

**THE FIRE NEXT TIME; HEBREWS 12:18-29; AUGUST 21, 2016;
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Here's a poignant analysis from one observer: Our civilization believed for a very long time in God and the soul and in sin and salvation, assuming whatever else, that meaning had a larger frame and context than this life in the world.

Polls indicate Americans have not really abandoned these beliefs; many, a majority, still believe there is a God who is mysterious and demanding, with whom we are not easily at peace, and with whom there will be a reckoning.

This observer notes that such beliefs, based on annual Pew and Gallop surveys, were not discredited or consciously abandoned so much as they simply dropped out of the cultural conversation. At the same time, we adopted a reduced view of ourselves as merely consumers, patients and members of interest groups – the contemporary secular answers to our deepest religious questions.

Here's the problem: if we still do subscribe to the view that we have a greater and different destiny than other created things, if we believe there is a God who hears the cries of the oppressed and who takes an almighty and everlasting measure of our actions and our thoughts...

If we still do believe in the seriousness of being human, even though we have lost the means of acknowledging or articulating this belief, then anxiety seems an inevitable and natural result. ⁱ

As well as a persistent longing for purpose and meaning. How else to explain the proliferation of high risk, extreme sports and trips to dangerous and exotic places – like scaling Mt. Everest or cohabitating with Grizzly bears.

There is a sense in which the popular culture relentlessly reduces our daily lives to material aims and goals. Things like income and credit shrewdly managed, fashion and style learned from the better shops and catalogs and systematically acquired. Could it be because our hopes are so modest that we can be made to fear that what we have earned can be taken from us by unwed teenage mothers and their children, or illegal immigrants?

Could it be because we hope to acquire rather than to achieve – or in the old language of religion, to receive rather than to give – that the good we imagine and strive for can truly be taken from our hands?

If this analysis has a shred of relevance for 21st century, mainline, middle class Americans – then the Book of Hebrews is just what the doctor ordered. The book, classed as an epistle, is really a sermon admonishing the congregation to whom it was written to embrace the tenets of the faith and live the gospel in acts of love. The message could be titled Christianity 101; it describes God's love affair with human creation and marshals an argument that takes the reader through the Old Testament and culminates in the ministry of Jesus.

But the writer of the letter wasn't born yesterday. He suspects his audience will leave the sanctuary mulling over one or two points of interest in the sermon, or the anthem, or the way the sunshine came through the stained glass; and as they head home or to brunch other matters will surpass his call to rigorous discipleship.

And so we have today's verses like the warning on a power tool. These lines that remind the people who they are dealing seem out of place in an otherwise uplifting message. "My children," he writes, "do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves and chastises every child whom he accepts." Already you can hear the grumbling: "tough love, punishment? That's not what the pastor said in the new member class."

Then he really turns up the heat: "you have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made hearers beg that not another word be spoken."

The preacher of Hebrews, bestowing the demands of the Gospel upon the people, shrewdly returns to the moment Moses descended Mt. Sinai and gave the people the Ten Commandments; that moment was the beginning of their life as a community. The God who summoned Israel then, the preacher implies, now summons us.

But do you remember what happened the moment right after God spoke the Ten Commandments? It was then that the people, so recently rescued from their oppression in Egypt and now beginning to complain about their circumstances realized they were dealing with an unfathomable, fire-breathing deity. And they covered behind Moses and begged for mercy.

"All the people were there," one commentator says. "No one missed it: God's own voice, with thunder in it and lightning crackling all around; the sound of a trumpet none of them knew how to play, with notes that made their scalps crawl; the mountain smoking like a kiln, shaking so violently the ground slid beneath their feet. It was an encounter with the living God, and in about five seconds they decided they had had enough. Turning to Moses, they said, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.'

At their request God never spoke to all the people again. Secondary speech replaced primary speech. The pillar of fire and cloud that led the people through the wilderness gave way to a tabernacle they could carry around with them. The hot lava of God's voice cooled into the six hundred thirteen commandments of the law.

Books, clergy, and institutions of worship would replace the presence of the living God, and that would suit everyone just fine. In George Steiner's words, "We seek the immunities of indirection. We welcome those who can domesticate, who can secularize the mystery and summons of creation."ⁱⁱ

From one point of view, churches – and mosques, synagogues, temples, ashrams and meeting houses – are as much buffers as they are conveyors of the holy presence.

And that's the problem and challenge we face today. We choose our houses of worship on a spectrum ranging from snake handling and speaking in tongues to following predetermined scripts dictating every minute of worship. We choose our houses of worship to the extent that they meet our needs and serve our interests from political orientation, to the culture of the membership, to location and architecture; all of which is not necessarily a bad thing.

But there is one requirement upon which our present and future well-being depends: "See to it," the preacher of Hebrews warns, "that you do not refuse the one who is speaking."

He is not referring to himself or to any subsequent preachers but to the voice of God – and here's the tricky part for modern Christians: discerning God's voice among all the competing voices and in whatever manner that voice is spoken – through the sermon, on occasion; in the music so often, and in the deep still silence of this place.

Worship is the foundry where our guiding principles are forged; where our ethics and politics are challenged and refined; where our hearts are opened to the suffering around us and as far away as the distant corners of the earth. It is, in other words, where the dark, passionate, fiery tempest of God and the people collide.

Maybe that's why we keep coming back to this place. Certainly for the people; but perhaps we are hoping for more than the world can give us, more than a therapy session or the mirroring of our own opinions; perhaps we long for nothing less than a meeting with the true and living God. Perhaps we are hoping to have our world shaken just enough, our path in life challenged sufficiently to silence, for a moment, the empty gods of our culture.

Perhaps what we are being called to do, in these turbulent times, is to not just make the Bible relevant but use it to turn our modern world upside down. Maybe the time we spend together in this chapel and sanctuary is not merely to engage what is euphemistically tossed around as the 'real' world but to challenge with faith and imagination who defines 'real' and the very terms of the definition.

We're not going to turn back the clock and encounter the pillar and cloud of God's presence but I wouldn't be surprised if we were brought face to face by the summons we discern in this place with the East Side of Buffalo or the plight of our aging population and members as they face the trials of old age;

I wouldn't be surprised if God called us to live the gospel with our friends from Jericho Rd. in Goma, Congo or if we discovered new pathways to ministry and worship with our brothers and sisters at First Presbyterian.

Ninety years after Jesus walked the hills of Galilee the preacher of Hebrews stirs the embers of faith and ends his sermon this way: "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to the stranger. Remember those who are in prison. Let marriage be held in honor by all. Let us express our gratitude for God's grace and serve in a way that is pleasing to God, with respect and awe, because our God really is a consuming fire." Amen.

ⁱ Marilyn Robinson, *The Death of Adam* (Picador: New York, 1998) 84.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God Is Silent* (Cowley: Boston, 1998) 58.