

Date: August 22, 2004

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 21

**SERMON: A Tale of Two Mountains**

Text(s): Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

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This week, like most of you, I've been trying to catch as much of the Olympics as possible. The public relations media for Greece has made a lot out of the fact that the games are back in the land where they began more than a millennium ago. And there have been the requisite scenic shots of Mt. Olympus, a real enough snow-capped peak that is the mythological home of the ancient Greek gods. The association of mountains, particularly large, awe-inspiring mountains, with deities has a long history. Think of the significance of Mt. Fuji in Japan, or Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania as only two examples. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons for their ability to inspire awe is the sheer size, massiveness, and power of large mountains to influence the climate, make weather, and affect all life around them. Big mountains come as close as anything on earth to representing eternity.

Perhaps some of you will remember the colorful advertisement that appeared in many magazines for a ski resort in the American northwest nearly 25 years ago. Pictures of lovely ski slopes on a snow-capped peak, luxurious ski lodges, and happy skiers offered a powerful invitation to those looking for an invigorating and relaxing vacation. Yet, within a few days of the appearance of that advertisement, the ski slopes were gone, the ski lodges were gone; much of the mountain itself was gone. It was Mount St. Helens, the long-dormant volcano that erupted with such an explosive force, that the entire top of the mountain simply disappeared. More recently, and closer to home, the Great Stone Face over in New Hampshire detached itself and disintegrated into a pile of rocky rubble at the foot of the cliff it had been part of for who knows how many eons.

The fear that nothing is solid, nothing

enduring, is one of the primal human fears, isn't it? If even the most massive and seemingly unshakeable thing in the world— great mountains— can be shaken into rubble, what permanence can any of our lives have? What is there about us that has any transcendent meaning or purpose, when all around us seems to be transient, ever-changing? The search for something that is enduring, something that will give our lives stability and foundation like a great mountain expresses itself in many different ways. One of the most common forms this quest takes is the “good old days” syndrome. That's the tendency to look behind us to some imagined, idealized past when everything was better and more solid and more stable, and happier than it is now. If we could only turn the clock back, if we could only recover what it is we imagine that we had in the “good old days” and then lost, then we could find our way out of our present difficulties and uncertainties and find solid ground under our feet.

How many times do we remember our parents, in an effort to deal with our behavior, saying something like, “When I was young, we didn't have the advantages that you kids have today.” “When I was young, we knew what good manners were.” “When I was young, we knew the value of money, because we had to work hard for it.” Whenever I used to try that on my kids, they just quoted Bill Cosby's comedy routine to me: “Yeah, yeah, Dad, we know, back in the day when you were a boy you had to walk to school, barefoot, in the snow, uphill. . . in both directions!”

There's a great deal of the “good old days” syndrome around these days. In the so-called “culture wars” that are constantly being fought in our country, the appeal of the good old days is always trotted out — a vision of a pristine golden age of the past when so-called family values and Judeo-Christian morality were the unshakeable bedrock under the society. (I must confess to sometimes having a bit of malicious fun with those who say, “Let's go back to the Christian ideals of our founding fathers.” I

usually ask them, “Which founding fathers do you mean? Thomas Jefferson who was a Deist and rewrote the New Testament to eliminate all reference to the supernatural, who kept slaves, and had an long-standing affair with one of them, or Ben Franklin, also a Deist, who sired 14 illegitimate children?”)

I suspect that in many cases, those promoting the return to this idealized past, are simply afraid, because they don’t know how to cope with a society in which white, Anglo-Saxon culture and the Judeo-Christian moral framework no longer enjoy the position of dominance they once did. So the program of returning to the “good old days,” often takes on ethnocentric or tribal overtones, with reactions against immigrants of different cultural or ethnic stock or religious stock. In the part of New Jersey, for instance, where I used to serve, Muslims and Hindus outnumbered Protestants in the population. The mosque in Princeton Township was larger than any Protestant church in at least three counties. One town refused to permit the building of a Hindu temple, ostensibly because it would cause traffic jams during various religious festivals, but in reality, because that small, predominantly white community was fearful of the rapid influx of Indian immigrants.

Nor is the “good old days” syndrome confined to America or the West. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism that is responsible for the current global wave of terrorism is another example of the same phenomenon. Confronted with the complexities of modern life, cultural encroachments from the West, and autocratic and corrupt regimes at home, many younger Muslims are opting for a return to a rigid, religious fundamentalism in an attempt to maintain their identity. Even within the church, this same longing for “the good old days,” is evident. In just about every major Protestant denomination, as well as within Roman Catholicism, there are voices calling for a return to “classical Christian orthodoxy” whatever that means. What is

“classical” Christianity? Is it the Christianity of the earliest Christians? If so, then we have to ask which early Christians, for the literature of early Christianity testifies to widely differing beliefs and practices. Does the yearning to return to the “good old days” of classical Christian orthodoxy include a return to belief in astrology and horoscopes which was certainly part of Christian belief and practice at the time of the building of the great Gothic cathedrals in the Middle Ages, as the signs of the zodiac carved over the doors or depicted in the stained glass of Chartres and Notre Dame bear witness.

The problem with the “good old days” syndrome is that the “good old days” were never so good as we imagine them to have been. They’re simply the “old days.” In fact, those who lived in those bygone days were faced with the same troubling and complex questions with which we are faced. There is nowhere on earth, not even in the remotest Amazonian rainforest, where the present experience of human beings does not involve coping with confusing and unsettling change. There is no enduring mountain of permanence somewhere in the past where we can take refuge from “the changes and chances of this fleeting world,” as the prayerbook so eloquently puts it. Every mountain of religious orthodoxy or culture or political system to which we look back to find permanence will reveal itself as a Mount St. Helens, in appearance unshakeable, but in reality, a seething volcanic cauldron which at any moment may erupt in terrifying change.

This is not to suggest that we should not study the past or learn from it. As George Santayana said, “Those who do not learn the lessons of history are condemned to repeat it,” and there is no shortage of examples in every generation of the failure to learn those lessons. We must study the past in order to locate ourselves in the present and to learn from the successes and failures of those who came before us. But studying the past to learn from it is not

the same as trying to return to a past that exists only in our romanticized memories.

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews understood this very well. He was writing to a congregation or group of congregations, probably in Asia Minor, who found the ground under their feet quaking, and were trying to find stable footing. With the beginnings of persecution of Christians, life became uncertain, precarious. It was a confusing and fearful time. It wasn't easy to know how to be a faithful Christian. The yearning for the "good old days" was strong. Why couldn't God speak to them as clearly as he had once spoken to Moses and Israel at Mount Sinai, with all the thundering theatrics that attended the giving of the Law?

The writer of the epistle refers to those "good old days" at Mount Sinai, as he tries to help these fearful, confused, and struggling Christians find some bedrock under their feet. After recalling the stories of the heroes and heroines of faith from the Hebrew scriptures, he tells them a tale of two mountains.

He reminds them that Mount Sinai was not quite the ideal rock of stability they imagine it was. In fact, it too was a lot like Mount St. Helens. He reminds them that Israel's experience at Mount Sinai was not comforting and reassuring, but terrifying. The Christian readers of this epistle hadn't experienced the smoke and the earthquakes and the thunder, and the voice from heaven that was so terrible that the Israelites begged for it to stop speaking. They forgot that the Israelites at Mount Sinai discovered that they were dealing with a real, live deity, and not with a divine word for all time, inscribed on stone tablets, to which, if they only could hold fast, would make life secure throughout the generations.

That's not how it works, the writer tells them. *"You have not come to something which can be touched* (Mount Sinai, and stone tablets enshrining an immutable law). *But 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. . . . At that time, (i.e., at Sinai) God's voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, 'Yet once more will I shake not only the earth, but also the heavens.' This phrase, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of what is shaken, that is, of created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, let us give thanks that we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken."*

The key to our ancient and universal quest for permanence, for meaning that is larger than our experience of the often painful reality of our daily lives, lies not in a return to some fuzzy Mount Sinai of our memories, but in faithfulness to the vision of the Mount Zion of our future. It is only God who is Eternal; everything else changes. Everything else is shaken. No created order, no natural or human institution, no political or religious or economic system or cultural tradition remains unshaken. The very foundations of the earth itself shift under our feet. What cannot be shaken is what Jesus and the New Testament writers referred to as "the Kingdom of God," which is nothing less than the creative and redemptive will of God achieving God's goal for the whole creation. And God's kingdom always comes to us from the future. It is always a "kingdom which we are receiving," and the fullness of which we anticipate in hope. We have not, and cannot in this life, receive the Kingdom in its fullness. We cannot receive it by turning backwards to "the good old days." That's the difference between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion.

The theologians who criticized Jesus for healing the crippled woman on the Sabbath, were looking back to Mt. Sinai, clinging desperately to what they perceived as the unchangeable and

unshakeable Word of God. Jesus' freedom to act in love in apparent defiance of the sacred law appeared as a threat. In clinging to the past, they completely missed the promise of the future. They could not participate in the joy of a daughter of Abraham, healed of her infirmity, set free to live in wholeness, because it didn't fit their conception of God's requirements. By looking back to the thunder and smoke of Mount Sinai, they failed to see the angels in festal gathering, rejoicing on Mount Zion.

To get to Mount Zion, you see, we have to face forward, we have to walk by faith and not by sight, we have to live by love and trust instead of taking our stand on our sacred traditions, however comforting they may be. We are pilgrims on earth; our citizenship is in heaven. Pilgrims don't go backward; they are always journeying forward. We live by heaven's laws as we travel, and heaven's law, as we have seen so clearly in Jesus Christ, is always the law of love. And love never offers absolute security, is never without risk. So we will always be vulnerable because we will always be taking the risks that love entails, as Jesus did. Sometimes, in fact, like Jesus, we may be crucified for our efforts, but even our crucifixions belong to the old order that is being shaken and that is passing away. But with faces to the future, we know that we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. We are marching to Mount Zion, to share the festal joy of all the heavenly hosts and blend our voices with theirs in praise to the Living One who was and who is and who is to come, the Almighty.