A tale of two mountains! God and His people

This sermon is titled a tale of two mountains. Ain’t that a title that sounds like ‘a tale of two cities’ by Charles Dickens?

Let us pray:

God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the One, who met and spoke with people no matter where they are, meet us here today in your word. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction

Location, location, location! If you have seen the movie, ‘the castle’ you know how important location is at times. In that movie the Kerrigan family finds itself next to the airport, which means all the associated noises of booming jet engines become part of their routine life. On the other hand one of the greater advantages of living next to an airport as one of them puts it, ‘you could walk home from airport’. Enough said about the ‘the castle’ movie imagery, but here is the fact that I would like to draw your attention to today, location.

In our second reading we hear of two great locations that are important to human history. Two sites that has spiritual significance to Jews and Christians. In fact their importance as we heard through our reading, they are not only relevant for past, present but one of the mountain is spoken even in the language of ‘heavenly…’; there is a future anticipation too. The tale of two mountains, the Sinai Mountain and Mount Zion. So what is so special about these two mountains? Why are they specially mentioned here? Most importantly, what is God saying and doing on these mountains? To know answers for these questions let us look at their individual stories now.

The ever present God on Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion – What is God up to?

(sit in the first chair and call it Mt. Sinai)

First you have Mt. Sinai. What’s so special about the mountain? Well its speciality is not accounted to how tall or how wide or how elevated this mountain is, but for the people, the special connection with Mt. Sinai comes from the fact that God met Moses in the burning bush. In that encounter, God revealed His compassion for Israel and laid out the plan for their redemption. God revealed His name to Moses, YHWH which translates as ‘I am who I am’ or ‘I will be who I will be.’

While God was busy announcing the good news that He will save His people, Moses was too busy looking at his own life. If you recollect his story, he was a murderer lying low tending the sheep of his father-in-law. Moses. Too focused in on himself, Moses was busy coming up with all sorts of excuses (e.g.: He said, Lord I am no good speaker) (see Exodus 3 for more information) when God met him in the burning bush.

Fast forward to a few years, we hear that, Israel finally was set free by the Pharaoh to go and worship God. So they are travelling through the wilderness and camp at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19). At this Mt. Sinai, God calls Israel to worship Him. God said to Moses to prepare people for worship, through ritual cleansing and present themselves for worship. God gives clear instructions and on the appointed day He comes down to meet His people.
God coming down to meet people, of course it was a magnificent event, there is 'blazing fire, the darkness and the gloom, the storm, the blast of a trumpet, and the sound of a voice. When the people heard the voice, they begged not to hear another word, because they could not bear the order which said, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling and afraid!"

Speaking of worship experience can it get any better than that! It was an eventful, experience.' People 'saw' God's glory, they witnessed His power. As I consider this event, a lot of us long for such experience, and some churches goes to the lengths of even duplicating this at their worship centres, blazing fire (all sorts of spot lights?), darkness and gloom (fog machines?), there was trumpets (perhaps the emphasis on having a great music band ever?). Maybe I'm reading too much into it?

Anyways, have you taken notice of people’s response to God meeting them even in the grandest means possible, people were concerned about one thing, “When the people heard the voice, they begged not to hear another word.” Wow, have times changed? But God, well God is keen to reconcile people to Himself, and gives them what? His Word - the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). By obeying these commandments people were told they will be known as God’s people. We all know how we are going with those commandments. Given our other readings speak of Sabbath, let me give you 3 Commandment as an example, how are we going with, 'keep the Sabbath holy?' Apparently, times have changed the meaning and like everyone else Christians at times see Sabbath as a day of rest, it is 'my' day, it is 'family day', or 'holiday.' Listen to what Luther says about this commandment in the Small Catechism, “we should fear and love God that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it.’ How are we going with resting in God, resting in His word?

Sabbath rest stands for coming to God and intentionally refreshing in His presence. Regular rest in God’s presence will refresh you for the journey ahead. By the way, the prophet Elijah did just that, when he was fleeing away from the evil Jezebel after putting all the 400 Baal prophets to death. Angry Jezebel was after his life, therefore, Elijah flees and arrives at foothills of Mt. Sinai. Out of desperation he cries out that life is too much for him, 'take away my life; I might as well be dead' (1 Kings 19). God instructs him to go to the top of the mountain. Most of you know how that story goes, ‘Then the LORD passed by and sent a furious wind that split the hills and shattered the rocks—but the LORD was not in the wind. The wind stopped blowing, and then there was an earthquake—but the LORD was not in the earthquake, 12 After the earthquake there was a fire—but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire there was the soft whisper of a voice’ (1 kings 19: 11-12). Again, God came to Elijah in His Word, not in the bells and whistles, not in earth shattering experience.

Look at what Elijah is doing in that story, the second he opens his mouth, he goes straight to complaint mode and says to God, ‘I served you and now they are after me.’ Again, God through His Word assures Elijah there are 7,000 others who did not bow to Baal as well, thus restoring him. Not only that, God assures Elijah of a blessed future for the people of Israel. So at the end of the day, Mt. Sinai is a place where God came to meet His people, introduced Himself, He revealed his plan, He gave his people His Word - Ten Commandments, revealed His power, majesty and glory, assured them of a future. No wonder Mt. Sinai is a special place for Jews and Christians.
What about Mt. Zion, what is so significant about it? According to Genesis 22, this is the mountain on which Abraham almost gave his beloved son Isaac as sacrifice to God. As we all know, God stopped Abraham in time and honoured his faith by providing the ram. Again, God spoke, honoured Abraham's faith, and provided the sacrificial ram.

Later on as the story of Israel unfolded, Solomon built God's temple on Mt. Zion. Since then, Israelites regularly offered their sacrifices to compensate for their sins at the temple. God dwelled in glory on this temple. When the temple was later destroyed by the Babylonians, the temple was rebuilt. Jesus visited this temple first as an infant (Luke 2: 22-38), later as a young person (Luke 2: 41-50) and of course finally as he was trialled in this temple by Sanhedrin. He was condemned on this mountain to die for all people as the ultimate sacrifice, once and for all (John 1: 36).

With Jesus sacrifice, the temple curtain, the wall that separated us from God has forever been broken. The whole event of his crucifixion is brutal, back in the day to the normal folk, nothing about crucifixion was extraordinary. But for Christians this is an extraordinary event, because of Christ’s sacrifice. Through Jesus’ sacrifice God brings forgiveness, salvation and life to His people. The writers of the Bible point to Jesus being handed over to death, and say that represents and calls for heavenly mount Zion, which is fast approaching. As baptised people, we find ourselves close to this heavenly mountain which Jesus brings to us. No wonder Hebrews writer says this,

> **Instead, you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, with its thousands of angels.**

**Promise – present & the future belongs to God!**

So far you heard about Mt. Sinai where God meets people and gives them law. You have heard about Mt. Zion where God meets his people through His Son Jesus death. Have you heard what God says after this?

This is what God says,

> **Be careful, then, and do not refuse to hear him who speaks. Those who refused to hear the one who gave the divine message on earth did not escape. How much less shall we escape, then, if we turn away from the one who speaks from heaven! His voice shook the earth at that time, but now he has promised, “I will once more shake not only the earth but heaven as well.” The words “once more” plainly show that the created things will be shaken and removed, so that the things that cannot be shaken will remain.**

What did you hear in that? Did you take notice that, God has made a promise that once again he will shake everything up and so will be in control of the future or did you hear God is going to speak and His voice will do the shaking? God speaks promise and if we truly listen then we hear, that God is in control of future. Since God is in control of what is to come what are you worried about today? Why do you feel alone? Why do you think life is pointless?
Why do you feel your life will not get any better? Why do you think the sickness won over you? Why do you think your future is in jeopardy? In Christ, in that waters of baptism didn’t God speak and take away your ultimate embarrassment, your shame, your eternal suffering?

Through forgiveness isn’t God restoring you today? Through His body and blood, isn’t God offering you ‘forgiveness of sins’ and ‘life eternal’? Why then are you searching for ‘glory’ and not see the ‘sacrifice God already made’ for you? Isn’t the theology of the cross not enough for you? God’s blessing that takes care of your sin and its eternal consequences, the devil and all its arguments to keep you grounded in hell is made weak by the cross of Jesus – have you taken notice of it? Why then the world, its sufferings, its worries, its joys keeps you busy? God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the one who came down to meet the people on Mt. Sinai, and the Son, Jesus Christ, came down to meet the humanity on Mt. Zion, comes down to you today too, in the bread you are about to hold in your hand, in the wine you are about to drink soon. That is the good news for you today! God not only came down once to give law, not only came down in Jesus to give us life, continues to come down to us through the meal, to forgive, restore and bless us. Therefore, rejoice and be thankful to God who visits you on this Sabbath day.

You and I are here to Worship God

What does this mean for all of us? What are we instructed here? Actually, the writer of Hebrews uses the Greek word Ekklesia which means Assembly of God’s people, or simply known as church. That includes all of us, so what is said to us? I’ll finish as I read verses 28-29 from our reading:

28 Let us be thankful, then, because we receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Let us be grateful and worship God in a way that will please him, with reverence and awe; 29 because our God is indeed a destroying fire.

God deserves our praise and worship no matter what our circumstances and preferences are. To revere God and be thankful to Him for the grace we receive is our primary calling. As you unpack this for your own journey, the peace of God that surpasses all human understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

Pastor Jaswanth 21 August 2016