

“Get a Glimpse of God’s Glory”

What does God look like? We have ways that we use to picture God. One of the stained glass windows in the back of the church pictures God above Adam and Eve and the rest of his creation looking something like a wise old man. We have ways of representing God with symbols. We have the interlocking circles in an upper window representing the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Another of those upper windows represents God the Father as a hand reaching down from the sky. But what does God really look like?

Well, God himself tells us in his Word that he is a spirit. He exists from eternity not in a physical form like we do. We cannot possibly, from our own vantage point, both physical and imperfect, fully know or see God.

But God has shown himself to sinners. He appeared, for example, to Abraham in the Old Testament and spoke to him about the destruction to be brought on Sodom and Gomorrah. He appeared to Moses and to all of the Israelites as they left Egypt in the form of a pillar of cloud and fire that led them on their way. And in the tent of meeting outside the Israelite camp, God spoke to Moses face to face.

Now, it may seem a little strange that we would be talking about Moses on Christmas Day. I suppose it is a little strange. This particular lesson was inserted into our lectionary, the list of lessons for our Church Year, only recently. We are not looking back at one of Isaiah’s prophecies that so clearly speak about the coming Savior, nor at one of the Gospel accounts that tell of his birth in Bethlehem. But in spite of how strange it may seem, this account about Moses really has a lot to remind us of concerning Christmas. In it, we go alongside of Moses to get a glimpse of God’s glory. And of course, we will revisit the manger in Bethlehem and get another glimpse of the same glory.

The account of Moses that includes our sermon text this Christmas Day morning follows after the incident with the golden calf. After God’s people, the Israelites, left Egypt, they went to Mt. Sinai, where Moses went up the mountain to receive God’s laws for his people. Moses spent 40 days on the mountain, and the people in the camp became anxious. They hadn’t heard anything from God or his chosen leader for long enough that they decided to make an idol for themselves, a golden calf that they could use in their so-called worship. God in his anger over their shameful sin threatened that he would no longer go with the people, that Moses could lead them along with an angel.

Moses went to God to plead for his mercy. He held firmly to God’s promises and wrestled with God in prayer, and God ultimately offered him the reassurance that he would be with Moses and the people throughout their journey. And then Moses spoke the opening words of our text, “**Now show me your glory.**” Some have questioned Moses’ motivation. Did he simply see a unique opportunity and wish to behold something that no one else ever had? Did he feel that he deserved the special privilege of seeing God as he truly is, in all his glory? It seems more likely that Moses was seeking reassurance. He knew how gravely the people had sinned and offended God. He was overwhelmed with God’s forgiveness and love, and he simply wanted the added assurance that God could give to him by a demonstration of his glory.

Wouldn’t it be nice to be able to go to God the way Moses did? In our moments of weakness and despair, wouldn’t it be so very reassuring to have God himself speak to us with words of comfort and hope? After all, who knows better than we do why those doubts appear? Who knows better than we do all of the sins that lurk in our hearts or have clouded our lives? Wouldn’t it be nice to say, “God, show me your glory. Prove to me your grace. Guarantee to me that your words are true”? Wouldn’t it be nice to receive absolute assurance that God is and will be with us?

God agreed to Moses’ request. Of course, there were limitations. God in some ways will always remain hidden to sinful human beings on earth. As he said, “**you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and**

live.” Instead, God would hide Moses in the cleft of a rock. He would conceal himself from Moses as he walked by, and would allow Moses a glimpse of his glory after he had passed.

A parallel truth is revealed to us. God must in many ways remain hidden to our sinful minds and hearts. We cannot fully understand or comprehend God in his essence. We cannot delve into his mind. What he has revealed to us is clear, and we can learn something of God by looking at the works he has done after he has done them, but we cannot see his face and live.

But God would do better for us and for Moses than to show forth his glory. God promised to Moses that he would pass by and proclaim his name, his merciful name. The reassurance to sinners comes not from seeing the glory of God but from hearing the message of his grace and love. He says, **“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”** And he goes on to preach a sermon on his name: **“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.”**

God will not deny his holiness. He will not allow sinful rebellion against him to go unpunished. He will deal with sin. But he is the Lord: the personal, eternal, unchangeable God of grace. This is the name by which he has made and will make himself known. He would be with Moses. He would be with his people throughout history with his unfailing forgiveness and patience and love.

Moses got a glimpse of God’s glory as he passed him there on the mountain, but in this sermon, Moses got so much more. This is God’s greatest glory as we as sinful human beings can know it: that God is gracious and merciful, that God is love and forgiveness.

And this is God’s Christmas sermon to us today. It should not surprise us that God deals with his people in consistent and similar ways at various points in history. Consider then the many parallels between the account of Moses’ mountain experience and our Savior’s birth.

To a world that had turned away from God, had worshipped idols, and had failed to obey God’s commands, God made and kept his promise to be with his people. In his grace and mercy he showed his glory. No, it wasn’t the bright-shining glory that we so often think of. It was his glory hidden in a way that sinful people could bear to see it. It is the glory of God hidden in human flesh and blood and laid in a manger. It is a glory that no one would have seen or noticed unless God had revealed it to us.

And in the manger is a glimpse of God’s glory that proclaims his holy name. Compassionate and gracious- that’s why Jesus came into the world. Slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness- he did not give us what our sins deserved, but instead kept his gracious promise. Maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin- Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the Magi, and you and me...sinner after sinner lined up to worship the King because he had come to take away their sin, our sin, forever.

Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. There in the manger is the one who would be raised up on the cross, where God’s love and God’s justice would meet and both would have their way. Sins would be punished at the expense of an innocent victim, a substitute for the world, and forgiveness would be freely given.

Is it a surprise that Moses would be so central to our Christmas celebration? I suppose in a way it is surprising. But let’s not forget that Jesus testified about Scripture that all of it is about him. We will not be surprised to find him on any of its pages, at Christmas or any other time. But today we have come to get a glimpse of God’s glory. We have seen it with Moses on the mountain, and we have seen it with Mary at the manger. By God’s grace, we will continue to glimpse his glory on the pages of Scripture, in the waters of baptism, and in his holy meal. And by God’s grace he will bring us to see the fullness of his glory in heaven. **“We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth”** (John 1:14). We praise and glorify his holy name.

The Text: Exodus 33:18-23, 34:5-7

Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."

And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

Then the Lord said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."

Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."