

January 1, 2012

Exodus 33:1-6, 12-23; 34:5-8

¹The Lord said to Moses, "Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your offspring I will give it.' ²I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ³Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."

⁴When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. ⁵For the Lord had said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, 'You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.'" ⁶Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.

¹²Moses said to the Lord, "See, you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' ¹³Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." ¹⁴And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?"

¹⁷And the Lord said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." ¹⁸Moses said, "Please show me your glory." ¹⁹And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." ²¹And the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, ²²and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. ²³Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen." (*Then, in chapter 34, verse 5*)

^{34:5}The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. ⁶The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." ⁸And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. (ESV)

When I hear this passage, I can't help but think of what I used to call Wal-Mart moments. If you don't know what a Wal-Mart moment is – don't worry. I'll explain it to you. Wal-Mart is the store my wife just *never* feels like she wants to enter. Especially when you have kids with you. Very crowded, usually long lines, and piles, sacks and stacks of strategically placed, unnecessary plastic items that your children find absolutely critical for survival. You hate it; they love it. Any money you thought you might save on the prices you more than make up for with the things they hold in their hand and ask you to buy.

Now let me be clear. I have nothing against the company, their business practices, or their prices. I LIKE their prices. But that's just it: the store is so good at making you a mass consumer, that people walk out looking like THEY have been consumed.

So, I have always considered it part of my family leadership to occasionally gird my loins, put on the full armor of capitalism, and occasionally enter Wal-Mart as leader and protector of the family – to take it on. To defeat it. Sort of like Mel Gibson in *Braveheart*. And as a bonus, it was always Daddy-time with my children, which I *usually* enjoy.

But what would actually happen was that I'm on my way over – with the kids in the back seat (this is when they were 5, or so) – and everything would be fine. They're singing songs, they're joyful, and just plain happy to be out with their dad...Until we arrive at the parking lot.

And then suddenly I am far from the most important thing in their life. I am suddenly a distant-last to all of those unnecessary plastic items dancing in their heads.

And they would begin to fight. Who will get to go to which part of the store first? Who will sit in which *part* of the shopping cart? Who will be the LEADER of this expedition? Nothing would seem to stop the screaming short of MY shouting even louder.

In fact, let me take some liberties with the text in front of you – verses 1-3. Let me paraphrase one of my car rants in Old Testament-speak: "Go – if you want to – up to the store that I promised you on oath this morning. I will pray that an angel lead you by the hand to all of the plastic-filled shelves and drive out all of the other Christmas shoppers in your way. Go up to the toy aisles filled with princess toys and footballs. But I will *not* go with you, because you are stiff-necked children. And I might consume you with my anger on the way."

And by the end of that speech, everyone would be distressed, everyone is in tears. And at that moment it would **seem** like there were only two choices – I'm going to hurt these kids because of my anger, or leave them in the car and walk away.

Now, God is NOT like me. Praise God!! And these verses do *not* mean that God has trouble controlling his temper! The Bible sometimes describes God in human terms. But it does not mean God has the same sinful emotions that I have. When God decides to destroy someone, it is not because he has lost his cool, but because he responds to sin with *perfect* righteousness. He is a God of *holy* justice, and this made it too dangerous for him to stay with Israel. It's out of God's love that his point is, "It would be safer for you if I didn't go with you at all."

The context is this: In chapter 32, we had the famous incident of the golden calf. Moses had gone up on the mountain to receive the 10 Commandments – the culmination of the great delivery of Israel out of slavery – this was going to mark a great, new time for God and his children, Israel. Like when they bring the family in on *Extreme Makeover* – they've been brought out of a life that was falling apart, and they've been brought into a great new land...

But when Moses came down the mountain and found what his brother, Aaron, and all of the Israelites had done, turning back to the gods of Egypt and making a golden calf, God said that they all deserved to be destroyed.

Now, at some point things DO change... God *will* proclaim at the end of our passage (34:6), "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, **keeping steadfast love** for thousands, **forgiving** iniquity and transgression and sin..."

Our question this morning is, how does this happen? It all turns around due to:

- **The Presence of God**
- **The Presence of Moses**
- **The Presence of Jesus**

First, the presence of God.

God does something very fatherly with his children, here. He sets up what is really a test. He says, "This intimate relationship we've been building up to... it's not working. So here's the deal: You are a stiff-necked people. But in spite of that, I'm going to give you amazing success. I am going to give you a land of your very own. I'm going to give you military success – I'll drive out *all* of those ITES. And I'm going to give you *economic* success – a land **flowing** with milk and honey. Everything is going to go well with you. Except there is only one thing. ***You won't have my presence. You won't have me.***

Now before you say – good Christians that we all are – "this is a *terrible* thing," admit something. Admit that this is the very kind of religion we want! We can have peace! Prosperity! Success! We can have military and political power. His favor without his face. Sounds good! God has moved on... and we can too.

If God did this – if he actually pulled back and let us do things the way we like – many of us **would not even notice** that God was gone. Why?

Because people **equate** a good life, with the presence of God. IOW, if my life *seems* blessed, if my standard of living *improves*, and my church is doing great with amazing programs – if my "ship is coming in" – then **I must** be experiencing the presence of God. We measure the presence of God by WHAT we have, not WHO we have. We claim to be Christians for WHAT we can get – into heaven – rather than for WHOM we are given – Jesus Christ as our Savior and our God.

I won't get personal, but you can see this in entire churches. Just last Sunday, Christmas Day, many of the churches in our area cancelled services. Why? Because they thought people had other or even better things to do. Time with family, opening presents, football games, etc. And family and gifts *are* blessings, so he **must** be blessing and giving those things... so he's "there" in those things as well.

Now to be fair, some churches canceled services, and then had their congregation do community service. Maybe serve in a soup kitchen. But that isn't the point. At least it's not the point of worship! You see, we do things like cancel worship on Christmas because the time we spend in church on Sunday morning...we think *we're* giving that hour to God. And if you think that Sunday morning is about what **you** do, then what you do and where you do it is essentially interchangeable. Why *not* cancel the Sabbath service?

But if Sunday morning is about God's communicating to you who he is, and what he has done... If worship is about God's promises to be in our midst when we gather in his name, and about his promises for what he *will* do to teach, feed and refresh us through his word and through his sacraments... the *means* of his grace...then you can't trade it in for something else **because there is nothing else like it.**¹

Remember what Jesus said to Martha, when Martha complained that she was doing right thing in preparing the meal, while her sister just sat there at Lord's feet listening to him? Jesus said. "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but **one** thing is necessary. *Mary* has chosen the good portion, which will *not* be taken away from her."² In other words, hearing the word of the Lord is how you receive the bread of life that can't be gained in doing **anything** else. You have the rest of the week to love your neighbor. You can cook, clean, work anytime. But I am here now.

We are just like those Israelites, are we not? We forget what our mighty God has done for us, and therefore have little regard for his real presence with us. But there IS a way out of ALL of this.

Thank God, for Moses, right? Because Moses says here, and in various ways, "**We have got** to have you with us, Lord. If we don't have you with us, we will die. We might have all the gifts you promise, but without the giver, they will all simply turn to dust and we will have nothing. We will suffer an anonymous death in the desert. If we don't have your face, **or** your glory, we will die. AND THEN what will other nations say?"

Now if the 1st to 3rd grade children were in the room with us right now rather than in Sunday school, they would probably be saying, "Hey wait a minute!" And that is because every other year or so, they learn about the Omnis. The "omnis" are those Latin attributes of God – that God is **OMNISCIENT (all knowing), OMNIPOTENT (all powerful) AND OMNI-PRESENT.** And by omnipresent, we mean that God is not located in one particular spot but that He is everywhere throughout the entire universe – he penetrates and fills the universe in all its parts. And our 1st-3rd graders would be right! God IS everywhere. He can't leave!

But Moses is saying that there is an awfully big difference between the fact that God is over the mountains, and with me in my bedroom at night, and in our car as we drive to church... and that God would show his *favor* to me – that God would give us **his glory-presence.** There is an enormous difference between the fact that God IS everywhere, and **knowing him personally.** Moses is simply saying "It will kill us to know that you **are** everywhere – that you're *with* us – but not *for* us."

¹ This doesn't have to be either/or – you *could* move worship to the soup kitchen...

² Luke 10:38–42

And Moses says, "That's not good enough." Moses may know what a 10 dollar word like omnipresent means, but he *knows this*: "If God's Presence doesn't go with us, there is no point in being sent from here to anywhere."

Now look, I can't explain the pleasures of God's presence. But if you haven't known it – I ask you to seek after it. Even if you don't have children – imagine being a child, without your parents, stuck in a car in a parking lot for an indeterminate length of time. Until you know God, that's where you are. You know there is something better out there – you're built for it. But it's *missing*. You are lost, and far from the one who REALLY loves you.

BUT, when you start to think of God like this:

That it doesn't really matter what *I* think of this God – it only matters what he thinks of *me*... When that dawns on you – that what *he* cares about is more important than what *I* care about – you will start to think of him and experience God's presence. You will start to experience him in more than just his **everywhere-presence**, and you'll start to see his **glory-presence**. You'll say "I cannot just decide who *I* think God is, but that I have to discover who HE reveals himself to be."

But the presence of God is IT. It's what you need in your life. Everything else is ... plastic. God is not *just* everywhere. It makes *all* the difference when his glory is in your *midst*.

- **The Presence of Moses**

Second, the presence of Moses. We need this too.

Look at what's going on here in verse 1: "Depart; go up from here, *you* and the people whom *you* have brought up out of the land of Egypt". Anyone who has had Sunday school or heard the 10 Commandments has probably heard at some point that it is GOD that brought the people out of Egypt. "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt..." And yet God is telling Moses – they're *your* people. He's angry!

I don't know about you, but in my family there are, on occasion, things that our kids do that embarrass us. Things that go against everything we want *from* them, and *for* them. When this happens in my family you might hear me say to my wife – "that's *your* child." And she usually shoots right back, "Noooooo. That's *your* child."

That's exactly what's happening here. God is saying to Moses, these children are so bad they must be yours. Because if they were mine, they'd be toast.

So we have a pretty big tension here. Our first point was that we absolutely MUST have the presence of God. It's ESSENTIAL. But then we have to see that God is so angry at our ways that if we HAD the presence of God, we would be in danger for our lives. God's presence: Essential. God's presence: Lethal.

And yet Moses dares to approach God and ask for it.

If we're going to figure this out, we have to say a few words about the enormity of sin we're talking about here, because it is VITAL for understanding the conversation between Moses and God.

Moses and God agree on one thing for sure: The golden calf is seen by both of them to be a violation of the first two commandments – to have no other God but God, and no physical representation of anything that CLAIMS to be God. So 40 days after this great, new covenant relationship between God and his people begins, and it's broken. This was supposed to be an *exclusive* relationship. A MARRIAGE. And the people are adulterous during what is *essentially* the honeymoon of the relationship.

The commentator Terrence Fretheim says this is the pain of divorce on a *cosmic* scale. The point is, God is rightly, justly angry. He has just loved and rescued them... and they turn away. His anger is not arbitrary.

But thank God for Moses. Why? Well look back again to Exodus 32:10, right there in the middle of the golden calf incident. There in v. 10 God says,

"Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, ***in order that I may make a great nation of you.***"

Now what God is saying here is, "Yes, I'm a just God. A Righteous God. A Holy God. But I am ALSO a God of love, and a God of truth. And when I make promises, I keep them. And so I promised you, Moses, a great nation and I'm going to make one. But not with these folks. I'm going to have to start all over again. And since you are faithful, I'm starting with *you*." But look at what our friend Moses does in verse 12 of chapter 33:

"See (God), you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know ***whom*** you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' Now therefore, if I *have* found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is ***your*** people." Moses says, "You MUST save this people. There is something missing if I'm the only one that reaches the Promised Land."

Thank God for Moses. Because God continues to only focus on Moses – He says in v. 14: "My presence will go with *you*, and I will give *you* rest." But Moses doesn't back down. Look at verses 15 and 16: "If your presence will not go with ***me***, do not bring ***us*** up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I ***and your people?*** Is it not in your going with ***us***, so that ***we*** are distinct, I ***and*** your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?"

Now here is what this teaches: If we ARE going to share in this glory we've been talking about, we need ***a mediator***. Someone, Hebrews tells us, who "lives to intercede on our behalf." That's Moses – the people have let him down every time – but still he argues on their behalf. In fact, he tries something very interesting in chapter 32:

Exodus 32:30-34

The next day Moses said to the people, "You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the Lord; **perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.**" ³¹ So Moses returned to the Lord and said, "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. ³² But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written."

Right there in v.30, Moses tried to atone for the sins of the people. He tried to place **himself** between God and the people to save them. Maybe if *he* were blotted out of the book of life himself, maybe Moses could help bring life to the people. The death of one, you see, might bring life to the many.

I read about a small boy who was consistently late coming home from school. His parents warned him one day that he must be home on time that afternoon, but nevertheless he arrived later than ever. His mother met him at the door, and said nothing.

At dinner that night, the boy looked at his plate. There was a slice of bread and a glass of water. He looked at his father's full plate and then at his father, but his father remained silent. The boy was crushed.

The father waited for the full impact to sink in, then quietly took the boy's plate and placed it in front of himself. He took his own heaping plate of meat and potatoes, put it in front of his son, and smiled at him. When that boy grew to be a man, he said, "All my life I've known what God is like by what my father did that night."

The Father took the judgment – he was the mediator.

We all need a mediator. If we are going to know God's glory, we need a mediator. We are always coming home late for dinner, are we not? Why?

Because something else is MORE IMPORTANT to you at that moment.

Look, it has always been easy for me to spend money on books and film. Why? There are lots of reasons I'd LIKE to give you. But here's an underlying motivation. When someone comes along and says, "You see a lot of films and you read a lot. I can't believe how many films you've seen and all that you've read. Is there any film you haven't seen? On the outside I say, well, Thank you very much. But on the inside, I say..... "I know. And I've seen a lot more than you have and I am very culturally literate and I'm just so wise."

What am I doing? What are you doing? We all have some golden calf we've erected. This is just a hint, by application. But see it was the gold and jewelry of the people that was melted down to make the calf. And where YOU spend your money – what you do with your income – CAN be a hint at what you are doing to cover your insecurity, what you do to make yourself more significant before God and before others. And how you make sure YOU matter.

You need a mediator. Do you see that? We need a mediator who will exchange their plate for ours – someone who has a perfect record. We need a mediator. We need someone like Moses.

- **And that leads us to the presence of Jesus.**

There is another reason we need a mediator that I did not mention. Some of you read here that Moses asks – after God actually says he **WILL** go with Moses and the people in v. 17 – that God show Moses *his glory*. And it does not excite you at all. In fact it scares you. Change can be scary, even when you **KNOW** it's for the better. It may also be that you know just enough about this **glory-presence** of God and your own **heart** that it scares you.

The best way to explain this is to imagine you are impersonating a police officer. You can walk around and do pretty much anything you want. You've got a pretty good uniform. You're packing heat. Everyone gets out of the way. Unless a real police officer shows up, because the real one is the only one who can unmask you as the fraud you are. When you are acting AS God, it's scary to confront the **REAL** God.

But I want to tell you that this is **NOT** a bad place to be. Because if you see the face of God, there **WILL** be changes. Coming face to face with God **WILL** change you. But God knows this. He **KNOWS** he's holy and that you are not. You get a glimpse of this in v 18-19, where Moses asks to see God's glory and God says, "I will ... *show you my goodness*." So for God, to see all of his goodness, *IS* to see his glory. And then when it actually happens, in v. 19, and then **ALSO** in chapter 34, verse 6, Moses really *cannot see* God so much as he *hears* a proclamation. A gospel.

And when it actually happens, God **proclaims** "**The LORD, the LORD**, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love..."

That is the essence of the gospel. Moses asks for Glory, and he gets a message. "My glory is this: *I am* compassionate and gracious. *I am* slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. I maintain love to thousands. I forgive wickedness, rebellion and sin. And yet – as it goes on there "I do not leave the guilty unpunished"

God's glory presence, you see, attracts and frightens us. And it should. Because God's glory is saying, "I am absolutely forgiving, **AND** I am absolutely punishing. *At the same time*. I want nobody to die. And yet I will destroy."

Now some people have studied this philosophically, and have dismissed it. It's a contradiction, right? Others hear this with their hearts and are frightened. "I know that if I come into his presence, *I* will probably get the punishing. The death. The destruction."

But look, the reason why it **SEEMS** contradictory is that God is showing Moses **ALL** of his goodness. Why does God not want anyone to perish? Because of his goodness. Because he **IS** love. Because he is too good to let anyone perish. **BUT**, why can he not let anyone off the hook? Why does he destroy? Again, *he's good*. He's too good in terms of his justice and his righteousness. Do you want someone who has abused you, harmed your family, or cheated your friends to get a smile, a wink, a knowing nod from a judge? No! You want a "good" judge.

We might have a hard time holding together these two things – that God forgives and forgives and forgives. And God punishes, punishes, punishes. But that is his glory. And it's why Moses bows down to worship. Turn with me to the book of John – page _____

John 1:14, 17-18

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁷ For the *law* was given through Moses; **grace and truth** came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Remember when Moses offered his life to God back in Ex. 32? It was never going to work. God wasn't going to simply transfer the people's guilt onto Moses, because Moses didn't have any righteousness to transfer to the people! He was a sinner, too! If this exchange happened, then there would REALLY be no one left. There would be judgment – but no forgiveness.

No, there has to be someone who is ABLE to bear the burden of another's guilt. The reason that Jesus is "the only God," who came from the Father, full of grace and truth, is because he IS WORTHY of bearing the sins because *he was without sin himself*. And if you think that Moses looked pretty persistent at going after God on behalf of his people, well look at Jesus Christ at the right hand of the Father. He *lives* to intercede continually and relentlessly.

Friends, God has NOT rejected Jesus' offer the way that he rejected Moses' back in Exodus 32. Jesus is *such* a better Moses because Jesus himself will say "I and the Father are One."

In fact, on the cross, something wonderful and terrible happens to the Son. Something forgiving and also punishing happens. Jesus no longer saw the face of God. Jesus **lost** the glory of the father. He was hung up like criminal and forsaken by those that followed him AND by his father. Betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, forsaken by the Father. Scorned by us. He became insignificant. Ignored.

You probably received some Christmas cards last week that had a picture of the little Babe in the manger, with a glowing halo on his head. Christmas is the glory-presence – the birth of Jesus – when we see his face. But he lost all of it on the cross. Because on the cross God showed his face to all of us. He showed that he was absolutely forgiving, glorious, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to *thousands*, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. And he did not let sin go unpunished because he poured it all out on the Son. Jesus became sin for us.

That's why Moses bowed down. This atoning sacrifice that WAS for him and it's for you... then you will have nothing to fear. You will not only see that nothing matters more to you than beholding the love of God and seeing his glory, but you will also see that **you** matter to God – and you will lose the desire to go after things that can only make you *feel* like you matter.

Let's pray