of Hebrews doesn't make a suggestion concerning form, but he does concerning

content. In the mind of the author of the epistle, what we have received from God is a kingdom—God's kingdom, a kingdom already present in part in our world but yet to come in its fullness when Christ returns, a kingdom that is unshakeable. That is what has been given to us by God, and there is only one appropriate response to such a gift, and that is gratitude. We are to show appreciation for what God has done for us. We are to be thankful.

And so thanksgiving, gratitude, appreciation should be at the heart and soul of our worship. More than anything else we do when we come to church, we are to use this time to let God know how much we realize we owe him and then show him how grateful we are. All of our music, all of our liturgy, all preaching and teaching—should contain that element of appreciation to God that represents the essence of acceptable worship. All of what we do in worship could be summed up in two brief statements we offer to the Lord: *God, you are wonderful in all you are and do. And God, we are grateful for who you are and what you have done, are doing, and will continue to do for us.*

I like what one commentator has said as a kind of reflective summary of this passage: *As worshipers, we should never forget that it is God whom we approach and that, therefore, the worship service is offered in reverence and awe. The service of worship needs to be designed and implemented so as to be appropriate to the nature of*

God. Unless worshipers are informed and led in ways that have their basis in authentic and appropriate theology, preferences in music, texts, and preaching, while satisfying certain appetites, may fall short of being "acceptable worship."

The commentator goes on to suggest that the image of "a consuming fire", while jolting and distancing at first, reminds a congregation that has grown neglectful, apathetic, dull of hearing, and indifferent toward its own gatherings, that its life of worship is not to sink into that same carelessness. It also reminds a congregation that worship is the single most important aspect of the church's life. And furthermore, this passage of scripture may be understood to imply that designing worship that abandons, gratitude, reverence, and awe in order to please passing tastes, may meet with some applause but may fail in being what is acceptable to God [Craddock, pp. 160-161].