

# “Lift Up Your Eyes...To Mount Zion”

## Hebrews 12:18-24

April 18, 2010

LWML Convention

Mountains are a stunning part of the Montana landscape. They are what first caught my eye when our family moved here four years ago and are still one of my favorite things about Montana. I never tire of lifting up my eyes to the mountains of Montana to admire their beauty and their majesty. However, have you ever tried to climb one of those things? I dare say few, if any, of us would be able to take up such a task. We're not young enough, strong enough, or in good enough shape to tackle one of those mountains. The mountains are just too much. We would either have to give up in defeat or be injured or even killed in an effort to get to the top of one of those mountains.

Mountains play a significant role in the Biblical narrative and have been a part of the theme of the LWML Montana District Convention this weekend. You have heard of several mountains to which you have or should lift up your eyes. In our meditation today, we will hear of one more mountain to which we lift up our eyes.

First, there was Mount Sinai of the Old Testament. This is the mountain we try to climb. It is, of course, the mountain on which God gave His Law, the Ten Commandments. When the Israelites were told that they would receive all the laws and commands of God, they replied, “We will do everything the LORD has said.” (Exodus 19:8)

We answer in the same way. “Sure, God, we'll do what you say.” It's not that we particularly enjoy obeying laws or commandments, but we think, like the Israelites did, that this is the way to get to God. So, we try our hardest to ascend Mt. Sinai by living good and moral lives. To get even higher faster, we add our religious actions: being a faithful church member, regularly attending worship, taking our turn at teaching Sunday School or other congregational duties, and even serving in the LWML to the point of spending the time and money to be at a convention like this for an entire weekend when we could be out doing other things.

As long as we keep our eyes down, focused on our own efforts, we feel pretty good about ourselves, but, when we lift up our eyes to really see Mt. Sinai, it's a different story. When the people of Israel, who confidently said they would do all the Lord commanded them, actually saw the Lord descend on Mt. Sinai, they changed their tune. Scripture says, "there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled." They were deathly afraid.

When we rightly see the Law which God gave, we should be very afraid, too. But, you may say, "We're not bad people. We are not unbelievers or criminals. We are doing what the Lord wants! We do more than many other people. And, even if we are not doing it all, surely the Lord will honor our best effort." Such is not the case. The Lord has a different standard. This is what the Lord told Moses and which He tells everyone of us, "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy." (Lev. 19:2)

If we think we can make it to the Lord by climbing Mt. Sinai, we are in trouble. If we are going to choose the way of the Law and depend upon our goodness and obedience, then we have to go all the way and do it perfectly. The Bible says, "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." (Gal. 3:10)

But what about our best efforts to be faithful Christians and dedicated LWML'ers? Shouldn't that count for something? Shouldn't these acts help us ascend Mt. Sinai? Not at all. The prophet Isaiah says, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;" (Isaiah 64:6) Imagine that! If our righteous acts are no more than filthy rags before a holy God, then how do our "best efforts" or, even worse, our bad actions appear before Him?

We are doomed to fall off this mountain to our death. The Scripture clearly condemns us: "the wages of sin is death". (Rom. 6:23) This means any sin, any wrong thing done, any good thing left undone, whether it's one or a million occurrences, will bring us physical death here and eternal death of body and soul in hell forever

But there is a second mountain. This is Mount Calvary of the New Testament. This is the mountain which we cannot climb for it is here where the debt of sin must be paid. As God had foreshadowed in the Passover lamb, the one who would pay for the sins of the world must be an innocent victim who has no sin for which he has to atone and who can take on the sins of the world. That lets all of us out. Not only can we not fulfill the demands of the Law as God requires – perfectly, 100% of the time – but we cannot pay the price for our offenses against that Law.

Therefore, on Mount Calvary, the God who gave the Law which condemns us to death and hell because of our sin, gives us the one and only Person who can free us from death and hell by taking the punishment and condemnation which our sin deserves upon Himself. That Person is His only Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the mediator of a new covenant through His blood. The old covenant on Sinai was all about obedience of all people. The new covenant is all about forgiveness through the shed blood of Jesus on the cross. The old covenant promised death for disobedience. The new covenant promises life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the tomb to life again. Now, not only do we have the forgiveness for all of the sins which condemn us but we also have the righteousness of Christ which qualify us to stand before a holy God.

Mount Calvary provides the way to God which Mount Sinai could never do. In fact, it is the ONLY way to Him. That is the claim which Jesus Himself made (John 14:6). Mount Calvary, a place of torture and death, ends up being a place of peace and life. The body of Jesus Christ which was nailed to a cross and died, was taken down, placed in a tomb to await the resurrection three days later. It is His bodily resurrection from the dead (which we just recently celebrated) which is the guarantee of all of God's promises made on Mount Calvary. There is forgiveness for sins and, because there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation.

But where do we get those things? We already said that we couldn't get them by walking the way of Mount Sinai. That's why our text today says, "You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a

voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them.” Sinai only produces fear and death.

But it’s also true that we can’t go to Mount Calvary. While it is true that forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation were earned on Mount Calvary through the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, that is not where He distributes those great blessings. There is a third mountain which our text for today speaks of: Mount Zion.

“Zion” is the name of a mountain which appears throughout the Old and New Testament. It was once called Moriah and is the place where a ram was sacrificed as a substitute for Isaac, saving him from death at the hand of his father, Abraham. Later, Zion (as it came to be known) was the mountain upon which the city of Jerusalem was built, the dwelling place of the people of God. It was here that Solomon built the Temple which was then rebuilt by people returning from exiles and then by King Herod. It was the place the sacrifice for sin was to be made.

So, Mount Zion is symbolic of the dwelling place of the people of God where the benefits of the sacrifice of the innocent Lamb of God are given and received, namely the Church of God. It is the mountain we don’t have to climb for God brings us there in Holy Baptism. The text says, “But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.” Wait, you might say, that sounds an awful lot like heaven. It may seem puzzling. It talks about the “heavenly Jerusalem”, but it also talks about the church of the first born. Which is it – heaven or the church? The answer is both.

Theologians often talk about the “Church Militant” (meaning the church here on earth) and the “Church Triumphant” (meaning the church in heaven), but they are not two churches, but one church from two different vantage points. As the hymn puts it, “we feebly struggle, they in glory shine.” Whereas we confess our sin and receive forgiveness here; they live sinless lives there. Whereas we hear the voice of Christ through His called servants here; they hear the voice of Christ directly there. Whereas we receive Jesus body and blood in, with, and under bread and wine here; they are in the

bodily presence of Jesus there. This unity of the Church on earth and the Church in heaven is beautifully expressed in our liturgy when the Church on earth proclaims, "With angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify your Name, evermore praising You and saying, 'Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might; heaven and earth are full of your glory.'"

So...lift up your eyes to the hills...but not to Mount Sinai which only leads to condemnation and death. You can't climb it. And not to Mount Calvary where forgiveness and life is to be won. You don't have to climb it for it has been climbed by Jesus, the Son of God, for you. But lift up your eyes to Mount Zion, "the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God...the church of the firstborn." Here, you escape the condemnation of Sinai. Here, you receive the benefits of Calvary. Here, you dwell with the people of God, now on earth and forevermore in heaven. Amen.