

From Holiness to Lowliness: So that We Can See God's Face

In the name of Jesus, our Immanuel, God who has come to dwell with us

Each year with my Catechism students, there's one day of class we spend doing something a little different than the rest of the lessons. I enlist the help of the class's two best doodlers, the ones who are always drawing some little doodle in their catechism workbook, and I ask them to come up to the board and have a draw-off competition as they hear the details of one of the greatest spectacles the world has ever witnessed. Can you guess what event I ask them to draw?

I suppose there's a couple pretty good options like any of the Ten Plagues or maybe the parting of the Red Sea, as the Israelites walked between two walls of water. But the one I ask them to draw is when God came down on Mount Sinai, with cracks of lightning and peels of thunder, and covered the whole top of the mountain in a dense cloud of smoke. The whole mountain heaved and quaked and billowed up smoke like a furnace. Today, we are going to spend some time remembering how God appeared to his people in his terrifying holiness at Mount Sinai so that we can more fully appreciate how God comes to his people in graceful lowliness at Christmas and shows us his face. That's our theme today: **From Holiness to Lowliness: So that We Can See God's Face.**

In preparation for the event on Mount Sinai, the Israelites were supposed to put barricades around the mountain and set it apart as holy ground. Then when Moses first got up the mountain, the Lord told him, **"Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish. Even the priests who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves or the LORD will break out against them."** (Exodus 19: 21,22).

So Moses goes and warns the people not to force their way up and while he's down the mountain, the Lord speaks the words of the 10 commandments to them, and it just about does them in. **"When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.'"** (Exodus 20:18-19)

God was beginning to establish a few of the facts in his relationship to his people. Sinners cannot bear the presence of the holy God, for **"God is a consuming fire" (Deut 4:24)**. Sinners can't come to God on their own terms. He must come to them on his terms and enable them to stand in his presence. And the point of all the theatrics and the dramatic spectacle was what Moses said to the people, **"Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning."** (Exodus 20:20). It is proper for us to have a healthy fear of God and his holiness and that holiness should, in a sense, "scare us straight". It should keep us from sinning, and the Israelites thought it would. Over and over during this time

at Sinai, the Lord spoke his words and laws and the people responded, **“Everything the LORD has said we will do.” (Exodus 24:2)**

Then they got to have a special covenant ratifying ceremony. Moses and the 70 elders of Israel got to go up the mountain and see some of God’s glory up close and **“God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God and they ate and drank.” (Exodus 24:11)**. After this God calls Moses all the way to the top of the mountain. **“The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.” (Exodus 24:16-18)**

God finishes giving Moses the rest of the Law during that time. He sends him on his way with the two tablets of the covenant law inscribed by the very finger of God and Moses doesn’t even get down the mountain before realizing that 40 days of the most amazing spectacle the world had ever seen was apparently enough to bore the people into rebellion and sin. When they saw Moses was long in coming down the mountain, they asked Aaron to make the golden calves and had a festival of worship and wickedness to the golden calves. They completely broke the covenant they had just made. Moses burns with anger. He breaks the tablets. He grounds up the golden calves and makes the people drink it. The Lord burns with anger; he’s ready to destroy them all and start over with just Moses. Moses talks God out of destroying them completely, because that will look silly to bring them out of Egypt just to destroy them, but God still sends a plague on some of them. There the Israelites sit camped at Mount Sinai. The Lord was going to send them on to the promised land, but he wasn’t going to go with them.

Now there’s one last stretch to the story we need to cover before we wrap all the Moses and the Israelites stuff together into a point for Christmas Day. The last stretch is what you heard in the First Lesson today. After the golden calf incident, the Israelites are still camped by the mountain. Moses would set up a tent outside of the camp called the tent of meeting where he would go and the Lord would appear in the tent and speak to Moses directly as one speaks to a friend. One of those times Moses, who has seen more of the Lord than anyone on earth, gets even bolder and begs the Lord, **“Now show me your glory.” (Exodus 33:18)**. And the Lord, who was pleased with Moses, obliges him and says he’s going to put him in a cleft in the rock and let all his goodness and glory pass by in front of Moses, **“But you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” (Exodus 24:20)**. Once again here God is emphasizing this fact: sinners cannot see the face of God in his unbridled glory or we will die. It will consume us. His goodness and holiness and glory are too great and we are feeble sinners.

So the Lord shields Moses in the cleft with his hand and then passes in front of Moses and proclaims his name, **“The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God,”** and Moses gets to see God’s back. He bows in worship and then makes this request, **“Let the LORD go with us. Although this is a stiff necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance.” (34:8)** And the Lord says, “Yes!” He renews and restores the broken covenant, they remake the tablets, and God promises to come with them and deliver them. Even here, at the giving of the Law, God displayed himself as the God of free and faithful grace!

Now here we are over 10 minutes into a sermon on Christmas day and you might be wondering, “Uh, Pastor, aren’t we celebrating Jesus’ birth today? Why are we talking about Moses and the Israelites.” Fair question! My prayer for you this Christmas Day is that having journeyed back with me to Sinai to get a glimpse of God’s glorious *holiness*, you will be able to more fully appreciate the great gift God bestowed on this world when wrapped himself in human flesh and *he gave himself as one of us*. **“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:14)**

Since way back in the perfect garden of Eden where Adam and Eve used to walk and talk with God, no one has been able to see God face to face. Moses was the closest to do it--his face radiated for days--and the people asked him to cover it up. Now in the fullness of time, God wraps his goodness and glory in human flesh and sends his Son to be born among us. **“We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)**

But do you see the difference between Sinai and Bethlehem? Yes, the announcement of his birth was glorious, well yes and no. Yes, a great company of angels filled the sky and the glory of the Lord shone around them, but appearing to handful of terrified shepherds out in fields tending flocks? No, not so glorious! And when the shepherds went to see what they had been told, the Son of God they laid their eyes on there in the manger was not glowing or radiant or terrifying. No billows of smoke or peals of thunder, just a little baby, humble and *lowly*, wrapped in swaddling clothes. They looked into a manger and beheld the face of God, the one who had once rattled Mount Sinai to its core, now meek and mild, emptied for a time of his power and glory—for us, so that we could see him, God in the flesh. Yet, it was the same **“LORD, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” (Exodus 34:6,7).**

For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became truly human. (Nicene Creed). The God who once appeared at Sinai, *holy and gracious*, now lay there, *lowly and gracious*—God from God, light from light. It was grace in place of grace already given. God had been gracious to his people in the past at Mount Sinai, but in this Holy and Lowly Child he had truly outdone himself. **“Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:16)**

Jesus came from the Father, full of grace and truth, to us who promise to do everything the Lord has said and fail to keep that promise over and over again. He came in grace and truth and kept the promise we’ve made for us, **“When Christ came into the world, he said, “I have come to do your will, my God.” (Hebrews 10:7).** He kept it with every moment of his life.

And all during that time, though he kept hidden the light and radiance of the glory of God as it had been seen at Sinai, only revealing it in small glimpses, he did so in order make his Father known to us in a way we could handle, that wouldn’t destroy us. **“No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (John 1:18).** He spoke the Father’s word to us! Then when the time was right, he was lifted on the cross to draw all sinners to himself. This is how the Son

would be glorified and make known his Father's grace and glory. It was in the salvation of sinners. It was in bringing many sons and daughters to glory!

From his holiness on Sinai to his lowliness in Bethlehem, the Son of God came to give us the holiness we need to be brought back to God, *so that we might see his face and live.* **“For without holiness, no one will see the Lord.”** (Hebrews 12:14). Dear friends, Jesus came the first time to give you holiness so that when he appears the second time, he will take you into the presence of God, **“who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see** (1 Timothy 6:16, and there you **“his servants will serve him, and will see his face.”** (Revelation 22:4). The Holy God became lowly so that lowly sinners might become holy and see his face forever. God grant us all this blessed vision at last! Amen.

Now, dear friends, we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Amen!