

MOUNTAIN OF FIRE, MOUNTAIN OF JOY  
A Sermon  
First Congregational Church UCC  
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*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

In 1741, Pastor Jonathan Edwards preached what would become his most famous sermon, a sermon that kicked off the First Great Awakening in New England and beyond. He preached it in his own congregation at Northampton, Massachusetts, and then again in Enfield, Connecticut. The title of that sermon was “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” In what was probably the most dramatic image in that sermon, Edwards said, “The God who holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked....” I shall now read the full text of that sermon to you as my message for today. JUST KIDDING! But if you want to get some idea of how the church of our ancestors differs from our church today, you need look no further than that fearsome sermon. Jonathan Edwards didn’t coddle his hearers. He wanted to terrify them. He wanted to scare them straight...straight into the arms of God.

My primary text for today is that passage from the Letter to the Hebrews in Chapter 12, read for us today by Mike Flanagan. It contains descriptions of two mountains, and the first one is the awesome Mount Sinai, that high place in the desert where Moses ended up with his people on their exodus from Egypt and where he received the Ten Commandments. In other words, we begin this text with “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Mount Sinai, as depicted in the bible and specifically here in Hebrews, is a place of awe and of the revealing of strict divine laws for the people, and also the place of the golden calf and of the angry smashing of tablets and of terror among the people. This writer refers to the mountain as “a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them....” Moses said, “I tremble with fear” in the face of such power on the mountain. The main thing that everyone took away from their

encounter with God on Mount Sinai was that this was a God who was not to be messed with. This God meant business. This God demanded respect and, yes, fear.

But the author of Hebrews moves quickly from the fearsome image of God at Mount Sinai to the image of God as the Holy One of Mount Zion, the City of Jerusalem, both the real place and the spiritual reality, depicted as a place of intense joy and hope. You may not think of Jerusalem as a mountain, by the way, but when you go from the Jordan River, 20 miles east of Jerusalem, to the city of Jerusalem, you are going from below sea level to 2500 feet above sea level. The bible talks about “going up” to Jerusalem, and it is indeed a steep climb. Around here in western New York, we would probably call the mount of Jerusalem a hill, but the people of Jesus’ day called it a mountain. So, Hebrews takes us from Mount Sinai to Mount Zion, from the mountain of fear to the mountain of joy. This second mountain, the mountain of joy, is “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,” where the faithful are met by “innumerable angels in festal gathering” and are ushered into an “assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” and “the spirits of the righteous made perfect.” “God, the judge of all” is present, as is Jesus, “the mediator of a new covenant.” What a glorious contrast to the mountain of fear and terror! This is the paradise yearned for by people of faith. This is the shining goal that lies beyond all our mundane everyday lives.

If we stopped there, my sermon would be about over. But then in verse 25 the author of Hebrews does the unexpected. The author goes **back** to the mountain of fear. “See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking,” says the text, “for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!” We have jumped back to Mount Sinai and to sinners in the hands of an angry God. “At that time,” Hebrews says, “[God’s] voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.’” Can’t you just hear that rumbling bass soloist in Handel’s *Messiah* when you hear these words in the Letter to the Hebrews? “And I will shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land, and I will shake all nations, I’ll shake... But who may abide the day of his coming, and who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner’s fire.”

Now we may thrill when a bass soloist sings those words, but many Christians (especially more liberal Christians) often seem to want to skip over biblical images of fear and fire and an angry God. We want our gentle Jesus, meek and mild. We're happy to speak of joy and peace and love, but we steer away from the harsher side of the bible and from expressions of religion that convey fear or judgment. I wonder if this passage is calling us to take a second look at this tendency. It may not always serve us well.

There's a toughness and a roughness about life. And perhaps we don't do ourselves or our children any kindness when we pretend that aspect of life isn't there, when we speak and act as if all people have our best interests at heart deep down and as if there's a bluebird of happiness just around every corner and as if our faith will solve everything. One commentator I read years ago wrote about phrases Christians should quit relying on (Jayson Bradley, reprinted in the St. Thomas Episcopal Church newsletter, Bath, NY, December 2013). The writer suggested that we do away in particular with this one: "God doesn't give you more than you can handle." He said that's not biblically accurate, since it's not **in** the bible, and since the bible is full of people "who find themselves at the end of what they can handle." He said those words can be heard by suffering people as dismissing the seriousness of the trials they're actually experiencing in their lives. And he said the fact is that people do go through more than they can handle all the time, from the loss of a child to a slow death from cancer and on and on. Imagine saying those words (God never gives you more than you can handle) to a Jewish prisoner at Buchenwald, or to a Palestinian mother whose child is starving to death in Gaza, or to a mourning husband whose wife just lost her life to a missile in Ukraine. Our human life and our life of faith aren't always simple or easy. And our scriptures often represent an honest attempt to wrestle with why bad things happen and why life can seem out of control and why God can seem either absent or angry.

Encounters with God, like all human experiences, are seldom a smooth road. In his book, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, James Baldwin describes an experience of conversion that drives his fictional young man, John, to the floor of a church filled with family and friends. He writes, "And something moved in John's body which was not John. He was invaded, set at naught, possessed. This power had struck John, in the head or in the heart; and in a moment, wholly, filling him with an anguish that he could never in his life have imagined, that he surely could not endure, that even now he could not believe, had opened him up; had cracked him open, as wood beneath the

axe cracks down the middle, as rocks break up; had ripped him and felled him in a moment, so that John had not felt the wound but only the fear; and lay here, now, helpless, screaming, at the very bottom of darkness” (p. 219).

The truth is that our spiritual paths can lead to times such as John experienced. It’s been described as “the dark night of the soul.” Encounters with God can be times of fear and terror and of being broken open, times we feel we cannot endure. And in such moments, we can feel helpless and lost and alone, faced with our own complete and utter inadequacy and even faced with the absence or fear of God. We’re at Mount Sinai. We’re sinners in the hands of an angry God.

The solution to this dreadful situation is far from easy or simple. It may come quickly or it may come only after months or years of time. And yet there is a solution. Hebrews refers to it as “receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.” The call of God, both from the earth and from the heavens, is to place ourselves utterly in God’s hands. It’s a call to seek God’s will for our lives in all that we do and all that we are. It’s a lifetime task, but it takes on greater urgency at certain times in our lives. Our lectionary psalm today is Psalm 103, which says our God is “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Our God may be a refiner’s fire, but the purpose of that fire is to lead us into the God’s glorious presence. Jesus is an example of what it means to live in that glorious presence. And God invites us into that presence. There’s nothing we can do to earn being in that presence. But we each can find the path to that sacred place for our lives, to true paradise on earth, to the benefit of all around us.

This is ultimately what happened to John in James Baldwin’s novel. He was raised from the darkness to the light and from the floor of the church to the arms of a loving congregation. The God who can crush us can also lift us up. But we cannot forget that our God is a God of awe.

In one of my favorite children’s books, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, by C. S. Lewis, the children who end up in the land of Narnia have a talk with spirit guides, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver. They learn that Aslan, the name of the powerful image of Jesus or God in the book, is not a man but a lion. “Ooh!” exclaims Susan.... “Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.” “That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” says Mrs. Beaver. “If there’s anyone who can appear before Aslan without their

knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly." "Then he isn't safe?" asks Lucy. "Safe?" says Mr. Beaver.... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King" (mentioned in online commentary by Bishop Cummins, Catonsville MD).

You and I may imagine God as a cosmic buddy. But God, in the sense meant by C. S. Lewis, is not safe. The God of the universe is an awesome God, a God before whom we may feel compelled to throw ourselves to the ground in fear and reverence. Our God is not a God to be messed with. Our God is to be respected. Our God means business. But the business of God is to open the gates of paradise, to convince us that the mountain of fear is also the mountain of joy. Both mountains are mountains that belong to God. They are, in a sense, one mountain. And the God of awe and joy awaits us at the summit. Thanks be to God! Amen.