

Sermon for Proper 16 (Year C)

22 August 2010

St Mark's, Tampa

✠ I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

We've all heard people talking about the Old Testament God versus the New Testament God. The Old Testament God is a God of wrath and judgment; the New Testament God is a God of love and forgiveness.

There was actually a guy in the second century who taught that – taught that there were literally two different beings revealed in the two different Testaments. His name was Marcion. Marcion taught that the Creator God, the Jewish God revealed in the Old Testament, was a God of law and judgment, one who was fickle, capricious, ignorant, and cruel. But Jesus, he taught, came to reveal a different God, a God of love, and to overthrow the Creator God. This God of love was the God revealed in the New Testament – or at least the parts of the New Testament that Marcion approved of. (That's a whole other story.)

Now the key thing to know about Marcion is that he was a heretic. The Church rejected this idea that the God of the old covenant and the God of the new covenant are two different Gods; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the very same as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And every time people talk about the Old Testament God versus the New Testament God, they're falling into some version of the Marcionite heresy.

Unfortunately, today's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews sounds more than a little bit Marcionite. This strange but beautiful passage sets out a contrast between two mountains: Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. Mount Sinai represents the old covenant and Mount Zion the new covenant – and according to the writer, the two mountains could not be more different:

- Mount Sinai is a place of darkness and gloom; Mount Zion is bright with innumerable angels in festal gathering.
- Mount Sinai is a place of fear, of a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them, so terrifying that Moses himself shuddered with horror. But Mount Zion is a place of confidence: when the writer says that we have "come" to Mount Zion, the word he uses is one of his favorite words

when he talks about approaching God *boldly*, with confidence in Jesus as our High Priest.

- Mount Sinai is a place of violence and tragedy and perpetual sin, where the blood of Abel cries out for vengeance. But sprinkled on Mount Zion is the blood of Jesus, which speaks a better word, a word of forgiveness: “This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.”
- Mount Sinai is a place where the death sentence is handed down, but in the courts of Mount Zion there is only one verdict: not guilty.

So the writer draws his contrast between the old covenant and the new, between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, as starkly as possible – and shouldn’t our heretic Marcion be quite happy with that? Well, only if he stops reading midway through today’s passage. Because once the writer has made us glad that we have not come to the mountain of darkness and fear and violence and vengeance – that we have come instead to the mountain of light and boldness and forgiveness and reconciliation – he gives his kaleidoscope a brisk shake and forces us to look at these images in a new way.

It turns out, you see, that the God of Mount Sinai and the God of Mount Zion are one and the same God. It is the same holy and awesome God, for indeed our God is a consuming fire. He was a consuming fire at Mount Sinai, destroying whatever was unworthy of his presence; and he is a consuming fire at Mount Zion, the refiner’s fire that burns off the impurities and perfects the spirits of the righteous. He shook the earth at Mount Sinai, toppling everyone and everything that tried to stand in his way; and he shakes the earth at Mount Zion, getting rid of everything that is not destined to remain in his kingdom.

For indeed our God is a consuming fire. Not: our God *used to be* a consuming fire, back before Jesus came and mellowed him out. But our God *is* a consuming fire.

And why – after going to all this trouble to assure his readers that we have not come to the Sinai of darkness and gloom and fear, but to the Zion of “innumerable angels in festal gathering, 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, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” – why, after all of that, would the writer ruin the mood by telling us that indeed our God is a consuming fire? Are we supposed to be afraid after all? Does he mean for us to hide under the pews? Or is this somehow still supposed to be part of the *good* news?

The God of Love who makes an appearance in lots of preaching these days is definitely not a consuming fire. He's in the business of telling us how wonderful we are, handing out candy when we ask for it, and making no demands on us whatsoever. And where is the glory in hearing that we are loved by such a God? Such love is cheap. It's meaningless. It's indiscriminate. And it doesn't ask anything of us. And then, in the hard times, when we don't hear the voice telling us how wonderful we are and the supply of candy seems to have run out – what then? What faith, what awe, what power is there in such a God to sustain us? The writer to the Hebrews tells us that we have come to Mount Zion, but this cheap God sounds more like we've come to Chuck E. Cheese.

It's *good* news that our God is a consuming fire – because then it means something to know that we have come to Mount Zion. It means something to know that the God who shakes heaven and earth has stilled the voice of Abel and listened instead to the blood that speaks a better word. It means something to know that the consuming fire is even now purifying us, making us ready to join the spirits of the righteous made perfect. It means something to know that the same God who terrified Moses, the same God who demanded death of anything that approached his holy mountain, has welcomed us to Mount Zion, not because of anything we have done, but because our great High Priest is there interceding on our behalf, setting his passion, cross, and death between God's judgment and our souls.

If we do not believe that by eating and drinking unworthily, we eat and drink damnation to ourselves, how can we really believe that by eating and drinking worthily, we partake of the bread of life and the cup of salvation?

If we do not believe that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, how can we believe that our approach to Mount Zion is a glorious privilege, beyond our deserving, beyond our imagining?

So why does the writer to the Hebrews tell us that God is a consuming fire? Not so that we will fear – not to get us cowering under our pews – but to impress upon us the dignity and glory, the incomparable splendor, of our salvation – and to encourage us to worship God, not with casual assurance, but with awe and reverence: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.”