

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Hebrews 12:4 – 29

Rev Joseph Highley

(transcribed from his sermon on Sunday August 21st, 2022)

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. Name, that book.

[The congregation answers] Tale of Two Cities

The Tale of Two Cities. That's the iconic opening to Charles Dickens' classic "Tale of Two Cities". While I have never read that book, I have heard its opening, its opening with its contrasting images. That is what we have this morning. Instead of a tale of two cities, we have a tale of two mountains. The mountain of the law and the mountain of the gospel.

Martin Luther prepared a set of thesis. No, not the 95 theses he nailed on the Wittenberg church door. He prepared theses for something called the Heidelberg Disputation. In that thesis number 26, he says this, "The Law says, do this, and it is never done. Grace says, believe in this, and everything is already done."

That will be our theme this morning for the two mountains, the mountain of the law and the mountain of the gospel. We'll tweak that slightly, simply to say that with grace or with the gospel, it is finished. Law and gospel; our theme this morning. Something very important to get when understanding the message of the Bible.



As part of our meditation this morning, we will look at this painting from Lucas Cranach, the Elder. Painted around the year 1536. Lucas Cranach, the Elder was a lifelong friend of Martin Luther and created many, many influential pieces of art to support reformation theology. This particular painting happens to be called Law and Gospel. It's one of two editions of this painting. This one, the latter one hanging originally in Prague. I'm excited to share this painting with you as we dive into it and our scripture reading for this morning, Hebrews, chapter 12.



So the first thing I'll invite you to do is to turn your attention to the left side of this picture. Here on the left, we have a mountain beneath which is Adam and Eve picking from the fruit and the garden and on top of which his Moses receiving the 10 commandments. This ties directly with our epistle reading. It describes the scene on Mount Sinai, the mountain on which the commandments were given to Moses to be presented to the people.

The author of Hebrews summarizes the mountain of the law, Mount Sinai, like this: verse 18, 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 no further message be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the site that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." It's a pretty accurate summation by the writer of Hebrews of the book of Exodus and the giving of the law. God giving the law through Moses, the people were terrified. They said, God depart from us. Right from the start there were many that rebelled and died. With the law comes death. The law places demands on you. The mountain of the law is one of terror because the law says do this and it is never done. It is a terrifying, horrifying mountain.

Who here has ever gone mountain climbing? Anybody? A couple people have gone mountain climbing. You look up in the mountain and as you're getting up on there and you've been going on for hours, you look up and you say, "Ah, there's the peak." And then you come around some bends and go up and down. And then, "Ahh! I've reached the peak." And oh, that wasn't the peak.

This, in mountain climbing, is what is known as a false peak or a false summit. There are false peaks that are unintentional, like those that are just discouraging as you think you've made it to

the top only to find out there's yet another peak waiting for you. Then there are intentional false peaks. In 1906, a man named Frederick Cook claimed to be the first man to ascend on Mount McKinley or Mount Denali, as it's also known, which is the tallest peak in North America in Alaska. To document his claim of reaching the summit, Cook published a photograph he had taken of a colleague at the top of the peak with an American flag. Good peak picture. Plant that flag right there. The problem is the photograph wasn't of the peak of Mount Denali. One of Cook's fellow explorers recreated the exact photograph that Cook had claimed was the peak several years later, and it is from a part of the mountain that is a full 19 miles away and 5,400 feet of elevation below the summit of Mount Denali. It was quite the scandal for Cook and hurt his later claim when he tried to claim that he reached the North Pole first. Mountain climbing you see fake peaks like that frequently. Everyone wants to be the first to do something or prove some sort of incredible claim of ascent.

Only just a few years ago, trying to be one of the few to summit some combination of the world's highest peaks, there was a man who claimed he had finished his second peak. It was K2 and he took a photograph of himself, a selfie from the peak of K2. The problem is in the reflection of his snow goggles you can see features that are not visible from the peak of K2. Some astute sleuths noticed that those features are only available down several steps below the summit of K2. Later, the man had to admit that he had faked that climb.

The mountain of the law is full of false peaks. Peaks of our own creation, trying to do our own accomplishments, make them look better than they are. The peak of the mountain's creation, also, a never ending series of false peak after false peak, as we attempt to climb our way up that mountain. There's just always another peak before us, we simply cannot do it. No amount of human endeavor, no amount of striving can summit the law. None of it can get us to God. You can work your heart out, you can strive to your dying breath to get right with God, to really do it right, to be able to hold up your accomplishments and say, look, God, I did it, but it is never enough. The law is constantly putting another false peak after false peak in your path and it says do this and it is never, ever done. The law says, do this, and it is never done. Those that try to make the summit of the mountain of the law, what's your end fate? Well, if we look back to our picture, it's the man sitting under the mountain on the left side of this painting. It ends in death.



So, where are you this morning?

Lucas Cranach, the Elder, in this painting, pictures you as placed between these two mountains. That's you sitting right there in the bottom middle of this painting.



You see the mountain on the top, right of the painting? That is the mountain of the gospel. Our body, however, has turned towards the mountain of the law attempted to attempt its summit. Then we have one of the prophets, himself from the side of the law saying, no, the law is pointing you to Jesus. Look at the crucified one. Even though the law cannot give us life, it ends only in death, the law does still point us to Jesus. In the background, we might not be able to see it quite so well, there's a pole just to the right of the mountain on the left and on that pole is the bronze serpent and the camp of the Israelites.



That episode in the Old Testament points to Jesus. Jesus himself mentions the bronze serpent in John, chapter three. The whole law points us to Jesus though the law itself cannot give us the life that Jesus can.

Then to your right there in the middle of this picture, you have John the Baptist, the one who's preparing the way for the Savior, pointing you to Christ crucified. The gospel simply says it is finished. The law says do this and it's never done. Grace says, believe in this, and everything's already done.

The mountain of the law is best represented by Mount Sinai and the mountain on which God met with Moses and spoke to the Israelites and wrote the tablets of the law. The mountain of the gospel is best represented by Zion. As it is mentioned in our reading from Hebrews this morning, verse 22, "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels and festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkle blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

You, this morning, have come to Mount Zion. The question is, what is Mount Zion? In the Old Testament Mount Zion was this hilltop or mountaintop in the city of Jerusalem. On that mountaintop sat the temple of the Lord. Nowadays with the destruction of the temple they call something else entirely Mount Zion, but in biblical times it was the Temple Mount. Why would the Temple Mount, Mount Zion be the mountain of the gospel? After all God was present on Mount Sinai it was a terrifying experience for the people. What was so special about Mount Zion and the temple and God's presence there?

Well, in the Old Testament, Mount Zion was the place that promised to be secure. Mount Zion housed the presence of the living God and no force could assail it. No enemy could take it. It was the place of protection and peace for the people of God. It was the place on earth where God's presence promised to dwell with his people.

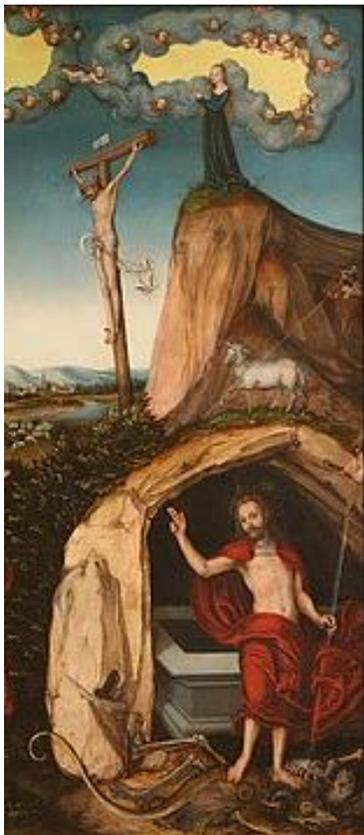
Then you see everything changed with the infant, Jesus. If you can see up at the very, very top right of the painting, in between the two clouds there. There's a little baby. You can see the full picture of the baby and just a little thing that it's carrying. Can anyone see what that baby is carrying. A cross.



The little baby is the infant Jesus, and he is bringing with him, his cross. With Jesus, the presence of God was not promised just to the temple on Mount Zion. Jesus came to earth and is the presence of the living God on earth. Jesus is the new true and fuller Mount Zion. Jesus is the place that no force can assail and that no enemy can conquer. Jesus is the place of protection and peace for God's people. He gives his presence to you. That little flame that's there in the background, in the middle, the Holy Spirit, the presence of the living God that Jesus, himself, pours out on you, his church, his presence with you forever. When we gather here in the name of Jesus and the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Mount Zion is in your presence.

Did you know there's a mountain in this room? Sometimes we say, oh, did you hear about the, you know, about the elephant room? Let's talk about the elephant room. No, in this room, we have a mountain, an unmissable mountain, Mount Zion, the mountain of the gospel. You don't have to wait for some age to come to assemble at this mountain, this holy hill, this Mount Zion, this heavenly Jerusalem.

It is wherever Jesus is. Jesus is here with us today. This is what the mountain of the gospel is. Now we must answer what exactly is this gospel. This gospel is what John, the Baptist is pointing up to. As if he's saying with his finger, look, there is the one crucified for you on the cross. The gospel is this, that while the law places all these demands on you and you can never fulfill them Jesus fulfills them all. He cancels your debt with his death on the cross. He is raised up into death for you. That is the gospel. Jesus Christ crucified for you. Does he stay dead? No, of course not. He is Mount Zion. He cannot be conquered.



The bottom right part of this painting, you have Jesus, the risen Jesus. He shows the fate of all who received the good news of the mountain of the gospel. An empty tomb just as Jesus' tomb was empty Jesus has risen and so will you, death cannot take you. You see what's in his hands? That Jesus there in the bottom, right? It's a spear and rather dark underneath him it's a dragon and a skeleton pierced with that spear. The dragon representing the devil and the skeleton representing death. Both of them defeated trampled on by the feet of Jesus. He is the conqueror and he gives you the victory. It is already finished. There is no work for you to do, to earn this salvation. Above the tomb you see the lamb, another depiction of the triumphant Jesus raised to life after his sacrifice. There perched on top of Mount Zion, the very top of the mountain, is Mary, the mother of Jesus, a representative of the whole church. We stand like her perched atop Mount Zion, perched atop Jesus receiving all these things in faith, receiving the victory, receiving the, it is finished, receiving forgiveness life and salvation. Jesus has won the victory. Jesus is Mount Zion. Jesus is the gospel and Jesus is for you.

In other sermons, we talk about what this means for us now as Christians, that as those chosen by Christ, loved by him, forgiven by him, now we've got work to do. Not to earn our salvation, not to earn our salvation, not to earn our salvation, but because we have received salvation. We talked about that last week with what we do in faith, as we go out in faith, serving others. Well, that's not this week's sermon. This week's sermon, we simply rest on this. Quit trying to do it all on your own. Quit trying to offer up something good of yourself. Climbing that mountain of the law that only ends with another false peak and another false peak in your way. You cannot ascend to God that way. Don't even try. Instead, look to the mountain of the gospel and see Jesus.

See Jesus crucified for you. See Jesus raised to life for you. See Jesus conquering, conquering death, conquering the devil. The mountain of the gospel holds life. It holds the church, the saints who have been made holy. It holds you because of what Jesus has done for you.

The law says, do this and it is never done. Jesus says, it is finished. Amen. May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding guard, your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.