

Sermon – August 21, 2022
“Come and belong!!”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Hebrews 12:18-29

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill us with open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for those who hear them, a blessing that transforms us into Christ's image and guides us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Good morning! What a blessing it has been to have days of cool weather in the middle of August. Please keep our school children in mind as they head back to school this week in Northumberland. Give those buses a little extra space, and let's keep our teachers, students, staff, and administrators in our prayers. On Thursday of this past week, our bishop was sent demand letters from churches in Virginia. Those churches included Fairfield and Afton. The demand letters request that the conference negotiate with churches seeking to disaffiliate with the intention of securing better financial terms for those desiring to exit the UMC. As we learn more about the conference's response, our leadership will share that information. Please keep all involved in this process in your prayers, asking that grace and mercy will be extended to all who are part of this journey. Give us hearts of mercy, Lord, as we seek a path forward to follow you.

There are two very important words in today's scripture reading from the letter to the Hebrews. Can you guess those two words? The words are "not" and "but." "Not" is found in verse 18 where the writer says, "You have not come to" and the "but" is found in verse 22 where the writer states, "But you have come." This morning's reading pivots around these two words and we will want to be clear about what we have come to and what we have not come to. In the Greek language that the letters were written in, these words "not" and "but" are found at the beginning of those sentences. The writer wants us to realize something important about what we have come to and what we have not come to.

There are two mountains described in the scripture, Mt Sinai and Mt Zion. Let's look at these two mountain scenes our writer describes. The first scene occurs at Mt. Sinai when Israel comes to that place in their wilderness journey. Imagine this scene if we can. It is a scene that every Hebrew would be aware of as it is part of the Hebrew culture and identity. Imagine that we are in the camp with all of Israel in the wilderness and have been told that today God will come and speak to us. We get up early and are led out to the mountain which towers up in front of us. We have been told that we are not to even touch the base of the mountain, and if we do touch it or an animal touches it, we or the animal will be stoned to death. We are not to go up on the mountain. We are to stand at the base and listen for God's words. Boundaries have been set to let us know where the mountain begins. As we gather at the base of the mountain and look up towards the top, we see that the mountain top is burning in a blazing fire with the smoke going up from the top like the smoke from one of the great brick kilns we left behind in Egypt. We see deep darkness and gloom present at the top, and the mountain looks very uninviting. At the top we can see a storm or raging tempest. Just as we began to study these things, the sound of a trumpet blast begins. At first, that sound is distant but it keeps repeating and growing louder and louder until it is almost deafening. And then out of all of these sights and sounds, we hear the words begin that sound like roaring thunder in our ears. These are the ten words, the Ten Commandments. We might take a quick look at Moses and notice that even he is trembling in fear as he witnesses this scene. If we can begin to imagine what this event was like, then we also would be those who are gripped with fear and trembling as this sight that marks the very presence of the creator of the universe to whom we have come. This is the first covenant that was marked by the giving of the Law, the Torah. The presence of God is not a place that any want to be found unprepared, as the God present on the mountain top seems to be a God of awe

and fear. Remember that this is not the place we have come to. This is not where we have come. We have a “but” that tells us we have come to another place.

Contrast that scene with the one that follows the word “but,” and provides the description of the place we have come to. Try again to imagine what is described for us. We have come to a new mountain that is the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. We have a picture of this new city in the Book of Revelation in the vision given to the Church. We might recall items like streets of gold or the gates of the city each being made from a single pearl, but most likely we will recall it as a place where there is no more pain, no more suffering, no more death, and where God wipes away every tear from our eyes. Sounds better and more inviting already, doesn't it? In this new place are thousands and thousands of angels not in some sort of warlike assembly but in a joyful assembly. They are celebrating before the throne of God, where Jesus sits at God's right hand. Don't miss the word “joyful” used in our translations. The idea is there is a jubilant festival, an ongoing celebration, or a party of sorts. Also present and joining in this festival is the church of the first born. The first born are those whose names are written in heaven. They have died in Christ and are now before the throne and are part of this great joyful celebration. Do we know any who might be present? Can we imagine the joyful expressions on their faces? Do our hearts yearn to be with them and to bring everyone we know into this ongoing, joyful celebration? Here in the midst of this celebration, in fact at its center, is God, the judge of all people, yet there is no trumpet sound or a thundering voice booming out words. There is no blazing fire and no one here seems fearful. Those present are in awe but are joyful at being in the presence of this righteous judge. Present in this celebration are also the spirits of the righteous made perfect, those who have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus and are able to be included in this great celebration. Here also we see Jesus, the Lamb of God. Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant. Jesus is not trembling in fear at the presence of God as Moses did at Sinai, but rules and reigns with God, inviting this great throng to join together in praise. Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant, one that brings people into this assembly with unspeakable joy in their hearts. Here we see the sprinkled blood of Jesus with its cleansing, washing ability to remove sin and reconcile these before the throne, enabling them to be in a holy God's presence. There is no fear here of one going too close to a holy God, becoming holy and being loose among the people. In this celebration, we see the results of shed blood that is better than the blood of Abel. Abel's blood cried out to God for vengeance after his death. Jesus' sprinkled

blood shed on the cross brings sinners into this joyful gathering before God and with God and for God.

Do we see the difference between these two mountains? They represent two covenants, one that was made with a people from a distance because they were not holy, by one who dwelt in holiness and whose presence shook the mountain. The other is a celebration of the redeemed in heaven, a celebration filled with joy that is enabled by Jesus' work on the cross. Moses in all of his boldness was a mediator of the first covenant, a covenant that those who received it in the wilderness could not keep, were judged, and fell in the wilderness. Jesus is the better mediator, bearing the sins of this multitude on the cross and reconciling to God sinners who will accept and believe in him. Don't forget that while Moses trembled in fear at the sight on Mt Sinai, he did go up into the thick darkness at the top of the mountain and meet with God. But Jesus is the better mediator of a better covenant. I hope that we can grasp the difference between these two scenes. Which of these places do we want to be? I hope the line to go to Mt. Sinai is short and the line to go to Mt. Zion is long.

One aspect of this heavenly scene that we may not understand is that it does not await us at some future time. We have been given the kingdom. This kingdom of God is in breaking. This kingdom is alive in our hearts. We are connected to this great joyful, ongoing celebration now, and it should be present whenever we are blessed to come together, such as when we worship on Sunday mornings. We live in the now of this scene. We are with Jesus in the heavenly places. Whenever we realize this, we also should be touched by this great joy that is being celebrated in heaven and in our hearts right now.

Let's ask ourselves this morning if when we come to worship on Sunday, does our worship reflect the worship on Mt. Sinai or on Mt. Zion? Are we those who hear God's Words and judge each other and the world by them, seeking to hold each other to the Law, looking for the chance to point out failures in each other's lives? Or do we come to a place of great joy and sharing that celebrates the risen Lord, our salvation, and the grace we have been given by the cross? When people drive by and see us coming into the church on Sunday mornings, do they see us slowly coming to worship as if we are approaching the gloom and darkness seen on the top of Mt Sinai, or is our approach vibrant and joyful like the host seen in the ongoing celebration in heaven? Are people in our community drawn to this place because they are aware of the joyful worship that occurs within these walls Sunday after Sunday, or do they stay away because they

are afraid that they will only find fire, thunder, and judgment from those they might sit among in the pews? Do we leave here each Sunday with a new experience of the joy that surrounds the throne of God, a deeper experience of the joy found there, and a stronger desire to be with them and to bring a bus load with us? Does our hunger for heaven grow when we worship in this place? Are there shouts of joy and songs of praise sung as if we were among those around the throne of God? Do we live in fear of breaking the Law or are we in love with Jesus and seeking to live more fully in his mercy and grace? Are we inviting people to come and belong to a group of people who are celebrating the now of the kingdom of God and looking forward to the time when we will be with the joyous heavenly throng before the throne?

These two very different mountains represent two aspects of God. Which does our church reflect? As we begin to grasp the significance of these two covenants, we need to grasp the idea that God is “both and”, both our righteous judge and the giver of grace through Jesus. We need to understand that God is a consuming fire as the writer reminds us at the end of this passage. There is a coming judgment where those who reject the love of God through Jesus will face the white-hot fire of a holy God without a mediator. As there was a mountain shaken when the Law was given at Mt. Sinai, so also God’s words will at last shake heaven and earth. This final shaking means that the universe we cling to will pass away and only the eternal will be left. Those around God in heaven will continue their joyful celebration, but those who reject Jesus will, like the universe, be destroyed.

In light of these two mountains, two very different covenants, let us not just look forward to a future time when we will be reunited with God, but let us live in the now of a time when the kingdom of God is, but is not yet. We should be experiencing the joy of the kingdom right here, right now, sharing that joy with each other and the people in our community. We should be so full of joy and our worship should so reflect the heavenly scene that there is a line that forms each Sunday at our doors of those hoping to catch a glimpse of our festive worship and overflowing joy and to receive the grace and mercy of Christ. Don’t miss in our reading of the scripture that Jesus as our mediator left this festive place, put on the flesh of a human, came to earth, and was among us. Jesus set aside the glory of the heavenly kingdom to come to earth to shed his blood and die on a cross that we might turn to him and receive mercy and grace. We are to be people known in this community as “the church that is so filled with joy” that people have to come and see us worship to believe it. There should be so much joy present that a line forms

outside our doors each Sunday of people hoping to get in, follow Jesus, and join our joyful worship.

Remember, broken people are drawn to Jesus. The deeper their pain the more they are trying to find Jesus. Our goal is not to place obstacles in their path, but to invite them into a festival, a place where they can come and find welcome in the loving arms of Jesus, repent of their sins, be washed clean by the blood of the Lamb, be ministered to with Jesus' great love, and belong to a people who are already celebrating the future in the daily walk of their lives. We have to check ourselves and determine if we are those who joyfully invite those who are broken in our lives and in this community into a relationship with Jesus. We are to welcome them into the celebration of the now we live in, a celebration over the in-breaking kingdom of God. How are we doing? If we are carrying burdens that weigh us down and keep us from being such people of God, then we need to come and give our burdens to Jesus and receive mercy and grace. If we are anxious about our lives, then we are to let Jesus fill us with the joy that is found in his presence in this place when we gather and on Mt. Zion always. This picture of the mountain top of Zion is who we are now and will be forever. Be filled with the mercy and grace Jesus purchased for us on the cross with his shed blood and be joyful people. And take that joy from here and go into the world and find some broken person or persons and love them into the kingdom of God, that they may tremble alone in fear no more but may be filled with the joy of a risen Lord. If you don't have overflowing joy this morning, then come to the altar, leave your burdens there, and meet the risen Lord new this day. Jesus is waiting to give us mercy and grace.

Pray with me: Jesus, fill our hearts anew with the joy of the future heaven and help us live in the now of an available relationship with God. Lord, lead us to those we don't see who are hurting, broken, and trembling in fear because they only know of Mt. Sinai, a place they know because we have shown it to them. Forgive us and help us, Lord, to love them and invite them into the festival on Mt. Zion. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.