



## Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

[www.mzluth.org](http://www.mzluth.org)

September 2, 2007

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Hebrews 12:18-24

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 66:18-24

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 72

Second Lesson: Hebrews 12:18-24

Gospel: Luke 13:22-30

### Where Will You Find Holiness?

Did you ever get ready to drive someplace on a nice bright, sunny day and think to yourself just as you are walking out the door, "I better grab my sunglasses." And you look where they normally are and they aren't there. You look around on the counter and they aren't there. You start accusing every child in the house of taking them, moving them, and hiding them someplace and thinking they are funny. Then, as you give up and start to go out, you pass a mirror and notice that they are right on the top of your head.

Looking for something that you know should be some place and you can't find it is frustrating, isn't it? If I had back all the time that I've spent looking for something that I was absolutely certain was in this pile on my desk, and if I had back all the raised blood pressure, all the words spoken in anger to my children accusing them of moving it when actually it was in a different pile on the other side of the desk, I could probably preach for three hours and still have time to spare today.

Sometimes we waste time looking because we are looking for something that is right there in front of us and we don't know it. And sometimes we waste time looking because we are looking in the wrong place for something because we forgot that we had moved it or we forgot that it was no longer where we thought it should be.

In a very real sense, the whole letter to the Hebrews is describing that. The writer to the Hebrews is writing to people who had left behind the comfort and the familiarity of ceremonial law and approaching God through the Law, and had come to the faith that the Spirit gave them that Jesus was an end to the Law because Jesus was their Savior. He had taken away their sins through his life and through his death and all those things were a shadow of what was to come. But they were being attacked at times. Their family and friends that weren't Christians were challenging them. As they faced persecution, no doubt they were being told it was because they had turned their backs on the Law and because they were following this liar Jesus that they had this kind of difficulty. There was a very real pressure for them to turn back to the familiar, to the comfortable, to go back to approaching God on the basis of the Law instead of the realization that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that he had already come. So that is what the writer to the Hebrews writes to them about.

A couple of weeks ago we read from the great hero of faith chapter, Chapter 11, where we talked about Abraham and all those people that were living by faith, not by sight, and they lived as aliens and strangers looking forward to that heavenly home. Then last

Sunday we heard, in the Second Lesson, him saying, “Now, since you have seen such a great crowd of witnesses, strengthen your weak knees and your feeble arms. Buck up! Put your trust in God and recognize that your home isn’t here, it’s in heaven. And continue on in what you know to be true because the Spirit has led you to believe it.” Then he says, “Without holiness, you can’t approach God” in the verses right before our text. So then as he continues on, he is basically saying, “Where are you going to find this holiness that strengthens your weak knees and your feeble arms? Are you going to find it back at Mt. Sinai where the Law came, where the people were terrified, where everyone was just scared to death?” In reality, that is what the Law ought to do to you and me yet today. Or, are you going to find it in the gospel, in Mt. Zion.

So, where are you going to find holiness? He is really saying that it’s one of two mountains and if you stop at Mt. Zion, you stop short. You haven’t reached the goal. You haven’t reached the pinnacle. The goal is found at Mt. Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, where we find this glorious truth that Christ has taken away our sins even though we don’t deserve it. That is what we need to be reminded of today also.

I don’t know how much reading you do in the Old Testament, but if you have read Exodus 19, which is what he is referring to in this first paragraph that is in our reading for today, it is a terrifying picture. God comes to Moses and says, “Put fences around the mountain so that not even the animals can come on the mountain. Don’t let the people come to the mountain when they see my glory.” He says, “I am going to cause my glory to come and I am going to speak to you so that they can hear me speak, because I want them to know that you have a special relationship with me so that they will listen to you as you lead them.” So the next day the fences were up and Moses starts to go there and this cloud comes down, a dark cloud. Smoke comes up from the mountain. There is thunder. There is lightning. The people are scared to death. Even Moses himself says, “I am trembling from fear.” God says to Moses, “Don’t let the people come up here,” and Moses in effect says, “God, don’t worry. We put the fences up like you said, but they are all scared to death. There is no one coming on this mountain.” God had told them that if anyone did, if any animal even wandered on it, “Stone them or shoot them with a bow and arrow, but don’t touch them yourself because then you also will be defiled.” That’s how serious God was.

He spoke from the cloud, the Ten Commandments. He spoke from the cloud, the regulations about the three festivals. He spoke from the cloud, all these laws that Moses was to write down and share with the people. The people could hear it. I can’t imagine what that must have looked like that day. Can you imagine being a parent there standing slack-jawed with your mouth hanging open, looking at this cloud, hearing thunder, seeing lightning, having this chill go up and down your spine and have some little child, your son or daughter, grabbing on to your cloak as they are screaming and tears are coming down their cheeks saying, “Mom, Dad, what is that? Why is that happening? I’m scared? Are we all going to die?” Can you picture that? That’s the Law.

Go back to find your comfort in the Law, he’s saying, “That’s really what you are going back to, what terrifies you.” Because the Law doesn’t just say, “Do your best. Try hard.” The Law doesn’t just say, “I’m making a list and checking it twice and I’m going

to find out who is naughty and nice.” There is a little bit higher goal that he has than being nice. God says, “Be perfect as I, the Lord your God, am perfect.” Nice, perfect—not the same, right? It’s not “do your best.” Be absolutely perfect in every one of your thoughts, every one of your words, every one of your actions.

How far short have each of us individually fallen from that this morning? Did you get a little bored at all during any of the readings today and start thinking about what is for lunch? Have you failed to love God with all your heart as you heard his Word being read to you? As you sang his praises, did you sing them with absolutely pure love in your heart or did you think, “I’m not so sure I like this tune.” That’s not a big deal, is it? God says, “If you don’t love me absolutely perfectly, you have sinned.”

The demands of God are so absolute that you and I can’t come close to meeting them. That’s why, if you go back to the Law to find your holiness, if you’re honest, the only thing that is left is abject terror and the fear of judgment, because if you are going to stand before God and say, “I’ve tried my best. I did my best. I’ve worked pretty doggone hard, God, you should let me in to my heaven”—it’s not going to happen. That is why the writer to the Hebrews tells them, “Don’t run back to the Law.” And that’s why you and I shouldn’t run back to the Law for our comfort or for our confidence.

We know that. That’s not a great temptation, you’d think, for us, but we do it at times. We do it at times. We say, “I’ve always done my best. I’ve always tried to make it to worship unless I was absolutely very sick and couldn’t get out of my bed or the chair. I’ve always been there. God must love me because of that.” That’s the basis of the Law. We do those things. We go to worship. We serve God. We serve in offices. We serve on Committees. We serve as parents. We serve as students. We use our gifts to the best of our abilities because God loved us first, not so that he will love us. If we are doing it because he will love us or to earn his favor or to get something out of him thinking “he is going to give us the keys to the car like a parent after we pick up our room without being asked,” we are going to the basis of the Law. You and I can’t keep it perfectly.

And the glorious truth is that you and I don’t have to keep it perfectly because, as he said when he talked about Mt. Zion, we have been made perfect. Now that we have been made perfect, now that the Spirit has led us to believe that Jesus is our Savior, that he lived in our place and that he died in our place, that he took away all of our sins, he took away our half-hearted worship, he took away our thoughts that are angry and spiteful and hateful, he took away our words that hurt that are not the truth spoken in love—he took away every one of those sins. That’s why we stand as he says, “*You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant* (Hebrews 12:23-24). Here is the covenant. God says, “I have done it all. I’ll give you faith. Believe it and you will have eternal life. But I give you the faith. I have done it all.” That is his covenant. That is his promise to us.

So now, we don’t have to keep the Law. But here is the thing—we want to. We want to thank him. We want to live for him. We want to love one another. We want to serve one another. We want to encourage one another. We want to teach one another. We want to admonish one another. We don’t always do it well, but it’s something that we

want to do because we live with our feet in the New Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the Living God. As we live on Mt. Zion, which means we are a part of the believers, the Holy Christian Church, we live with one foot in this world and one foot in heaven. We live with one foot surrounded by sin and sorrow and difficulty and pain and suffering, but as we go through it, we find incredible comfort and confidence in knowing that we have another foot that is in that heavenly Jerusalem where there are thousands upon thousands of angels in assembly around God. It's what we talked about Monday morning down at the Café in our Bible Study on heaven. All those pictures of heaven that bring us comfort and confidence—whether it's the glory and the power of God, whether it's the angels of God around him, whether it's the throng upon throng of people from every nation, tribe and language that are gathered around God, the reminder that our loved ones are there with God, or whether it's the glory of heaven itself—God wants us to remember, live with one foot there already.

Now why is that important? Because we still live in that world that is corrupted by sin and we are going to face difficulty. We are going to face sorrow. We are going to face heartache. We are going to face hardship. We are going to face things that rip our insides out. If the world wasn't a world of sin, we wouldn't really need Tums and Roloids now, would we? But we have a lot of things that worry us and trouble us and produce stomach acid.

As we face those things, God wants us to remember, "If I loved you enough to open heaven for you, if I loved you enough to take away sin, if I loved you enough to leave heaven and live and die in your place, I love you enough to be with you as you are sitting in the hospital waiting room. I love you enough to be with you as tears are running down your cheek after you have had another fight or argument with a loved one. I love you enough to be with you to assure you that no matter what you have done and no matter what price you might have to pay in this world because of what you have done, I have taken away that sin, and you are my own." That is what God wants us to remember.

We too are going to be tempted by what we just sang about, "hidden snares around us lie," the devil snares all around us. He is going to want to lead us away from Mt. Zion and it might not be back to the Law as the basis of our salvation. It might be to Jesus is one God among many. It might be to all kinds of other lies that he places around us. But when we keep our feet firmly planted in God's love for us in Christ, we have holiness and we have eternal life, and it makes a difference every day of our lives!