

True Worship on Two Mountains

PSALM 96 • HEBREWS 12:18-29

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • May 21, 2017 • Big Springs Community Church

Congregation of Christ: Why do you come to worship every Lord's Day? Is it out of habit or tradition? Is it to gather with family and friends? Is it to make you feel good? Have you ever wondered what really happens during a worship service?

In many churches today, people flock to see and hear entertaining music and amusing, therapeutic sermons. They say the purpose of the worship service is to get unbelievers to be saved. Others say it is to hear how we should live Christian lives. Still others say it is to be encouraged to be involved in the betterment of the community.

This morning, we will look at how Moses and the Israelites worshipped God at Mount Sinai; and how we are to worship God today at Mount Zion. In looking at our text, we will study these three things about worship: first, **Reverence and Joy of True Worship**; second, **The Precious Requirement of True Worship**; and third, **The Solemn Demands of True Worship**.

Reverence and Joy of True Worship

God's Word says in verse 22: "*But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.*" Our text points to a contrast between Old Testament worship at Mt. Sinai and New Testament worship at Mt. Zion. The Israelites first worshipped at Mt. Sinai, where only Moses could enter the presence of God. It was a terrifying sight, with lightning, thunder, and a loud trumpet (Exo 19:16). Then in the wilderness, they built a tabernacle as their place of worship. Centuries later, King Solomon finally built a glorious Temple on a hill in Jerusalem called Mt. Zion.

Psalm 48 calls Mount Zion "the holy mountain," and "the city of our God" (v 1). Psalm 48:9-10 tells of the gathering of worshippers from all nations, "*Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love. Like your name, O God, your praise reaches to the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with righteousness.*"

Today, we are God's temple. When we gather for worship, we don't worship in an earthly temple in Jerusalem. Our worship service is a heavenly gathering in a heavenly Mount Zion, in a heavenly city called heavenly Jerusalem. Therefore, the worship service is not an informal gathering, not a social get-together, not an entertaining event, not a revival meeting. Many people today think that the worship service is a happy-clappy, swaying, feel-good celebration. *On the contrary, it is a fearful thing to gather to worship God.* Moses and the Israelites trembled with fear.

But doesn't all these apply only to Old Testament worship? Certainly not! Because the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of New Testament. He is the unchanging holy and merciful God. Deuteronomy 4:24 says that God is "*a consuming fire.*" And our New Testament text says, "*Let us... worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire'*" (Heb 12:28-29), quoting the Deuteronomy verse.

Reverence is not the only characteristic of worship. Our text also describes worship as a **joyful** assembly. Verse 22 says that in worship, we join *“thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly.”* The Psalmist also sees the parallel between joy and reverent awe in the presence of God:

Psa. 2:11: *Serve [or worship] the LORD with fear; and rejoice with trembling.*

Psa. 96:9: *Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.*

We can see from these passages that, in worship, our joy must be tempered by reverence and awe for God, because he is *“a consuming fire.”* But how do we worship in both joy and reverence? Reformed worship has always sought to balance this joy and reverence in worship. This balance is usually seen by others as more fitting for a funeral service than for a worship service. But yes, our worship must be like a Christian funeral service! Don't we come to a funeral service to pay respects to the departed saint? To share in the grief of the loved ones? To meditate on God's grace and mercy in his life? *But* we also come to a funeral service to share in the joy of the loved ones because the dead in Christ is now with him in heaven.

In the same way, in our worship service, we confess, repent and mourn over our own sins. When we partake of the Lord's Supper, we solemnly remember Christ's sufferings and sacrificial for our sins. At the same time, we rejoice that he rose from the grave. That he is in heaven as our Mediator. That we are also heaven-bound because of his sacrifice.

Our worship, therefore, is a balance between joy and reverence. When we sing songs of praise and thanksgiving, we are to *“with cheerful voice.”* But when we hear God speak to us in Scripture reading and in preaching, we are to be filled with reverence and awe.

And when we gather for joyful and reverent worship, we gather before the Eternal, Heavenly Judge who will judge all mankind in the end (v 23). This is why in Psalm 96, we not only worship God in the splendor of his holiness, but also with fear and trembling, because he comes to *“judge the world in righteousness.”*

This is why verse 24 says that we have come *“to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.”* Heavenly worship is centered on the risen Christ. He is our Great Worship Leader as our Great High Priest, interceding for us before God in the new covenant of grace and forgiveness. He links us not only with the Father and with all the angels in heaven, but also with believers all over the world and with departed believers who are now in heaven.

So verse 23 says that we have come *“to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven.”* When we gather, we are but a small part of thousands upon thousands of firstborns who gather together on the Lord's Day to worship God, people from all nations, tribes and languages. Not only are we gathered with all believers in this world, but we are also gathered with all the saints in heaven, *“the spirits of righteous men made perfect.”* They are made perfect through faith in Christ and not because of their own good works. This means that our Lord's Day worship connects us to the faithful cloud of witnesses who are now in the heavenly city. And if we share the same historic worship that they had during

their time, we sing the songs that they have sung for hundreds of years. We pray the prayers that they prayed. We hear the same Word of God that they heard. We take part in the body and blood of Christ in same Lord's Supper that they partook.

Since Christ is our Worship Leader, he leads us in singing. And what songs did Jesus sing? He sang the Psalms, God's own hymnbook he published in the Bible. Israel sang this hymnbook. The apostles sang the Psalms with Jesus (Matthew 26:30; Mark 14:26). The early church and the Reformers sang mostly Psalms. Therefore, when we sing the Psalms, we sing with the great cloud of witnesses from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

But that glorious and joyful gathering in heaven is only possible because Jesus Christ lived a perfect, righteous life and shed his precious blood on the cross for all the saints.

The Precious Requirement of True Worship

Our worship is centered on the Person and work of the risen Lord, his saving, sacrificial life and death. All around us, worship services focus on the victory, majesty, and glory of Christ. But worship that focuses only on these things tend to be without reverence, and even without decency and order. This kind of worship tend to turn into a fun-filled, entertaining show.

But our text says in verse 24 that when we gather for worship, we worship Christ who has *"sprinkled his blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."* At Mount Sinai, the people couldn't even come close to the mountain to worship the holy God, because they are sinners. Moses had to sprinkle them with the blood of animal sacrifices before they could come near the mountain. And so they worshipped God in fear and trembling.

But today, we can enter God's most holy presence not only in *reverence and awe*, but also with *confidence and full assurance of faith*. Because Christ, who is our sinless High Priest, is in heaven interceding for us sinners, *"Since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."* (Heb 10:21-22).

Therefore, we cannot truly worship God apart from Christ, who has sprinkled our hearts with His precious blood. Jesus does not sprinkle your bodies with His blood. He sprinkles it on your hearts and minds to cleanse you from sin. The shedding of Christ's blood is so different from that of Abel. What did Abel's blood cry out? Abel's blood cried out for vengeance for his murder. But Christ's blood speaks of grace and forgiveness of our sins. So we don't need sacrifices in our worship service, because Christ was our "once for all" sacrifice. And our sacrifices are not bulls and goats. Our sacrifices are offerings of thanksgiving, prayer, songs, offerings, and most of all, obedience to God's Word.

The Solemn Demands of True Worship

Therefore, in verses 25-26, God has a serious warning to everyone:

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who

warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."

Are you going to refuse God who speaks to you in His Word? Are you going to reject God's salvation in his Son Jesus Christ? If rebellious Israel did not escape judgment, how much less will you escape judgment if you reject his Word and disobey? The terrors of Mount Sinai will be nothing compared with the coming judgment on those who reject him. In that coming judgment, not only the earth will be shaken, but even the heavens will be dissolved (2 Pet 3:10). No earthly kingdom will escape judgment. Only the Kingdom of Heaven will escape, because it cannot be shaken.

Are you a citizen of that unshakeable heavenly kingdom? If you are not, God's shaking of the earthly kingdoms will be your terrifying destination. You can only be a kingdom citizen by faith and trust in Christ. But if you are a kingdom citizen, God has some words of challenge for you. Verses 28-29 tells us, *"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire.'"*

Because you have inherited that unshakeable kingdom, our text has two solemn demands on you as citizens of that kingdom.

The first demand is this: *"Let us worship God acceptably with reverence and awe."* Acceptable worship is worship not created by our sinful minds, offered to please and praise God, and not to please our feelings and desires. In the arts and sciences, God gave us creative minds; but in worship, John Calvin calls our creative minds *"idol factories."* Wasn't this true in all of Israel's history, and still is true today for all of us? Before Moses could come down from spending 40 days with God at Mount Sinai, Israel was already worshipping a golden calf. During the time of the Judges, Israel continually practiced idolatry.

Today, most churches teach their congregations to be "creative" in worship. Creative worship! What a dreadful concept! The Bible calls Israel's great sin of creative worship as *"whoring after the Baals"* (Jgs. 8:33). What if God called us the same horrible name because we lust after the world's music, dramas, dance, therapeutic sermons, and other forms of entertainment, to use them in our creative worship?

We are to offer acceptable worship, but how do we know what is acceptable to God in worship? He has revealed it to us only in His Word. And we are warned not to add or take anything away from His Word *"If anyone adds anything to the words of this book, God will add to him the plagues described in this book"* (Deu 4:2; Rev 22:18). A very serious principle of worship is that *all the elements must be prescribed by God in His Word.*

The second demand in our text is, *"Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful."* The next chapter, Chapter 13, has a list of exhortations to show thankful obedience to God. You are to examine yourselves in the light of these exhortations. Verses 15-16 summarize the writer's appeal for godly living, *"Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."*

Dear people of God, let us not think that our worship service is a dull ritual; that the worship service should be an evangelistic rally; that other churches have more exciting worship; that we should change our worship service so that many people would come. Let us remember that we are to offer acceptable worship with reverence and godly fear, and in thankful obedience to Christ our Redeemer; that we come to the Lord's Day gathering to please God, and not ourselves.

If we faithfully continue to *worship differently* from the world; if we pray, read, and sing Scriptures; if we sing only Psalms and other Scriptural songs; if we preach the gospel faithfully; and if we administer covenant baptism and the Lord's Supper faithfully, then the world will notice. And they will come—maybe not by the dozens, as we might wish. But they will come, because those who truly seek the Lord come to worship him in spirit and truth (John 4:24), and in joy and reverence.

Let us remember that when we gather for worship, we have a foretaste of heaven with a glorious company of saints and angels; with Jesus our High Priest; and before a holy and merciful God.