

# Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

## The Unshakeable Kingdom

Hebrews 12:18-29

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16)

Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

Hebrews 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 the new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. 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 acceptable worship with reverence and awe; 29 for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Sinai (“Created,” v. 27)**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – Solid?**

Like the first-century people addressed in this letter, we moderns tend to rely on what can be touched (Mt. Sinai), seen (a blazing fire), and clearly experienced (darkness, v. 18). After all, “you have to see it to believe it” right? But what if those tangible, seeable, experienceable things were removed (v. 27) from our lives? What would be left? Or, what if the things we experienced (heard, v. 19) were so frightening that we couldn’t bear to coexist with them—say, for instance, “a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them” (see Exodus 20:18-19)?

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Shaky (v. 26)**

At first glance, tangible, seeable, experienceable things may seem reliable. But relying on something (like hearing a frightening voice from Mt. Sinai) does not mean we enjoy it (e.g., the frightening voice) or even trust it (e.g., the shakeable earth and sky, v. 26). Natural disasters teach this lesson too well: We may rely on a tornado to look like a funnel cloud or to tear our house off its foundation, but that doesn’t mean we should trust it! Relying on such things puts us on shaky (if not deadly) ground. Conversely, refusing to rely on something or Someone who can not be seen, touched, or physically experienced, but who offers life that is solid, leaves you on shaky ground too (v 25).

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Unmediated, Terrible Sight**

Relying on the wrong thing is risky. Worse than that, it is

deadly. When God demands that we trust in him alone, and when we fail to do so, our actions condemn us (like the blood of Abel crying out from the earth, v. 24). Moses knew the terrifying reality of God's power over those who dared to come into his presence; that is why he said of his encounter with God on Sinai, "I have trembled with fear" (v. 21). God's power became even clearer to Moses when he saw the destruction of those who refused Moses' warning on earth (v. 25). So, the Hebrew writer warns us appropriately, "how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven" (v. 25)! God promises to shake "not only the earth but also the heaven" (v. 26), removing the "created things" from his presence (v. 27). This same unmediated God is called a "consuming fire" in verse 29. It would seem that we "created things" have little hope of being left unshaken or removed from God's presence!

## **PROGNOSIS: Zion (Eternal)**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Mediated**

And, had God chosen to remain unmediated, we would be done for. But, as it is, God has chosen a mediator (v. 24): Jesus, who offers a new covenant, to replace the one given at Sinai. This covenant is "sprinkled [with] blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (v. 24). Jesus' blood (shed on the cross) creates a divine covenant of grace and mercy (5:16) that stifles God's wrath. His blood silences God's fury, and creates an unshakeable relationship between God and us (v.27), so that we can remain in God's presence eternally. Because of Christ, we already have inherited what is intangible and invisible now: Mount Zion and the city of the living God (v. 22). We are part of the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven (v. 23).

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Unshakeable (v. 27)**

Knowing that this unshakeable kingdom is for us, we cannot refuse Christ who speaks in mercy and grace to us (v. 25). Instead, we listen to his command whether it creates joy or sorrow for us (11:32-48). And, since “we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken,” we give thanks to the God; we worship him with reverence and awe (v. 28).

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Solid!***

We rely on, worship, and then we proclaim to the world the One who cannot be touched, seen, or experienced—except through his promise. And we shake up the world with this solid news: Jesus Christ shed his blood that we might come into God’s presence by his grace. His unshakeable kingdom is ours.