

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 21, 2016
Hebrews 12:18-24
The Contrast Between Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion
Rev. George Ferch,

Dear friends in Christ,

An excellent way to make your point is with contrast. Sales people, for example, use contrast all the time. They contrast the quality of their product against the inferiority of their competitor's product. They lay out the benefits that create genuine value in the one as opposed to the failings that will let us down in the other.

Listen with me as the author of the letter to the Hebrews lays out in contrast the difference between God's law and the gospel. We understand both are necessary. Both serve a purpose in our salvation. We also know it is necessary to keep the proper distinction between law and gospel. Basically, every difference in teaching among Christian churches is due to a confusion of what Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion represent.

Here is **The Contrast Between Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion**. The sight of Mt. Sinai is terrifying. Mt. Zion is the place of joyful assembly.

God had led his people to the foot of Mt. Sinai in the desert between Egypt and the Promised Land. He identified himself as "the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." [Exodus 20:2] The LORD then gave Israel the Moral Law, the Ten Commandments, the Ceremonial Law and the Civil Law. If they kept those laws perfectly, he would be their God, and they would be his people. This was the covenant of Mt. Sinai.

To clarify that he was not kidding, God's holiness showed to the people in conditions on Mt. Sinai. God's wrath and judgment against their breaking that covenant showed in the smoke, and fire, and trembling of the mountain. He told them that if anyone or any animal even touched the holy mountain they would die. The people heard God's voice. Trembling in fear, the people said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die." [Exodus 20:19] Even Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

Mt. Sinai represents God's law that demands our holiness, and damns us when we sin. We tremble in fear before the holy God because we deserve to suffer his holy anger and just judgment against our transgressions of his holy will. Never take lightly that harsh word to your spouse or child, or that complaint against God, or that worry about tomorrow, or that immoral thought.

Mt. Sinai serves its preparatory purpose in our salvation. The Ten Commandments make us realize our sin against God's will. It strikes fear into our hearts because we have broken the covenant between God and us. Our iniquities separate us from God. They condemn us to hell.

The one thing Mt. Sinai is not is the place where we find God's love and salvation. This is the confusion between law and gospel; to make the law a cause of salvation. As if my own obedience, even the obedience of faith, somehow satisfies God and moves him to save him. When Israel looked at Mt. Sinai and heard God's voice speaking the law, they knew one thing for sure; they were doomed.

The sight of Mt. Sinai is terrifying. My breaking the commandments puts fear and trembling into my heart. If I look for salvation on Mt. Sinai, I do not see any qualities or benefits that remove my fear.

In contrast for their comfort and ours, the writer penned, “You have not come to a mountain that cannot be touched...But you have come to Mt. Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem.” Mt. Zion is the place of joyful assembly.

When we are looking for the forgiveness of our sins and eternal life, we do not look on Mt. Sinai. We look where that salvation is, where Jesus Christ our Savior is. He is on Mt. Zion. Mt. Zion is one of the hills in which Jerusalem stands. The Bible uses Mt. Zion as a metaphor for the heavenly Jerusalem, the church. The good news of Jesus Christ, the gospel, brought us into the church. Here in the gospel are the qualities and benefits that remove our fear and keep it from coming back. The church is the place of joyful assembly.

In Mt. Zion, we have come to the city of the living God. We are here with countless angels, with the firstborn souls whose names are written in heaven. We have come to God the judge of all men, to souls perfectly righteous. Most of all on Mt. Zion, “You have come to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

In contrast to the law that kills, the gospel saves because it is the proclamation of Jesus Christ. The law is a bilateral covenant in which we have to do our part and cannot. The gospel is a unilateral covenant in which only God acts and has. God has in Christ mediated this new covenant. It is the new covenant of Christ’s blood shed on his cross that forgives our sins. It is the blood we receive with the wine in the Lord’s Supper. Israel saw that blood in the sacrifices.

Abel’s blood cries out for justice and vengeance after Cain killed him. Jesus’ blood cries out for forgiveness in contrast to Abel’s blood. This is the “better word” of the new covenant in Jesus’ blood. God rendered his justice and vengeance against Jesus on the cross. God speaks none of that against us. God speaks only the better word “not guilty” to the world in Jesus’ blood.

The confusion between Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion leads some to look for salvation on Mt. Sinai, you are saved by what you do, and for a new Moses on Mt. Zion, Jesus is a great example who commands us to love and do good to others. Jesus does command that but that is not the gospel. This is the confusion between the law and the gospel.

The LORD God has not led us to Mt. Sinai but to Mt. Zion. Here we live in the “joyful assembly” of saints and angels in the city of the living God. Here we live with our names written in heaven and as righteous spirits made perfect sprinkled with Jesus’ blood; the blood of a new covenant. The writer quoted God earlier in this letter defining this new covenant, “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” [8:12] Amen. <SDG>