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Alexandria, VA 22310  
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Luke 13:10–17  
Hebrews 12:18–29

## FULL OF AWE

After you read a passage like the one that was just read, you want to say, "Wow! What does all that mean?" There is all sorts of references of things that remind me of something else, but what is the author of Hebrews talking about?

He begins by describing two mountain experiences. He named Mt. Zion, but the mountain that he refers to—it doesn't take much research to figure out that he's talking about the mountain where the Ten Commandments came down from God—is Mt. Sinai. And he's talking about how the Israelites had to be schooled after so much time in bondage; they had to re-learn what it means to serve God; literally, what it means to worship God. They had to be reintroduced to God's greatness—to the powerful and creative voice that inspires awe in all humans.

There's reference to flames on the mountain that are terrifying. And this wilderness generation slowly but surely begins to understand, first one and then another, to grasp who God is—who is this source of all that they have experienced and who wants to be in their life. God wants our awe. Hebrews described a huge experience of a people coming out of bondage. Imagine how welcome it is if you are a Pepco customer, and you find that candle and the match to light it when the storm comes and the lights go out. Imagine when the wind is blowing as it does around Mt. Sinai. You hear the trumpet blast. You feel the mystery and, yes, even the fear of this place. Remember when God spoke through Moses, how the people begged for silence, reverence, awe—fascinating mystery.

This sounds like church here at Bush Hill every Sunday, doesn't it? Our experiences on Sunday morning are more like that second mountain that Hebrews describes, Mt. Zion, which is God's dwelling place—Jerusalem, the temple. Maybe you've been to one of those vacation beaches or mountains this year where the tourism board put up a sign that says, "God may not live in Boon, NC, but He vacations here." That's kind of how Mt. Zion is presented. God's more at rest—at peace—than he is on Mt. Sinai. But both of these mountains remind us of the gulf that exists between our sinfulness and God's purity. Both of these mountains remind us of how Jesus is the one who gives access to God's presence without fear. It is his sprinkled blood that gives us confidence—his new covenant that makes us possible to even be aware of God's greatness.

I wonder each Sunday, each day, each moment, if we get it. We are finite. God is infinite. We are selfish. God is self-emptying. We are disobedience. God in Christ is perfect sacrifice. I don't draw out these distinctions to depress us. No, in fact,

they are meant, at least in Hebrews, to inspire us to come to the temple. Come to the place where God is. There is a mixture of emotions when we arrive there. Yes, there's reverence and respect. But if we're honest, there's also a sense of dread. There's wonder, but there's also anxiety. There's genius and great beauty, great might and great power. And God calls us as a congregation and as individuals to be part of—how does he say it?—to be part of the first born.

I really struggled with all that might mean: the first born. Did that mean those who were taken at the Passover when the angel of death preserved the children of Israel but not those without blood on their door posts? Was that the first born that Herod sought to take from the earth in an attempt to kill the baby Jesus? Those may be in fact part of the reference, but you and I are also first born brothers and sisters of Christ. It used to be a tradition in church to refer to each other as brother so-and-so or sister so-and-so, as if our “connectiveness” in the body of Christ made us part of the same family. And it does, but the greater connection is that we are brothers and sisters, first born of the new covenant that Christ has created—first born brothers and sisters in Jesus. Puts a whole new meaning on the reference, doesn't it?

As we approach this mountain where we do not have to fear death if we touch it, there's a sense that eternity is breaking open in this space, so worship can become much more than entertainment. Worship can become much more than something we can consume. Worship becomes more than the reference I most disagree with—a filling station—for the rest of the week. No, worship can become an encounter with God, but we must be full of awe.

I remember having a wonderful friend early in my ministry. He was from another tradition. He was a Roman Catholic. I saw a man here today and I thought about my friend. We used to play racquet ball when I was younger and it was just nice to have someone else who was in the ministry and was learning. But I remember one day we were talking about our differences in understanding of God and my friend said to me, “You Protestants are just a little too friendly with God.” And I thought, “I get it; we lose that sense of awe of who God really is.” We become comfortable not only with God but even worse we become comfortable with the illusions of our own power—with the illusions about our significance independent of God. And worship shakes us back to reality where we kneel before the splendor, the beauty, the might, the permanence of God.

So much of life is transient. How quickly our lives pass as we look back over all our different experiences. It seems like only yesterday when some of us were learning to be teenagers—only yesterday when we were beginning a new life—only yesterday when we were graduating, when we were getting married, when we were making new relationships that would forever change us. And now we look forward, and we realize the only thing that's permanent is God. So, worship becomes a place to love and to fear, to trust above all things in God's permanence. Worship becomes a place where we do more than discover God. Worship

becomes a place where God discovers us—the real us—and still desires a relationship. Worship becomes God, the one who created the entire universe, finding us and accepting us.

I borrow words from an anonymous young woman who's crying out for a fresh sense of worship. She says the passion of worship isn't synonymous with loud or big or flashy. She confesses she wants to worship a creator who formed the universe simply by speaking a word. She speaks of longing to sing praises to God who shouts with excitement for her joys and weeps with her in times of disappointment. Isn't that what is often lacking in our lives? There simply isn't someone to shout with joy in all that life holds for us or to hold us tight when the tears come in the midst of disappointment?

And then if we've really gotten to know one another, you'll know that the next line that she writes is my favorite. "I want to surrender all I am to the workings of the Holy Spirit who guides my movement in ways I never dreamed possible." That sounds like what worship could be: surrendering all that we are to the working of the Holy Spirit who will guide us in ways we couldn't think up for ourselves.

This young worshipper continues, "I want to lay offerings before God who offered his son to wipe away the distance I continually place between us." Wow! If that's not you, I'll be honest, it's me to a T. Constantly putting distance—safe distance—between us. I want to meet Jesus over and over again so that someday I will begin to understand the magnitude of a love so grand, so extreme, so passionate. That's what's happening each time we stand before a loving God. Each time we kneel and God raises God's countenance upon us and grants us peace that the world can't offer. Meeting Jesus once again in you and beginning to understand the magnitude of his love: so extreme, so grand, so passionate. This is worship. This is why we gather each week. This is life that really is life. This is what—this is who—we worship. This is service to God. This is our fledgling efforts which God fills with awe. Share it. Be redefined by that awe as we stand and say the words of the Apostles' Creed—words much greater than we would have ever penned ourselves.

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*

*I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.*