

“Seeing the Kingdom For the Mountain”

Hebrews 12:18-29

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In your mental gallery of images of immoveable objects, is there any firmer, more permanent picture in your mind than of a mountain? When you think of ancient and enduring, not to mention majestic, is there anything that can compare to a mountain? Except perhaps in the middle of the ocean on a life raft, is there anywhere we feel more overwhelmed by sheer size and strength than in the face of a mountain? Is it any wonder that in ancient culture after ancient culture, the mountains in their midst were seen as the contact point between heaven and earth, between what was sacred and what was mundane? That place in their landscape, rising up in their midst, became their axis mundi, their center of the world, around which their religious life revolved. No, the mountain wasn't going anywhere because it was God's foot come down to rest on earth.

I get some of that same sense driving through the mountains of Costa Rica. They are not the Andes, nor the Rockies, but they will do. And we have purchased our little piece of them in San Cristobal Norte, a little south of Cartago, and our few acres are steep enough to be daunting and sometimes exhausting to climb. On one side of our property is a small river, and on the other side a road, and between them is a drop of what must be a hundred meters, but that is nothing compared to the other side of the road which rises yet higher and looms above us reminding us

that we do indeed live in the shadow of the mountain. That higher mountainside is still covered with trees and I like to say that they will always be there, even though someone else gets to decide that. But it will certainly be only the trees that may one day disappear, for surely the mountain itself is not going to go anywhere, as immovable and permanent as it is. Right?

Well, I thought so until Friday morning when I went out there to enjoy some solitude on our little piece of sacred space and found not one, not two, not even three, but four landslides on our property as a result of a very intense rain the night before. One was an annoying inconvenience on the driveway. Another created a new beach by the side of the river. The third I only saw from a distance, but the fourth made me question just how long the mountain would stand. You see, this particular landslide took out all the vegetation in its path, including the trees, carving out a nice new swath of brown and dumping it all on top of the natural spring that provides water for about sixty families in the town below. The town's water committee is now discussing whether they will need to build some kind of retaining wall to make sure this doesn't happen again. How permanent can the mountain be when it can disappear in the wink of God's eye in the middle of the night?

“Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also heaven,” we are reminded in the twelfth chapter of Hebrews, and it goes on to say, “This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of what is shaken – that is, created things –

so that what cannot be shaken may remain.” Yes, the mountains will disappear, and so will the highways, your home and car, this church building, even the chair you are seated in. It’s all going away, announces the author of Hebrews, all that has been created, to reveal what will not go away, what will not be shaken, what will remain after all we perceive with our senses has disappeared in the blink of God’s eye in the middle of the night. It’s hard to believe, I know, and maybe that’s precisely why earlier, in the beginning of chapter eleven we are given that great definition of faith, that faith “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” It must be by faith that we hold our conviction of the unshakeable kingdom, that it is there, indeed that we are already receiving it. At times, it is harder to believe that God’s kingdom is unshakeable than that the mountains themselves will not endure, it is harder to believe that God’s kingdom is unshakeable when young lives are snuffed out by a punk with a gun who wants to join a gang, when communities are poisoned by the toxins produced by the factories built alongside them with the promise of jobs, when a world lives in fear of terrorism and devotes all its resources to preventing it. Yes, sometimes, the mountains do seem a safer bet than God’s kingdom, and it takes a landslide to remind us that there really is something more permanent than what we can perceive with our senses. But thanks be to God that the unshakeable kingdom is the promise we have received, a promise which comes accompanied by the faith we need to hold on to it, and the call to live gratefully.

Although it goes unnamed, the mountain referred to in the first part of our passage tonight is Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Law and where he spent time in God's presence, the only one of his people to be able to do so. In precisely that sense of the mountain being the conduit to the divine, that place was revered and feared by the people of Israel. It was a place so holy, so full of God's presence, that even proximity to it could harm you. Listen again to the description of Mount Sinai: "You have not come to something that can be touched, 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 not another word be spoken to them." As holy as it was, it was a place which provoked great fear for the power of God that resided there. To give you an idea of just how holy, consider that "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death." And why should it be stoned to death instead of simply being slaughtered in the normal way? Well, the reason that sinners and stray animals alike were stoned is so that there would be no physical contact between the sinner and the saint, since physical contact, even with a third object, such as clothing, or a knife used to kill the person, would cause the contamination of sin to spread. Remember what a scandal Jesus caused when the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years touched even the hem of his garment; she had "infected" him with her sin. So, by launching stones at the guilty party, those responsible for carrying out the punishment did not have to run the risk of contamination since the stones that did the damage touched the executioners

first, before the condemned. Just like the contamination of sin could be transmitted by contact, so too could the volatile power of God found on Mount Sinai. But as important and holy as this mountain was to God's people, it too shall be shaken and removed. You see, it's just a mountain after all.

For those who have chosen to follow Jesus, another mountain is described, Mount Zion, the fulfillment of all the hopes of the generations of God's people. "You have *not* come" to Mount Sinai, they are told, but rather, "you have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of 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, 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 sprinkled blood." That description is in stark contrast to the description of that other mountain. Which would you choose? Fear or festival? The distance of stoning, or the closeness of Christ. The images of the two mountains couldn't be more different, but what exactly makes them so different? Let me suggest that what makes them so different is the same thing which makes one mountain unshakeable and the crux of how we are called to live.

An easy way to note the difference between the two mountains is to say that one is earthly, and the other spiritual, that they are made of different stuff, stuff that lasts and stuff that doesn't; God, heaven, angels, the spirits of the righteous made perfect, all these things last, while the earth simply washes away in a

torrential rainstorm. And while that is in some senses technically true, I think it not only lets us off the hook for caring for that which is God's creation, but obscures the more important difference, which is that the place to which we have come, the kingdom we are receiving, is relationship rather than residence, connectedness rather than country. The description of Mount Sinai gives us a clue when it begins, "You have not come to something that can be touched," and goes on to list the sights and sounds that surrounded that mountain. The description of Mount Zion, on the other hand, is short on physical details but long on who is there, and what they are doing, and how they are celebrating. "You have come to Mount Zion," and to all the rest. You have come into relationship with the angels, the assembly of the firstborn, the spirits of the righteous, and most importantly Jesus and his blood. This is the kingdom that is unshakeable, not because it is not material, but because what holds it together doesn't appear like carbon or plutonium in the periodic table of the elements, but is made of more divinely elemental stuff like love and forgiveness and mercy and justice and grace. That is the uncreated stuff, the stuff of God's character, the unshakeable stuff on which we can depend, and with which we must celebrate and worship, and care for one another.

If you need some images for your mental gallery of immovable objects in the unshakeable kingdom, picture the hospital bed of the saint with terminal cancer, for whom nothing more than morphine is left to be prescribed. And by the bedside of that saint sits another, hour after hour, day after day, hands clasped in

prayer, or tenderly stroking thinning hair, until that moment comes when the assembly of the firstborn in heaven grows by one. Picture, if you will, the newborn child in whom are placed the hopes of her family for a more humane and just kingdom, and whom they raise to the best of their ability to love and serve God. Picture the moments throughout your life in which you have captured glimpses of what is truly eternal and unshakeable as you have been loved or remembered or fed and clothed, or shown something of beauty, or simply smiled at during a time in your life when you needed nothing more. “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,” a worship not limited to Sunday evening at 5:00 p.m., but one lived out in every relationship God has given us, with those we know, with those we will one day meet, and with those whom we will never have the privilege of knowing. You see, as Mother Teresa said so well, “If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.” God gave us Jesus Christ to help us remember that the strength of the unshakeable kingdom is witnessed in our care of God’s already perishing creation, humans and mountains alike, lest we forget that we have already come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and all that worships and celebrates therein. May God help us to see the kingdom for the mountain. Amen.