

## One God?

### Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

### Hebrews 12:18-29

Unlike your ancestors, you didn't come to Mount Sinai—all that volcanic blaze & earthshaking rumble—to hear God speak. The ear-splitting words & soul-shaking message terrified the Israelites & they begged God to stop. When they heard the words—"If an animal touches the mountain, it's as good as dead"—they were afraid to move. Even Moses was terrified.

No, that's not your experience at all. You've come to Mount Zion, the city where the living God resides. The invisible Jerusalem is populated by throngs of festive angels & Christian citizens. It is the city where God is Judge, with judgments that make us just.

You've come to Jesus, who presents us with a new covenant, a fresh charter from God. Jesus is the mediator of this covenant. The murder of Jesus, unlike Abel's—a homicide that cried out for vengeance—became a proclamation of grace.

So don't turn a deaf ear to these gracious words. If those who ignored earthly warnings didn't get away with it, what will happen to us if we turn our backs on heavenly warnings? God's voice that time shook the earth to its foundations; this time—God's told us this quite plainly—God will also shake the heavens: "Still once more I will shake not only the earth but heaven as well." The phrase 'still once more' means a thorough cleansing so that only the unshakeable essentials remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that can't be shaken, let us continue to express our gratitude. With this gratitude, let us serve in a way that is pleasing to God with respect and awe, because our God really is a consuming fire.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

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### One God?

There's not much that we know about the Letter to the Hebrews: we don't know who wrote it (though it's clear it wasn't Paul), we don't know who it was written to (despite being called Hebrews), and we don't know when it was written (best guess is sometime in the first century). Which leaves us with not a lot to go on when we turn to this book in our Bible.

What we do know is that it was likely written not as a letter but as a sermon (a sermon, as one scholar put, that is, “rabbinical in design, Christin in content, and heroic in length”<sup>1</sup>), and based on the content of this sermon, we can deduce that it was written for a community that is exhausted and running out of steam. As that same scholar put it, “worn down and worn out, ... [the folks for whom Hebrews was written seem to be] tired of walking the walk, many ... are considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith.”<sup>2</sup>

Our reading for this morning comes at the end of the sermon, right after one of its most famous verses, a verse designed to address this sense of exhaustion: “therefore,” the writer of Hebrews exhorts, “since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” It is a sermon of exhortation. A reminder of who Jesus is and why it is we follow him. It is an acknowledgment of the challenges and difficulties associated with the life of faith and an encouragement to stay the course.

To bring the sermon home, the writer of Hebrews directs the congregation’s eyes to the finish line—the place where this long race of faith is headed. To do this, the preacher paints a picture. It’s a classic rhetorical move, well-used even today in advertising. You’ve likely seen it: you sit down at the end of a long day to watch a PBS show and before you can lose yourself in the world of *All Creatures Great and Small*, an ad for Viking Cruise plays. Suddenly you are no longer on your couch but standing with a woman at the rail of a ship as picturesque villages drift by while a disembodied posh accent invites you to “sail through the heart of historic cities and unforgettable scenery with Viking. Unpack once and get closer to iconic landmarks, local life and cultural treasures.” Just imagine.

For those listening to the sermon from Hebrews, the picture is painted this way: “You have not raced all this way, worked as hard as you have, to end up in a place of darkness and gloom, a tempest ... you have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, an invisible Jerusalem populated by throngs of festive angels and people just like you, a city where everything has been put to right and the judgments are always just.” Just imagine.

It is an idyllic image. A first century vision of what the kingdom of God will look like, the promise of a better future, a place where all your hard work has paid off and you are able to reap the rewards you have so long been striving after. And to drive the image home, the preacher of Hebrews contrasts this edenic mountain scene with an older, scarier image, one the listeners were certainly familiar with—the story of their ancestors encountering God at Mount Sinai.

We read about this encounter in the book of Exodus: “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now all of Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. ... [and] the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the Israelites” (Exodus 19:16-19 & 24:17).

Who wouldn't want Mount Zion instead of Mount Sinai? One is radiant with love, light and righteousness; the other shrouded in fear, darkness, and uncertainty. It's a contrast that echoes how many of us—whether we admit it or not—tend to think about the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament, we believe, features a God of fire and brimstone, an angry God who is quick to judge and unafraid to smite you if you step out of line. Whereas the God we meet in the New Testament, the God whom Jesus both embodies and teaches, that God is a nice God, a kind God, a loving parent whose embrace extends to all people, a God who includes even those we ourselves struggle to love and include. There is the Old Testament God and there is the New Testament God and most of us are grateful beyond measure that we worship the latter, that Jesus came and showed us a better way, a kinder God, a more loving faith, a faith without fear.

These beliefs have their roots deep in Christian history and they found their heyday in the second century with a theologian and Bishop named Marcion who “read the Old Testament as referring tyrannical God ... [and] that Jesus revealed, in contrast, a good God of love and mercy.” In other words, as Amy-Jill Levine puts it, Marcion believed that somewhere between the pages of Malachi and Matthew, God had a personality transplant.<sup>3</sup> While Marcion attracted a following, and his beliefs continue to infiltrate the church today, the church as a whole ultimately rejected this belief, writing the Apostles' Creed in part to establish that the God of the Old Testament is the same God we encounter in Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

So we know there is just one God. But what do we do with the image of these two mountains, these two very different understandings of who God is? With our own lingering suspicion that the God we read about in the Old Testament isn't the same as the God we find in the New Testament?

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One of the first things I learned in seminary is that biblical interpretation has its own version of the real estate rule. You've probably heard it before: the three most important things in real estate are *location, location, location*. Take the same house and put it on the lake versus overlooking the interstate and suddenly you have two very different price tags. Location can change everything.

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<sup>3</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 62.

<sup>4</sup> PCUSA Book of Confessions, p. 6

The same is true with scripture. Only instead of location, location, location, the rule is context, context, context. Pull a verse or story out of context and you can make it say anything you want. But keep it in its context—pay attention to what comes before and after it, who wrote it, for whom, and what was happening around them at the time—and the text can take on a whole new meaning. Just as location determines value in real estate, so context determines meaning in scripture.

Take for example the story from Exodus that the writer of Hebrews pulls from in our passage this morning. It is an ominous passage. Paintings of it are invariably dark and moody. There is often smoke or fire, sometimes lightning. It was a terrifying moment. The ground shook, a horn blared, and when God spoke all the people could hear was thunder. To read that passage is to encounter a God of whom one probably should be afraid. But to read that passage without having read the story that came before it is to read only half of the story.

The Israelites who came to Mount Sinai in Exodus were recently escaped slaves. For generations, their families had been enslaved in Egypt, forced to work for and worship Pharaoh, an all-powerful ruler who controlled not only the work they had to do but the lives they were allowed to live. Which meant that the Israelites who came to Mount Sinai came with a slave mentality, a deeply ingrained mindset of subservience and fear, a lack of belief in their own agency. It's why we don't see the Israelites fight back against Pharaoh and his forces when they're trapped at the Red Sea despite the text saying there were six hundred thousand men in their midst. It's why, when food grows scarce in the wilderness, their first wish to return to slavery in Egypt where they were at least fed.

The only god the Israelite people who arrive at Mount Sinai have known is Pharaoh. And Pharaoh is a tyrannical, powerful god. And so the God they needed to meet had to be a God who was bigger and scarier than Pharaoh. It had to be a God more powerful than Pharaoh, a God who could provide for them but also a God who could defend them. And that is how God shows up.

But that is not the only way that God shows up. What the writer of Hebrews doesn't include are the promises God makes to the people at Sinai, even before God shows up as fire and thunder. God may present as a bigger and badder Pharaoh so that the people will feel safe, will recognize this new God as a God worth their attention and worship, but God makes entirely different promises to the people than Pharaoh does—offering them a life not as slaves but as their own people in their own land. Nor does the writer of Hebrews recall the way that God appeared to Moses earlier in the book of Exodus as a burning bush that was not consumed—something miraculous and extraordinary enough to catch his attention and meet him where he is. Neither, you might notice, does the writer of Hebrews bring to mind the time Jesus overturned tables in anger, cursed a fig tree in frustration, called the leaders of his day vipers, or told the rich they had a better chance of squeezing a camel through the eye of a needle than entering the Kingdom of God.

We're so familiar with the gospels that when we read stories about Jesus' anger or violence, we're able to read them in the larger context of what Jesus was teaching and what the world was like in his day. It's harder when we read the Old Testament. Most of us don't know it as well and it covers such a vast expanse of history that it's hard to keep track of context, especially if we only hear snippets on Sunday mornings.

But what is true of the God we know in Jesus is true of the God we encounter in the Old Testament, even if its not always obvious on the first read. Part of understanding the two different images of God that our writer of Hebrews presents is recognizing that the God we believe in is big enough, vast enough, holy enough to hold both visions. And part of it is recognizing that more often than not, the God we meet is the God we need to meet. Our God is a God who meets us where we are—who helps us to recognize divinity by showing up in ways that we understand to be holy and good. Our mistake is when we think that is the only way God shows up, when we fail to recognize that God while God meets us where we are, God is rarely content to let us stay there.

The God we worship, the God we encounter in both the Old Testament and the New Testament is One. But just as the doctrine of the Trinity reflects the reality that we encounter God in different ways, so the stories we read in scripture reflect the fact that God shows up in all kinds of ways. Yet underneath all of the ways in which we encounter God, both in scripture and in our own lives, is a God who loves this world and all the people in it. A God willing to show up in ways that we can recognize, but also a God who is constantly calling us to a bigger and bolder version, not only of God, but of the world that God created.

Thanks be to God. Amen.