

Heaven and Earth, Shaken and Unshakable

Hebrews 12:18-29

August 25, 2019

Keith Starkenburg

“You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom ... but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.”

Today is a very normal Sunday. Today, like every Sunday, we have come together with many, many different experiences and burdens. It is the beginning of the school year, and some of us are filled with anticipation of new relationships, new learning, or new competition. It is the beginning of the school year, and some of us are dreading how alone we will feel among peers who shame us about our bodies, our hair, our zits, our whatever. Maybe we are just dreading all the work teachers will visit upon us. For some of us, today, like every day, is a routine of managing the pains of our aging bodies. For some of us, today, like most days that we've seen, is a day filled with anticipation – maybe of a beautiful Sunday afternoon bike ride. Some of us are dealing with great losses, like our pastor and friend Rog. Some of us are happy today that our children are healthy and growing into who they can be. Some of us are in pain and are suffering. Some of us are filled with the joy of anticipation.

This little chunk of the book of Hebrews, though, asks all of us to put all of our lives in another context. A bigger, deeper context called heaven.

At the beginning of our text, the author of Hebrews takes us back to Mt. Sinai, where God appears to God's people, Israel, but only through the mediation of Moses and other elders. The authors reminds us that God's fiery, smoky, thundering voice on Mt. Sinai was initially like a magnet – the people wanted to look, they wanted to see this glorious new thunder and fire. Maybe like those of us who are filled with joy and anticipation, who want to see what God is going to do. But, eventually, in line with what God commanded, the people wanted to stay at the foot of the mountain and said to Moses, “You speak to us and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die” (Ex. 20:19). Just as God's voice had made the mountain shake, God's voice made them tremble, made them shake, kept them at a distance. Just so, some of us are keeping a distance from God. Our loss and suffering has us afraid of what God might do.

But, all of that is simply for sake of contrast. The author is saying: “You have not come to something that can be touched ... but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” You have not come to Mt. Sinai which you could see or touch. You have come to Mt. Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem.

You have come. The Greek verb is second person plural, perfect indicative active. It means something that has been happened in the past that has present results. I have studied arithmetic (completed in the past) and so I know that $2+2=4$ (present results). You all have

come to Mt. Zion, and you all are still here. Not, you will come, or you came and left. You all have come to another mountain, the heavenly Jerusalem.

What is that? In part, heaven is a particular kind of community. This is the author expanding on the great cloud of witnesses who are watching us as we run through our lives. Listen for who inhabits this community: “the city of the living God ... to innumerable angels in 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.” It’s not just Moses, Rahab and Abraham would be watching. It is innumerable angels enjoying a festival, throwing a party. It is other perfected human beings who participate in the assembly. It is Jesus Christ, and the living God who is judge. Heaven is an untouchable community of angels, human being, and God in Christ, and they are cheering for us even now.

Every year I bring students to St. Spyridon church a couple of blocks from Trinity in Palos Heights. Many students who have never been inside an Orthodox church are often overwhelmed by the imagery. At the top of the dome is a massive icon of Christ, and the apostles are pictured just under him, and other saints and angels are depicted throughout the sanctuary in great detail. The church is a depiction of this heavenly assembly. NT Wright has described heaven as “a further dimension of our world, not a place far removed at one extreme of our world.” It is not just that the great cloud of witnesses can see us, can pray for us. It is also that we also, through Christ come to them. Jesus Christ mediates between God and human beings and between heaven and earth. And so, he brings them together.

“You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom ... but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.”

Why does this matter? Why talk about this community if it cannot be touched, even if they are near?

It helps to consider the original audience of this sermon. It is clear that the audience – perhaps a Christian community in Rome in the early 60s – have suffered for their commitment to Jesus, including the loss of possessions and imprisonment. They have been, in the words of Hebrews, “publicly exposed to abuse and persecutions, and sometimes being partners with those so treated” (10:33). In other words, they experience shame and dishonor. Some of them may literally have been put out of the city in a forced exile. Although they have not suffered martyrdom (12:4), it is something the author is probably preparing them to face. Unlike Jesus who disregarded the shame of the cross (12:2), the recipients of this sermon are probably considering giving up the Jesus way for “an older and safer” religion (Luke Timothy Johnson). Perhaps Roman religion. Perhaps a Judaism without the worship of Jesus.

In this context, the author declares to them that, in Jesus, they have come to the city of the living God – the church – which will not expel them. Also, when the author says that they are a part of the assembly or the ekklesia of the firstborn, the author is saying that all of them

are citizens. Ekklesia – the world we often translate as church – can often mean a gathering of citizens. In Rome, only a few are citizens. In the city of God, all are citizens. Rome shames and expels them. The city of the living God celebrates and honors them, just as it celebrates and honors Abraham, Rahab, Moses and others.

But, the author isn't just talking about the church in Rome or wherever. The author says that we have come to a heavenly assembly, a heavenly church that includes innumerable angels. Jesus Christ is the head of a cosmic city. We have come, even now, to a cosmic city in which all – not just the non-enslaved males 18 or older as with the Greeks, not just the men and women of non-enslaved Roman lineage as with Romans, and perhaps we should say in our context not just those we want in the United States – all will rule over creation with the angels. All of us are meant to interact with angels, as are those who have died and have been “made perfect” in Jesus. Even more, we are meant to be placed even higher than the angels, perhaps even rule over the angels, for we are Christ's brothers and sisters, and Christ is greater than the angels (1:4, 2:5-12). Rome and others is a community in which they are ruled and shamed. The city of the living God is a community in which they are rulers who are honored as participants in God's rule over creation.

“You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom ... but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.”

“since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be full of thanksgiving”

There's another reason the author of Hebrews wants them to know that they have come to an untouchable mountain. They have lost honor among their friends. They have been imprisoned. They have lost money. They are quite touchable. Yet, they are not alone. However untouchable is the heavenly Jerusalem, it is not unshakable. “Yet once more I will shake the not only the earth but also the heaven.” Heaven ain't perfect. Just like the earth, it needs to be shaken of the angels who follow another master. It needs to wait for a time when its fellow inhabitants will receive their new bodies. If the blood of Jesus speaks – if the crucified one is the crucified Lord of all creation – then you'd expect that everything from heaven to earth to experience loss and suffering as it becomes transformed into a likeness of the resurrected Lord. Heaven and earth are going to shake, but, like us, like Christ, they will not be shaken forever. Everything and everyone is being remade and so everything and everyone is being shaken on its way to becoming unshakable. Like the dead body of a drowned man undergoing CPR, heaven and earth will be shaken back to life as the resurrected Lord breathes God's own life into its lungs.

“You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom ... but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.”

“since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be full of thanksgiving”

I was transfixed last week by Anderson Cooper's interview of Stephen Colbert. About half of the interview was about the usual politics, but it was the other half that drew me in. Cooper and Colbert exchanged stories about what it was like to lose parents (and siblings) when they were 10 year old children. This conversation occurred probably because Cooper had recently been consoled by Colbert in the aftermath of his mother's death. Cooper said at one point in the interview to Colbert, "You told an interviewer that you have learned to—in your words—'love the thing that I most wish had not happened.'" Cooper paused and began to choke back tears as he struggle to ask Colbert, "You went on to say, 'What punishments of God are not gifts?' Do you really believe that?" At this point, Colbert took a moment and looked down. Then, he looked back at Cooper and answered with about as much sincerity, authenticity and boldness as I think I've ever seen, "Yes. It's a gift to exist, and with existence comes suffering. There's no escaping that. I don't want it to have happened. I want it to *not* have happened, but if you are grateful for your life ... and I am not always but it's the most positive thing to do—then you have to be grateful for all of it. You can't pick and choose what you're grateful for."

Like the audience of the book of Hebrews, many of us are keeping our distance from God because we are too lonely, too bored, too filled with pain, too filled with loss. We are afraid of what God might do. Colbert, I think, needs to struggle with the fact that when God shakes up the heavens and the earth, it indicates that God repudiates and destroys evil and the suffering evil brings with it. Some suffering isn't God shaking creation; it is what God is shaking out of creation. I was more moved by how he said yes. He said yes in a way that made me feel that he has been in touch with a deep reality, with an untouchable mountain that will someday be unshakable. He himself seemed almost unshakable. With the heavenly assembly, I pray that more of us can get there as well.

And, to all of us today who are eager to see God's work. We should, we can, all be joyful. Yet, we may have to learn how joy is a costly matter. For Jesus, joy led him to the cross, led him to loss, led him to being shaken. Seeing God at work will require being shaken, just as it did for Jesus. All the gifts of God that we love – like 75 degree days, like beautiful college basketball games, like the smell of a new baby, like the gift of new friends – all of these realities are gifts for us to enjoy. But, as one of my old professors once said, we will not be able to place the full weight of our love on any of these things. All of these things will pass, all of these things will shake, and so our love must rest most fully on the God who gives these gifts. All of these can and should be enjoyed, but as old saint Augustine said, they can only be enjoyed as the gifts of God, the God who will never be shaken. The God who will make them unshakable.

"You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom ... but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem."

"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire."