

September 1, 2019 So Unlike The Wizard of Oz: From the days of my early childhood, a disturbing image of a human face from an enormously popular motion picture of 1939, “The Wizard of Oz”, continues to haunt me. It is the face of the Great and All-powerful Oz. In one memorable scene, young Dorothy and her companions meet the wizard for the first time. His grim demeanor inspires fear and dread. He is stern and intimidating. His booming voice is threatening. To approach the Wizard without permission was a serious offense, and likely to result in a severe punishment, possibly including death. The Wizard was unapproachable. The poor Cowardly Lion was so badly frightened that he was the first to run from the wizard’s presence. He could not get away fast enough!

(A footnote: On the front of the parish secretary’s desk is a sign, which reads, “Nobody gets to see the Wizard. Not nobody, not no how.”)

In today’s second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, the author contrasts two mountains: Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. In the history of salvation, mountains seem to play an important role. On Mt. Sinai, God manifested Himself to Moses and presented him with the Tablets of the Law, the Ten Commandments. One of the key moments in Salvation history was accompanied by remarkable phenomena: a blazing fire, gloomy darkness, a horrific storm, a blast of the trumpet, and lastly, a great voice, the voice of God. So awful was the voice of God that the Jews prayed not to hear it again. Let us re-visit the words from today’s epistle. “And a voice speaking words such as those who heard begged that no further messenger be addressed to them.” (Heb.12:19) So holy was Mount Sinai that even if an animal trespassed upon it, it was immediately stoned to death. (Heb.12:20) What is underscored is God’s majesty, his transcendence and unapproachability. There is stressed the sheer terror of God.

Mount Zion is an image of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Fear gives way to joy for the Christian pilgrim. “Now you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” (Heb.12:22) It is through Jesus that we have access to the Father, and delight in accompanying Him through the Gates of Heaven, where the elect are gathered.

The People chosen by God assembled at the foot of Mount Sinai when the Old Covenant was made on earth. The biblical author of the Letter read today in our church writes of the assembly of the first born enrolled in heaven. (Heb. 12:23) It is striking how often one reads of phrases such as “come to”, “draw near”, and “go to” in the letter. Clearly, the goal of Christian pilgrimage is the heavenly Jerusalem, where all is peace and tranquility. We are still on our way to the heavenly city. We have not yet reached our destination; it is still to come.

Do we see ourselves as a pilgrim people? Do we truly believe that life has a destination? Are we not “in motion”? We “walk in faith”, (2 Cor.5:7) “walk in the Spirit”, (Rom 8:4) “walk in love”, (Eph. 5:2) “walk in Jesus”, (Col.2:6) and “walk in the day”. (Jn.11:9) Once our earthly pilgrimage ends, we hope to find “eternal rest” from all our earthly labors and forever enjoy the company of the honored ones “whose names are in the register of heaven”. (Heb.12:23)

The French writer Leon Bloy, once wrote “Joy is the infallible sign of the Christian”. Unlike the forbidding countenance of the Wizard of Oz, the face of Christ exudes warmth, mercy and love. Such a demeanor inspires joy, not sadness, and gives us hope to continue on our journey to the Holy City, the Heavenly Jerusalem, unafraid and always hopeful in the life to come.

Amen!