

## Imagining Life on Mount Zion

Before we get into today's Gospel, I would be remiss not to at least touch on our epistle, the Letter to the Hebrews. Please note that I didn't refer to it as "*Paul's* Letter to the Hebrews." This letter has been around since the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, and its authorship has always been in question. Some of the earliest theologians, most notably St. Augustine, attributed this letter to Paul, but modern scholars disagree. The letter doesn't use Paul's signature phrases and, candidly, the Greek is too good. Paul was a passionate and persuasive writer, but his Greek was a little clunky. This letter is so elegantly written that some scholars attribute it to our own St. Luke, whose Greek was exquisite, but we really don't know. As Bible scholar Raymond Brown observes, we simply have to live with the ironic knowledge that this letter, one of the finest theological treatises in the New Testament, was written by an unknown.

The letter is particularly apropos to my message this morning because our author has provided a brief but tantalizing description of the City of God. The heavenly Jerusalem is filled with "innumerable angels in festal gathering," populated by "the spirits of the righteous made perfect," and anchored in the presence of God. The author doesn't tell us what the city looks like – John of Patmos gives us more in Revelation – but perhaps that's to the good. This way, we're free to imagine the beauty and sanctity of the city where the Father is pleased to dwell with his people, where the Holy Spirit is all around and you can literally bump into Jesus on the street.

What surprises me is how little energy popular culture invests in such imaginings. Our evangelical cousins occasionally produce a movie like *Heaven Is for Real* or a novel like *The Shack*, but it seems to me that a disproportionate amount of our entertainment and our news focuses on dark and scary things. Authors like Stephen King and Tom Clancy rake in millions dishing up ever more terrifying tales to their avid readers. Serial killers, terrorists, Mafia dons,

vampires, extraterrestrials, and zombies parade across our television and movie screens. The news seems to get more disturbing every day, too. Maybe the world really is going to hell in a handbasket, or maybe the news keeps getting darker because news outlets believe that the best way to attract and retain viewers is to entice them with ever-escalating catastrophes.

Psychology suggests that focusing on horror can help people cope with scary situations. Many were drawn to horror movies during the pandemic. Psychologist Juliana Brienens suggests that those people felt more prepared and less anxious about covid. Horror movies may have allowed viewers to process difficult emotions in a safe environment – that zombie is on the screen, not in your living room – helping them feel better prepared to navigate the real world. But these benefits come with a price. Ten years ago, journalist Kare Anderson wrote in the *Harvard Business Review* that “What Captures Your Attention Controls Your Life.” What we pay attention to literally wires the neurons in our brains. Over time, negative thoughts become a pessimistic filter that distorts our perception of, well, everything. And, as Anderson observed, attention is essential to relationship. You can’t have a relationship with someone who won’t pay attention to you. I suspect that’s true even for God.

That leads us back to this morning’s Gospel. While teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath, Jesus sees a woman completely bent over by a spinal disease that Luke blames on the Adversary. Jesus calls her, lays hands upon her and instantly heals her of an affliction that had tormented her for eighteen years. The synagogue leader scolds Jesus for working on the sabbath, but Jesus is having none of it and the crowd goes wild. God is in the house, and his touch makes everything right.

In fairness to the synagogue leader, that prohibition on working during the sabbath was probably almost impossible to enforce. As Jesus points out, nobody was going to let their

livestock die of thirst, sabbath or no sabbath, and there were undoubtedly many other times when people quietly did whatever needed doing on the sabbath and hoped God would understand and forgive. We can imagine, though, that the synagogue leader had been so focused for so long on enforcing the sabbath that he couldn't see the bigger picture. The Son of God was standing right in front of him, having just performed a miracle, and all that poor man could see was that somebody had breached the sabbath once again. What captures your attention controls your life.

Our culture tends to glamorize evil. Lucifer is portrayed as the tuxedo-wearing owner of a swanky nightclub. Hannibal Lecter is an erudite, sophisticated genius with the unfortunate little quirk of preferring to dine on human flesh. In our entertainment, the devil wears Prada and a seductive smile. Ever since Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*, we've allowed the Adversary to masquerade as a romantic, tragic figure. It's time we gave that a rest. Real evil isn't glamorous or romantic. It's ugly, petty, poisonous, and destructive. The more attention we give it, the nastier it gets, but evil cannot win in our world unless we let it trick us into believing that it can.

None of this is intended to suggest that we should simply ignore iniquity and injustice, pretending that everything is just as it should be when it clearly is not. Driving the Adversary from the world is God's job, not ours, but I believe that we are called to help, to stand strong for what is good, right and just when evil tempts us to give up and give in. To strengthen our souls for that work, I believe we need to focus on goodness, to consciously devote our time and attention to imagining the world as Jesus would like it to be.

In commenting on this morning's Gospel, Pope Francis observed that it's all about *closeness*, about Jesus being close enough to lay hands on the crippled woman long enough to heal her affliction. The author of Hebrews described the City of God on Mt. Zion as a place where "innumerable angels" rub elbows with "the spirits of the righteous made perfect," all in

the company of God. Just imagine living in a place where you can be touched by an angel and stand in the Divine Presence, where you can grab a drink with Jesus – we know he likes wine – and allow him to heal whatever hurts you with a single, loving touch.

If all this sounds like a fantasy, I'll freely admit that it is. Human beings are imaginative creatures, thanks be to God, and our fantasies can inspire hope or fear, depending on how we use the imaginations God gave us. Science tells us that our thoughts literally shape our brains. If we make it a point to focus our attention on goodness, to imagine being close to Jesus, safe and loved, perhaps we'll be better able to see that evil may be scary and upsetting, but it's not invincible and it doesn't get the last word.

From private conversations, I know that many here are struggling with tough situations, and I'd bet that all of us have at least one thing in our lives that worries or saddens us. This week, please try an experiment. Don't let your problems fester – they just get bigger that way – but don't let them overwhelm you, either. Imagine yourself in the City of God, talking face to face with Jesus. Tell him what's going on, then ask his advice. While you're at it, ask him for the strength to deal with your problems and the hope that all will eventually be well. Hear what he says, watch what he does, then see how you feel. This may seem a little awkward and it might take some practice, but you're fighting the influence of a society that fixates on darkness. It can take time and patient effort for our spiritual eyes to become accustomed to the light.

Each of us only has so much time in this life, and only so much attention. Instead of letting fear and worry waste our time and distance us from God, may we choose to focus on the beauty and goodness with which God blesses us and the loving relationship which Jesus offers us. Nothing is more deserving of our attention, and nothing will strengthen us more. With every attentive step we take toward Christ, the closer he'll bring us to the City of God. *Amen.*