

Sermon for the 11th Sunday of Pentecost, Year C
21 August 2022
St. Matthew's Riverdale; the Rev. Trent Pettit
Jer 1:4-10; Heb 12:18-29; Lk 13:10-17

A friend and senior colleague of mine, a priest, once told me that, “Almost every error in thinking about God stems from a failure to realize how strange God is.”

And, God is strange.

But there are many ways we make him un-strange. We do this for lots of reasons, usually quite understandable ones actually. Usually we are just looking for some comfort, in one way or another. We don't intend to domesticate God, to bring him down to our level *per se*, but we can easily do this. It's an easy temptation. We want to understand God; but our intellect strains to grasp his ways that are not like ours. Maybe we want to just be able to measure our expectations of him, so that we aren't disappointed or embarrassed. Maybe God's grace, too, is just too intolerable in respect to what justice seems to demand. And yet we have this God who has let the captives go free. So, in order to accommodate ourselves to the world around us, we begin to do what we should not do: to think about God in terms of things in the world. It's important to see that God is not just a bigger version of another thing or another person in the universe.

I suppose, because it's so easy to accommodate ourselves to the world with God in this way, that is why in Paul's letter to the Hebrews, it is *not* “love,” so much as endurance that is called the chief Christian virtue. Now, endurance isn't an end in itself for Paul, though, but an entering into the way of Jesus' suffering obedience, which is best because it leads us into the truth of God. Paul brings this up because he wants his audience to *hold* onto their confession and resist the messages from the false teachers around them, essentially those whose message seems to make God *less* strange and more like us, our expectations, our conventions, and so on. These are naturally attractive options, after all, because to approach the Lord, the holy One, means to lose control, that is, to be *changed* by him, rather than the other way around. When we make God manageable, conscript him into our causes and such, we might just be trying to make sense of our world, of our lives—and it makes sense to want to do that—but we end up losing just how awesome God is in the process—how great his love is—when we do this. But God didn't come to make us comfortable; but to make all things new—including us.

That friend I mentioned once told a group of young adults—one of whom had been going on about how great God's love was, but in a way that suggested that they had God all figured out, and that this God was rather tame and un-adventurous. He interjected (well, he kinda vented actually) by telling them something like: “Only once you realize that God intends to kill us, can you begin to realize what it means for God to love us.” Indeed, that is a shocking thing to say; but, once you get over that initial shock, you can see that it is good news that God won't let us, “miserable offenders,” as the older Prayerbook calls us, to go on as such. And, that's just what is incredible about God's love; he does not *have* to give it to us. God gets nothing out of it; yet, he has come, personally, to gather each of us from the death of his judgement.

But let's back up a second and look at our passage from Hebrews. I don't know what your faith looked like when you got up this morning, but one can't deny that what we get here it is pretty adventurous. Sight, Sound, Smell, Taste, and Touch — all of our senses get engaged as Paul recalls God's meeting with Moses on Sinai, then at Mt. Zion (Jerusalem), and, finally, the last mountain of Calvary. We've got fire, darkness, trumpets, and a voice that speaks, and the threat of death. We have Moses on the precipice; animals paused in approach; we have the sprinkling of blood and a shaking; And then we have the Son; and the first born. God is strange, indeed.

And so we are drawn to this sight—the drawing near of God to Israel. They have known this God. He is not altogether new; for, he has made them by liberating them from bondage in Egypt. That act of salvation is the key to a covenant being forged up on the mountain, between God and the people of Israel. The Lord would be their God and Israel would be his people. One God; one people; this was how righteousness began to come to us, the unrighteous, beginning with Israel. Now, Moses doesn't exactly commune with the Lord on top of Sinai, but is more like, confronted by his presence concealed in a cloud. The wind circles the mountain, giving shape to the fire overhead, and the Lord speaks. The Lord is a consuming fire that cannot be touched, after all; though, he beckons us near. Just in this way, he called Moses to know him; to hear his voice beckoning from amidst the tempest, but no one can presume an audience, not so directly, anyway. Thus, Moses said in his approach, "I tremble with fear," as Paul reminded us.

And that brings us to the second mountain, that of Mt. Zion in Jerusalem, the cosmic mountain, that is, the holy temple and its veiled holy of holies in which laid the ark of the covenant, that place where God's holy presence dwelt. There, divinity touched humanity. But in that place only the high priest could enter before his presence. Someone had to be set aside for the task, like Moses. So on one day a year, on Yom Kippur, "the day of atonement," a priest offered a blood sacrifice and burned incense for Israel's sins, just as they did before the temple's construction in the wilderness. Before the temple's construction, in the wilderness, on that day, of Yom Kippur, the tabernacle was raised up, and the cloud of the Lord covered the tabernacle, that same cloud from before, the cloud from Sinai (Ex 40:33-40:34). The Lord would appear on the cloud again on the mercy seat, and at that time the priest could *not* enter the tabernacle (Lev 16:2), lest he be killed. For sure, though, Life itself made his home there in Jerusalem; and it is was for our sake that he did. But, it is was nothing but for his good-pleasure that he has chosen Israel to be his bride. He gets nothing out of it for himself. He has simply chosen to love her, and so righteousness took another step closer to us.

The priests have to continue to offer sacrifices in the temple for the sins of Israel, though, including that of the priests. Year after year, they had to repeat it. They had the temple, but its worship could never be perfect. And, even it, as holy as the temple was, eventually became corrupted, polluted, as Israel sought after false gods and betrayed their bridegroom. And, so Israel became subject to God's discipline. >Now, people have tried to make sense of what went wrong with Israel in all kinds of nice and tidy ways. Politicians, psychologists, and philosophers have all had their try, but they only manage to subject the Lord to their own terms. But the Biblical emphasis, however, shows us how God manifested his displeasure against Israel's bad kings and Israel's injustice in the land, their perversion of the temple, and their failure to care for the vulnerable around them: the widows, orphans, and strangers. So God sent his prophets to get Israel to repent, but they were cruelly rejected by the people. So God let the siege armies of other

nations set it, and the kingdom of Israel was divided and subjugated. The Judgement of the Lord took place, which vindicated the prophets, and the bitterness of exile set in. There went the northern tribes and the decimation of Judah by the waters of Babylon, but all this, too, led to the miracle of the Exile. A strange miracle, for sure, whereby, God enabled the people to remember that he is their God and that they are his people and live by his hand.

And so, for a second time, Israel faced the possibility of extinction. Two baskets of figs, one good, the other bad, God set before the prophet Jeremiah. And, so a wall of division was erected between Israel and Israel, then represented by Judah alone. Ezekiel came after Jeremiah, who confirmed the rejection of the sinful, the desolation of the chosen nation. And, so the reality of Divine wrath was laid over sinful and deceived Israel, the representative of all nations.

But once that judgement was complete, God said he would act in another way. God would raise up a sprig from the stump of Jesse, by which a new nation would be wrought from Israel's emaciated remnant. They would be gathered like stray sheep to receive new life. Their dry bones would be clothed with the flesh and warmth of life and blood, given by God. And, a new era of righteousness and holiness would be ushered in at Jerusalem—a new covenant.

This new covenant is not a rejection of the old one, but its fulfillment in the priesthood of Christ. Jesus does not reject his people, his bride, either, but seeks to renew them in the giving of his flesh, made triumphant over death.

Jesus' contempt for those who distorted the Law—like we heard about in Luke—was not the law itself. After all, he participated in Israel's ritual in his Father's house, in the temple. But he is critical of empty ritualism, of worship in act only, you know, without heart. So he condemned those that would make forgiveness on the Sabbath into a blasphemy. For, he is the Lord of the Sabbath. So, as the story unfolds we learn that some like Zacchaeus and the crippled woman turn out to be the true sons and daughters of Abraham. But, because of Israel's state, its corruption of worship and the law, its profiteering and cohabitation with Roman power, Jesus wept over the city that would reject him. Jesus' weeping over the city foretold of its violent destruction, this time, by Rome, because of Israel's continued in-fighting. That Judgement then befell those who failed to recognize that the "time of God's visitation" had come in Jesus. And, so we see that Jesus' prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple was fulfilled, which the Scriptures see as a sign of God's judgment on the people for their failure to receive Jesus.

But God has still *not* rejected Israel; they are more like clay in the hands of a potter. Not thrown out, but remade from the same stuff. Because Jesus stands for the Law of God, he came to accomplish what the priests and prophets of old could not complete. And, so, as Lord of the Sabbath, he has come to give his people *rest*. We come to see that somehow it was already *he* that was given in the Law. Jesus himself, the incarnate and eternal Son—he is the true temple. When Aaron entered the temple, Jesus was with him, but, in the Incarnation, Jesus took all his duties, the purpose of the Levites, their victims, upon his entire self, becoming in his person, what we say in the older prayer book, “**a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction**, for the sins of the whole world...”

Just in this way, as Paul says, Jesus has shaken the heavens and the earth, so that all that remains is what cannot be shaken: the Kingdom. He is the One who stands. He is the One who became, for a time, a little lower than the angels, but who is now crowned with glory and honor because of the death he suffered, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Heb 2: 9). Jesus is the ladder of Jacob's vision; the rung onto which we must cleave for salvation's sake. For, he went to the Cross, and endured the death of Judgement, the judgement meant for us, and, in this way we have been made to see the awesome, strangeness of God's love. He, who we could not approach on the mountain, became like a slave, was obedient to the point of death, *he*, who is the Exalted One over the whole earth. The One concealed in smoke and cloud, He took the cup, the cup of wrath that none of us could drink, and drank it to its dregs upon the cross (Ps 75:8). Indeed, our God is a consuming fire.

And so we come to realize that all that scary imagery from Mt. Sinai was actually present at Calvary, in the description of Christ's crucifixion. Remember there was darkness over the whole land. Remember the fear of the apostles. Remember that the crowd went away beating their breasts (Lk 23:26). And remember that, instead of a booming voice, there was a deafening, and equally terrifying, silence. On the mount of Calvary, God in Christ takes the fear, the trembling, the darkness of Sinai and absorbs it, and in two days later in Jesus' resurrection gives us a new Mt. Zion, communal life in worship in the company of God forever. Abel's blood (Heb 12:24), the blood of vengeance has run dry before the blood of Jesus that pleads for pardon, for compassion, for forgiveness and reconciliation. In Him, indeed, we have seen the Son of God—and, What a strange God we have. In Him, we go *not* to the mountain of vengeance, but to that of mercy, which involves nothing less than the making of the peaceful unity of all humanity, Jew and Gentile together through Israel's Messiah. Finally: One people; One God. The New Covenant.

You that go to Jesus have come to Mt Zion, the city of the living God. It's true that we cannot presume upon his glory. But, the temple veil has been torn forever; for, the Lord himself has come to us in the flesh and the Spirit has descended upon us so that we *can* approach him and with boldness. Because Christ has reconciled us to God, we have been welcomed into awesome presence, to share in the joy of angels, and to share in the company of saints. Our God is strange. As you approach him with courage, with awe, and thanksgiving, may you come to see, to know, to taste, and to touch, the spender of the Lord. But be careful should you do; because you will not remain the same. For, our God is a consuming fire.

Amen.