

PENTECOST: IN FAITH WE RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16)

August 26, 2007

Isaiah 58:9b-14

Psalm 103:1-8

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

The Unshakeable Kingdom

“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.”

(Hebrews 12:28-29, *NRSV*)

Hebrews 12:18-24 offers us one of the most beautiful and poetic -- perhaps even a bit unsettling -- comparisons between God's gift of the Law to Moses (represented connotatively by “the mountain” in verse 20, Mount Sinai) and God's gift of grace through Jesus (represented by Mount Zion). The author contrasts that which is earthly and tangible with what is heavenly, and that which can be shaken with what is fundamentally unshakeable.

It should be noted, however, that the writer of Hebrews is not attempting to demonstrate that Jesus *supersedes* the first covenant; rather, he is distinguishing two things that *both* come from God. Thus, on the one hand, he contrasts that which is temporary and passes away with that which lasts forever, on the other. Everything in the created order eventually fades. But a higher order of reality that is understood by believers, through faith, is eternal. Beyond that, the writer contrasts those who refuse to listen with those who do listen, not for the sake of assigning blame or praise, but in order to sharpen his warning. In every generation, there are those who listen and those who do not. Thus, the author is making every effort to persuade his readers to listen and act accordingly.

It is important to remember that the letter to the Hebrews is written out of a pastoral concern and is addressing “a church plagued by neglect, absenteeism, retreat, and near the point of apathy” (F. Craddock, *The New Interpreter's Bible*). The writer wants his readers to take seriously the privilege and position they have been granted, namely, direct access to God. The proper response, though, is not pride but rather humility, which comes from recognizing the level of responsibility that comes with such access.

The tenor of the letter offers a view of worship in its true context. “The readers are as pilgrims who have come to Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem in festive assembly with God, with Jesus, whose self-offering has made possible this accessibility to God's presence,

with all the saints, and with angels in joyful song” (F. Craddock). The verb “come” in verses 18 and 22 recalls the act of one approaching in worship. The tense used implies that the action has already begun and continues. Meanwhile, the word “awe” in verse 28 appears nowhere else in the entire New Testament. Taken together, the passage suggests an image of true and right worship -- worship conducted in full awareness of what is represented and what is taking place. The writer’s conclusion in verse 29 makes it very clear that God’s presence, symbolized by fire, is not something to be taken lightly.

This week’s Reflection was prepared by Scott S. Elliott who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Translations Officer in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship. Mr. Elliott (ABD) is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in New Testament and Early Christianity at The Theological School at Drew University, Madison, NJ.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Spain – With thanks to God for the completion and publication of the Interconfessional Bible Translation and with prayers that, through its distribution, many more people will be reached with God’s Word; **Portugal** – With thanks to God for opportunities to reach more people through two touring exhibitions, and for the new website, and with prayers that the website will be effective in raising the profile of Bible work; **Italy** – With thanks to God for the Bible exhibition that is touring the country, and with prayers for a wider distribution of Bibles, both Protestant and Common Language, for the completion of the Common Language Bible revision, and for the opportunity to continue the new literary translation of the New Testament with Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox Churches.

Activity Corner: “True Worship”

Supplies needed: Bible, writing paper, pens/pencils.

Gather members of your household together for a time of devotion. Read Isaiah 58:9b-14. This passage describes what constitutes true worship. Fold a sheet of paper in half lengthwise, making two columns. In one column, list the action stated in verses 9b, 10, and 13. In the second column, list the actions the LORD promises (verses 11, 12, 14). Discuss how this passage applies to worship life today. Conclude by reading Psalm 103:1-8 as a closing prayer.