

“A Consuming Fire?” GPPC 8-21-16
Jeremiah 1:4-10, Hebrews 12:18-29

A few years ago, Beth and I decided we needed to get a new dog. Our old and much beloved dog, Lucky, had finally gone to dog heaven. (Yes, dogs go to heaven. You biblical and theological purists out there, don't waste your breath arguing with me!)

After Lucky's departure, Beth and I mourned for a few weeks. Then she began spending hours online viewing and evaluating possible new dogs at local animal shelters. Eventually we visited a couple of shelters, and finally settled on Zoe, a beautiful six-month-old brown and white mix. We love this dog who has never had an unexpressed opinion about any subject.

But, Zoe, being Zoe, also cannot be trusted to stay in her yard. Leaving the yard could be dangerous, even deadly, especially if she were to encounter a moving vehicle. So we purchased one of those electronic underground fences. You probably know how they work. The dog wears a collar with two little watch batteries in it. If she gets too close to the boundary of the yard, the collar beeps, warning her to move back. If

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she's stubborn and continues to move towards danger, she gets a small shock that causes her to jump back. But it never comes to that anymore, because Zoe learns very quickly. She knows she has freedom to explore, but she's also has boundaries. And we put these boundaries in place not because we are cruel but to protect her and make her life good.

The passage from the Letter to the Hebrews this morning is complex and filled with phrases the first readers would probably have understood immediately. But those phrases are not exactly “user friendly” in our 21st century ears. Much of the language seems harsh and threatening. But ultimately the writing here is about good news not bad news, about God's love not hate.

As we mentioned last Sunday, the Letter to the Hebrews is actually more like a sermon. According to one scholar it is “the most elegant and sophisticated, and perhaps the most enigmatic, text of first-century Christianity. Its author is unknown and the circumstances of its composition remain mysterious.” (Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 1.)

We know the original audience was facing some persecution, though we don't know how severe it was. And it's obvious the writer

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speaks to Christians who are getting tired and discouraged. According to Hebrews 10:25, they're starting to skip worship. And they're even in danger of abandoning the Christian faith altogether. So the writer is trying to get them to renew their commitment to run the race of faith with all their might, and to trust in God with all their heart.

So the writer paints a picture that compares and contrasts. He begins with the first image. He says, "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." What's he describing? He is describing Mt. Sinai, where God's Ten Commandments were revealed, and even God was revealed.

It may remind some of us of that scene near the end of the movie "Raiders of the Lost Ark." The movie is set in the 1940s, and the Nazis have managed to steal the Ark of the Covenant in which God is supposed to have been especially present. But then the Nazis, who imagine the Ark will be their definitive weapon for making war, make the mistake of opening the Ark. Immediately, they're surrounded by

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darkness, storm, and gloom. And out comes God's avenging angels of death, burning up these people who are already consumed by evil.

This is the kind of scary image invoked by the writer here. God is depicted not as a Mother gathering her chicks under her wings, and not as a tender, loving Father running to welcome the prodigal home. No. God is a horrifying, blazing, *devouring* fire. This is the image the writer gives us not only of Mt. Sinai, but some would argue, also of Judaism.

And here is where we Christians need to be very careful. We know that Judaism and Christianity were involved in a family squabble in Christianity's early years. So one Bible expert says, "Christians must exercise caution in their interpretation of this comparison, for it is overdrawn and presents a caricature of Judaism as a joyless religion based on legalism, in which God is remote and unavailable. Clearly this is an exaggerated distortion of Jewish faith. We can understand how first-century Jewish Christians, in the midst of a difficult process of self-definition and differentiation, may have been motivated to claim superiority for their beliefs over the beliefs of their parent-faith and competitor." (Frances Taylor Gench, *Hebrews and James*, 72.)

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We Christians need to be very careful as we read the Letter to the Hebrews. Orthodox Christian faith does *not* claim that we have a god of the Old Testament and *another* god of the New Testament, and that the god of the Old Testament is harsh, distant, and judgmental, while the god of the New Testament is gentle, close at hand, and merciful. We do *not* claim that there are two different gods.

Instead, we believe there is one God revealed in the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Jewish people are *still* God's chosen people. And as the Apostle Paul says, by God's gift in Christ we Christians have been grafted as a branch onto the main tree that is Jewish faith. We *do* affirm God's supreme revelation in Jesus Christ, but we do not denigrate our Jewish brothers and sisters or the Jewish faith.

Speaking at the Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta in 2009, Amy-Jill Levine, a Jew, and a Professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School, warned the gathered Christian preachers to be on guard against anti-Semitism in our sermons. She offered a test. Levine had a young son at the time; I don't remember how old he was. But Levine told us to imagine that her little boy was sitting on the front row of the

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congregation when we were preaching. “Say nothing that will hurt him,” she said.

“Say nothing that will hurt him.” A good test for our preaching and a good test for our conversations and teaching, don’t you think?

Yet we still have this passage in the Letter to the Hebrews. How are we to pass Levine’s test and at the same time take this text in the Bible seriously?

One way is simply to remember the historical context for its writing. The relatively new Christian faith was an offshoot of the Judaism of the time. So in the midst of the competition between the two faiths this polemical text was written.

That’s one good option.

But retired professor Tom Long offers another option. He says the writer of Hebrews “uses talk of Levitical priests and Old Testament sacrifices metaphorically, not as descriptions of Judaism per se but as symbols of...distorted ways of understanding Christianity.” (Thomas G. Long, *Interpretation*, January 1998, 57.) For example, if a preacher today spoke about “Pharisees” in the congregation, nobody would imagine that we

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actually have a bunch of 1st century Pharisees sitting out there in the pews. No. It's a kind of short hand way of saying, "Don't be legalistic and judgmental with the *Christian* faith."

This second option for understanding the Letter to the Hebrews is especially persuasive to me. The writer is not attacking Judaism; he is critiquing damaging theological understandings of the *Christian* faith already present in his congregation.

So, following Tom Long's interpretation, the writer is actually presenting two different versions of the Christian faith. The first version follows the Mt. Sinai description. God is terrifying, unapproachable, the One before whom even Moses trembled in fear. And members of the Mt. Sinai church live accordingly.

At one point, Jack, the prodigal son in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Home* rejects the idea of simply apologizing to God for our mistakes. He says of his life, "No point in it. The damage is done. The Lord will use the information as he sees fit, come Judgment." (Marilynne Robinson, *Home*, 103.)

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Members of the church at Mt. Sinai live that way, you know. There's no use in simply confessing their sins to God, because God cannot be satisfied. God is distant, terrifying, and constantly angry. So members of the church at Mt. Sinai are demoralized, exhausted, and afraid.

And maybe you and I have had membership in that church sometimes. But a letter of transfer is always available.

There is another church at Mt. Zion. The writer says at that church there are "innumerable angels in festal gathering." It sounds like worship, like a party is going on. Maybe it's like "Beer and Hymns" on steroids. And why is there a party? Because God is there too. But God is not distant, terrifying, and constantly angry. No. God is as near as our next breath, gentle as a mother nursing her babies, kind as a father running to welcome his wayward son home. God is there, still awesome, still One to be revered, but also God who can be pleased and is pleased with us, God's children. The Mt. Zion church worships this God.

Have you and I visited this church? Are we members?

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One of my friends in our church has sometimes visited other congregations where the preachers constantly talk about “the blood of Jesus,” and “the blood of the cross” and “being washed in the blood.” My friend calls these preachers “blood guys,” but I don’t think he means it in a contemptuous or disrespectful way. He means that the death and resurrection of Jesus are central to their faith.

The writer of Hebrews here is also “a blood guy.” He says Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection mean he is the “mediator of a new covenant.” In some mysterious way, because of God’s love, God’s very self makes a sacrifice for us that is unshakeable and unbreakable.

So even when the writer talks about God as a “consuming fire” that is not a threat to us. As one scholar says, “In the Bible, fire is not torture: fire is purification...What gets purified and how? The obvious answer is something like ‘sin.’...God’s fire must purge away the false self from which our worst sins arise. ...Think of the consuming fire of God that way: an unavoidable mercy.” (Gray Temple in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3*, 378 and 380.)

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Members of the Mt. Zion church know God's consuming fire is not to destroy but to purify us, an unavoidable mercy. They know that like Zoe's underground fence, we have boundaries in life not to harm us, but to protect us and make life rich and good. They know we are utterly forgiven, cherished, and empowered. So they live with a kind of holy confidence, a boldness of spirit that is infectious.

We're members of the Mt. Zion church already, aren't we? So the invitation is simply to renew our membership each day, truly to trust in God's love for us and for the world. As we renew our membership in this church daily our worship is not a chore; it's a joyful time for praise and spiritual growth. Our prayers, service, and fellowship are not from obligation but gratitude. We're freed of having to worry that somehow we aren't doing enough. Or that *we* aren't enough, because we know God is enough, more than enough. God is a consuming fire, consuming and purifying until all that remains is goodness, joy, and love. So we gather with all creation and with innumerable angels in festal gathering to sing thanksgiving. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal