

Heb. 12:18 You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, 19 and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. 20 (For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.” 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”) 22 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, 23 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, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Heb. 12:25 See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! 26 At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” 27 This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. 28 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; 29 for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

MAKING THE GRADE

Each year the teachers in our congregation get nervous around the middle of the summer. Do you know why?

They're being graded ... or at least their schools are being graded. If certain criteria are not met they get a bad grade. No one wants to be a part of a school that is judged to be below par.

In almost every area of life we are graded in one way or another. At least we can come to church and know that this is one place where we are not being graded. We are saved by grace, right?

We are saved by grace. But, each week our worship is being graded. It's true.

The people who visit our church are grading us. They decide if they like the music. They decide if the liturgy was meaningful and helpful. They decide if they like the preacher.

If they judge that the service was acceptable they come back. If they decide that the service was unacceptable, they don't come back. It's just that simple.

In recent years in an effort to grow churches have tried to give those who consume religion what they want. We have tried to make the worship service more user-friendly.

Ask anyone what their church is like, and quite often they will say something like, "We're a friendly church. You'll feel right at home in this church. You'll feel comfortable here."

Certainly I could hope that we wouldn't say something else. Can you imagine being asked what their church is like and they would respond, "Oh, we're as cold as ice. You better be able to make friends on your own if you come to our church."

We might be God's frozen chosen, but we don't want to admit it. We want to see ourselves as open and friendly.

Indeed, for those of you who may be visiting with us this morning I do hope that worship is a pleasant

experience. I hope the music, the sermon and the friendliness of the people all combine to make you feel at home. We hope that what we have to offer today is acceptable to you.

WORSHIP ACCEPTABLE TO GOD

But, according to our passage from Hebrews planning a worship service that is acceptable to our visitors is not our job, nor is planning a worship service that is acceptable to the members for that matter.

According to our lesson for today worship is not judged by the quality of the music or the friendliness of the ushers. Worship is not judged by the preaching or how communion is served.

According to our passage for today, true worship, acceptable worship begins in the heart of the believer. In verses 28 and 29 we read, “We offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.”

I sometimes think that we get the wrong idea about worship because of the way we lead worship. Sometimes the music can be entertaining. Sometimes even the preaching can be entertaining.

And so we begin to think that the worship service is a lot like the other events we attend. It is entertainment.

If worship meets our needs, it is good. If the music is decent and the preaching is inspiring, we're happy. If worship doesn't meet our needs, well there's always next week ... or maybe we can just try the Methodist church down the block.

I must admit that those of us who lead worship can make worship easier or more difficult to accomplish. But, it would be a grave error to think that worship is judged by what I do or what the others who lead worship do.

Worship is judged by what goes on in your heart.

I had a theology professor who said,

“We have the wrong idea about worship. The preacher and those who lead worship are not entertainers and the congregation is not an audience. If you want to use that analogy, everyone in the congregation is a performer and God is the audience.”

And so the question we need to ask this morning is not, “Did I like the worship service?” The question we need to ask is “Was my worship acceptable to God?”

UNACCEPTABLE WORSHIP

There are many examples in the Bible where God tells his people that their worship was not acceptable. For example, the prophet Amos wrote,

“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.” (Amos 5: 21, 23)

Now what was wrong with the worship service? Their sacrifices were kosher. Their music was top notch. But, God didn't like it.

Why didn't God like their worship? Their hearts were not right with God. They didn't practice what they preached.

Jesus quoting the prophet Isaiah once told the religious leaders of his day. “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in

vain do they worship me ...” (Matthew 15:8; Mark 7:6)

Sometimes people say something like, “I just didn’t get anything out of that worship service ... or I just don’t feel the presence of God any more.”

It is possible that the problem doesn’t lie with the elements of the worship service. It is possible that the problem lies with us.

If our hearts are not right with God then we can try every church in town and still not be satisfied. If our hearts are not right with God our worship is in vain. God will give our worship service a grade of F.

Does that disturb you? It disturbs me.

I know what’s in my heart, and I know that sometimes... no often, my heart is not right with God. And if that’s true then like the religious leaders of old I become a blind leader of the blind.

GOD IS A CONSUMING FIRE

But, fortunately true worship is not dependent upon who I am or who you are. True, acceptable worship is dependent upon who God is.

I point not to myself but to the one who comes. I point to the one true God, the maker of heaven and earth. And it is the presence of this God that helps us learn what it means to truly worship.

According to our lesson for today this one true God provokes a sense of gratitude, reverence and awe. This God is a “consuming fire.”

You might say, “That sounds so judgmental, so Old Testament.” And you would be right. God was indeed described this way in the Hebrew Scriptures. (Deuteronomy 4:24)

Our passage for today describes the frightening nature of worship in the Old Testament. When God gave his people the law on Mt. Sinai it was an overwhelming awesome experience.

It was a holiness that could not be touched. It was a blazing fire in the midst of darkness and gloom. It was like the heart of the storm.

When God spoke it was like the sound of a trumpet. When God spoke it made the people tremble in fear. Even the righteous Moses was overwhelmed with fear and trembling when he heard this voice.

That, my friend, is worship. Worship is not some pleasant little interlude to begin our week. Worship is encountering the God who is a consuming fire.

A WARNING FROM HEAVEN

Now you might say, “That was in the Old Testament. We’re a New Testament church and things have changed.” And you would be right, sort of. In our Scripture for today there is a distinction drawn between BC and AD worship.

We no longer come to Mt. Sinai. Now we come to Mt. Zion in the city of our Lord. But, is the vision of the New Jerusalem any less awesome than the vision of God’s presence on Mt. Sinai? Not at all. Instead the glory is intensified.

Listen to a description of this new mountain of God’s presence. It is filled with angels and the spirits of the righteous made perfect.

And at the center of this holy city is the righteous judge, God. Now instead of just listening to the voice of God’s messenger, in Jesus Christ we hear the very voice of God.

The writer of Hebrews concludes,
“You better listen up when this God speaks. The voice of the Creator is heard in his son, Jesus.”

Don't make the mistake of thinking that the holy, just God of the Old Testament is somehow outmoded with the coming of Jesus. On the contrary the message is intensified. According to this passage the coming of Jesus is a warning from heaven.

The coming of Jesus does not always bring unity and happiness. The coming of God's word in Jesus Christ can also cause division. We are called to make a choice.

His coming shakes up our world. We can't stay the same for our God is a consuming fire.

REMAKING GOD IN OUR IMAGE

Many of us don't like to hear this message. From the very beginning many of us have wanted a God who is more manageable.

For example, when Moses was meeting the earth shaking, fire filled God on the mountaintop, the people in the flat, cool valley decided to make up a god to their own liking.

“What good is religion if it doesn’t make you feel good?” they asked. So they created a more down to earth god. They took their gold and made it into a golden calf and bowed down to it ... worshiping the works of their own hands.

Of course that was a long time ago in a place far, far away. Surely we’re too sophisticated to do a thing like that. Surely we wouldn’t try to cut God down to our size? Surely we wouldn’t try and remake God in our own image?

The Bible tells us that our God is a consuming fire and what do the famous preachers of our day say? In a saccharin sweet voice they say, “Jesus wants you to be successful. Jesus wants you to be prosperous.”

They sounds a lot like someone who wants you to take your gold and make a golden calf. That is not acceptable worship. That is not the one true God who is a consuming fire.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

In the Reformed tradition we have always emphasized the Sovereignty of God. In other words, God is in control. God is in the process of shaking

things up. God is in the process of shaking us up. Our God is a consuming fire.

We read in the Bible that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. (Psalm 11:10) In the book of Acts we read that one of the reasons the early church was so successful was that it lived in the “fear of the Lord.” (Acts 9:31)

The modern church can be described in many ways, but I’m not so sure many churches (if any) can be described as living in the “fear of the Lord.” And yet experiencing the presence of this living God is the whole point of our coming together today.

T.S. Eliot, one of the most influential poets of the 20th century liked to tell about a sign outside a baker’s shop advertising bread for one dollar a loaf.

You go into the shop, he said, hungry for bread and imagining the fresh smell of bread right out of the oven. You are famished and can’t wait to eat it.

However, to your dismay, you find that inside the shop all that is for sale are copies of the sign advertising bread.

Eliot suggested that the church is often like that imaginary shop. We often offer the world substitutes instead of the real thing.

We are not filled with the Spirit of the living God and so we lack power. We cannot satisfy a world that is hungry for the God who is a consuming fire.

It is this view of an awesome God that causes us to worship in Spirit and in Truth. And it is true worship that changes our lives, our churches and our society.

One commentator put it well, “The foundation of a Christian view of ethics ... begins in worship, in the sometimes dark, passionate, scary fiery tempest of God” colliding with his people on Sunday.

HELMETS AND SEAT BELTS NEEDED

Let me be honest with you. If you want to feel better go to a spa, see a therapist or go watch a good movie. Do anything but go to church and worship.

Worship is not primarily about feeling good.
Worship is not primarily about feeling safe. Worship is about having a collision with that dark, passionate all consuming, fiery God.

It may not look like it, but this is a dangerous place. The God we serve is a consuming fire. The God we serve has been known to turn our world upside down and inside out.

The God we serve has done things like take lowly shepherds and make them into kings and prophets. The God we serve has taken people who thought they were too young or too old to serve and said, “Nonsense. I have chosen you. Go!”

The God we serve cannot be counted upon to leave you alone. Our God is a consuming fire.

As one writer put it, if we really understood the God we worship, we would pass out crash helmets instead of bulletins, and the pews would all be equipped with seat belts!

Worshiping the God who made heaven and earth will definitely shake up your world. But, if we worship the one true God in the final analysis, we will not be shaken by anything else.

Our lesson for today tells us that we can give thanks because we “are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken ...” Even heaven and earth can pass away but the words of the Creator God will not pass away.

Jesus once said that we shouldn't fear those who can kill the body. Instead we should reserve our fear, our reverence and awe for the One who created the heavens and the earth. God is the One who will one judge all things. (Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:4)

And God is the One, the only One that we worship. May we gain a life changing vision of that God and may our worship be acceptable.

Amen.