

## *“An Anchor for the Soul: Unshakeable”*

*Hebrews 12:18-29*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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“Church is boring. I don’t get anything out of it.” Every now and then I find myself having a conversation with someone who doesn’t go to church, or at least doesn’t go very often. When they find out I’m a pastor, usually they will begin to explain why they don’t go to church. It’s really a strange phenomenon. Maybe it’s some sense of obligation. But sometimes they are honest and will tell me they find church boring. Sometimes I hear this charge from people who DO attend church regularly and it’s usually followed by suggestions that we worship in a different way. “Maybe if we had a band or a fog machine or colored lights or dancers or an orchestra. Maybe if we didn’t spend so much time talking about the Bible. Maybe if the service was shorter it wouldn’t be so boring.” My favorite line is, “I’m just not being fed.”

Before we go any further, let me pause to say that if you have thought this way or even said it to someone, I don’t want you to hear this as a “bad dog” message. This is not about guilt. It’s not about trying to make you feel bad. If it helps, I’ve had the same thoughts at times also. Instead, I want these next few minutes to be a time when we look together at what God is telling us from his Word about worship. So here we go.

Somewhere along the line we got the idea that worship is primarily about me and my feelings or experience. The self became the center of worship. It’s certainly understandable because the self became the center of all existence. This kind of thinking is the culture we live in. It’s the air we breathe. We don’t even think about it. Marketers spend tremendous time and money to convince us that we, as consumers, are the center of our world. So I choose goods and services that meet my wants and needs, and worship is no different. Over the last 30 years or so we have seen churches move to offer worship services to meet almost any kind of taste. There’s contemporary, jazz, electric, café, Taizé – in fact many churches

have changed the name of their traditional service to classical. In each of these cases the focus of worship has become the consumer. What kind of service would our customers like?

Now this is going to sound kind of blunt, but worship isn’t about you. So let’s see what it IS about. Hebrews 12 gives us a great picture of worship. Actually we get two pictures and I don’t think you could call either of them boring. The two pictures are presented as two mountains where God is. In the first scene, the Israelites have escaped Egypt and have arrived at Mount Sinai. It is here that God meets with Moses to give him the Ten Commandments and all the other laws. God tells Moses to get the people ready. They are going to come near the presence of God and they need to be clean. God’s holiness demands the people’s very best! God also warns them not to come too close. They are not to even touch the mountain.

When the day arrives God is visibly present. There’s a dark cloud and fire and smoke over the mountain. There’s lightning and thunder and the loud noise of trumpets blown by angels. The ground shook. And the people were scared. I would be, too. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that the people wanted it to stop. Verse 21 points out that Moses trembled with fear.

This scene is a picture of God’s majesty and holiness. It’s a picture of the worship that goes on continuously in heaven. In Isaiah 6, the prophet Isaiah has a vision of heaven. He says, “the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” The presence of God is a terrifying thing, especially for sinful people. One thing we know for certain is that God cannot stand sin. But like Isaiah, when we experience the presence of God we also realize our own sinfulness.

The second scene we get in today’s passage is of another mountain, Mount Zion, described

as “the city the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.” Again we see the multitude of saints and angels present worshiping God. This scene, though, does not seem terrifying. It seems attractive, even. We’re reminded of the Bible’s descriptions of heaven as the new Jerusalem where everything is perfect. No crying, no pain, no sickness, no sin. Only worship!

So what’s the difference? And how do we reconcile these two radically different understandings of God’s presence? Over the years people have tried to come up with solutions. One of the early heresies was to say that the God of the Old Testament was not the same as the God of the New Testament. But the Bible is clear that Jesus IS the God of the Old Testament. The Gospel of John starts out, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” Jesus is the same God who created the universe.

But He’s also the way from Mount Sinai to Mount Zion. Verse 24 continues, you have come “to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” This has been a recurring message in Hebrews. Because Jesus is fully human AND fully God, he is able to be the perfect mediator between us and God. Not only is he the mediator, he’s also the perfect sacrifice. Notice in verse 23 that God is still judge of all. He is still the same God we saw on Sinai. The difference is that when we are united with Christ we are adopted as firstborn sons in God’s kingdom. When we appear before God the judge, he is no longer the judge who punishes us but the judge who vindicates us. He is there to declare us righteous instead of guilty. We now have all the privileges of firstborn sons.

The issue that the writer of Hebrews was addressing was that when faced with persecution, some of those Jewish Christians in Rome were tempted to go back to their old

ways, back to the synagogue. He’s in effect saying, “why would you go back to that terrifying relationship with God when you have something so much better?” We tend to fall for the same thinking they did. We keep trying to go back to Sinai with its rules for getting to heaven. We like rules. We like to know the steps to earn our way to God. But we can’t earn our way to God. When we try it that way we find that we’ve earned our way to “fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest.”

So the issue for us today is how we get from Sinai to Zion. How do we get from the place where God is terrifying to the place where God is inviting. More importantly, how do we get from the place where God is boring to where God is exciting? Verse 25 gives us the key: “See that you do not refuse him who is speaking.” Who is speaking? Jesus. The whole Bible is about Jesus. I saw a sign in a shop the other day that said, “Don’t complain that God is silent while your Bible is closed.” Leaving your Bible closed is one way to refuse him who is speaking.

In addition to reading and meditating on the Bible, verses 28 and 29 give us a clearer picture of how to get to Mount Zion: “Therefore let us be *grateful* for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.” I don’t know about you, but that doesn’t sound boring. Notice, though, that this description of worship is not about our feelings. It’s about our actions. “Let *us* offer to God acceptable worship, with *reverence and awe*.”

When you come to worship, remember that God is here. The same God described on Mount Sinai and on Mount Zion. When we come here to worship we are joining the worship that is already going on all around us. Remember, the bush was burning before Moses encountered it. We come and sing and praise God along with the “innumerable angels in festal gathering.” We are worshiping with “the assembly of firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.” We are surrounded right now by “the spirits of the righteous made perfect.” And right

here with us is “Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.” Just picture that in your mind. Right now this room is filled with the presence of God and all the heavenly beings who are worshiping him all the time. You and I get to be a part of that. But we can only see it by faith and you can only experience it with reverence and awe. How could that *ever* be boring?

*Amen*