

Ephesians 2:13-22 9th Sunday after Pentecost July 24, 1994

*13But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

*14For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. 15He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*

“What do I want from the church?” was the question I asked each of them to answer.

“I want to be closer to God,” was one response.

Closer to God.

Israel was close to God on that day when they stood before the mountain of God, Mt. Sinai. For three days they had camped right at the edge of the mountain. This was the warning they were given, *“Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death.”*

Then we read, *“On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mt. Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke when up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder.”*

Closer to God? Israel wanted to keep this God at a safe distance.

God is dangerous - to see God, to touch the ark of God which contained the tablets of stone carved by God on that holy mountain, meant death. Only the very most holy ones, in the most holy moments dared approach.

God is dangerous. On that same holy mountain, drawn to the presence of God by a bush that burned but was not consumed, Moses asked the name of the God speaking to him there. Yahweh is the Hebrew word he heard. “I am who I am” its meaning. The people of Israel

knew this to be a powerful name, a dangerous name. Even in reading scripture they would not speak the name out loud for fear of being unworthy, speaking the name of God in vain. God is dangerous, God's name - dangerous.

In time the people were led by God to build a temple. As God had come down upon the holy mountain, now God dwelt in this most beautiful of human creations. The people would approach, but not too close, in the outer courts they prayed, gave offerings. But only the most holy priests, set aside by God, dared approach the Holy of Holies where God dwelt. And they approached but once a year to offer sacrifice for the sins of the people.

One thousand two hundred years after God caused the mountain to quake, the air filled with burning and smoke at God's approach, Jesus walked the dusty roads of Galilee. His voice was not a sound like thunder but a human voice. His touch did not bring death, but life, healing. God is present here, the people confessed, present in him. The people did not flee but raced to be where Jesus was - close to him, closer to him. So many people came to him that he and his disciples could not even eat. Yet he had compassion for them.

It must have seemed to many that Jesus spoke of and taught of a new god, a different god. Instead of destroying sinners, Jesus ate with them. "God is a Father who rushes out to greet the prodigal son," he taught. "God is a shepherd who seeks the lost, a physician who heals the sick."

The God is distant and dangerous crowd had a solution for this kind of talk about God. They put Jesus to death.

At that moment the curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, God's answer to their solution. God would not stay there, imprisoned in the religion of God's people.

Then once more God came down in fire as God had done at Mt. Sinai. But this time the fire did not come upon a mountain but came to rest upon the followers of Jesus. There was a great wind; the spirit of the almighty God entered the followers of Jesus. Now they were the new Holy of Holies. They were God's dwelling place on earth.

In our second lesson we hear these words: *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you are also built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*

The God who came down on Sinai, who spoke his name at the burning bush, who dwelt in the Holy of Holies, now has made us, the church, into God's Holy temple. You are the dwelling place of God.

There is no coming closer to God than this: the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, the Holy Spirit dwells in you.

Is this a dangerous God? To sin and evil and self-worship this God is dangerous for God wants to put these to death in you.

But to love and peace and gentleness in you and in others this God is no danger. For these are the furnishings of the temple of God.