

God with us
Sermon for Sunday 18th October 2020
Cashmere Presbyterian Church – Rev Hamish Galloway

Text: Exodus 33:12 -23; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Part one: Seeking the presence of God (Exodus 33: 12-23)

There is much to be inspired by, informed by and instructed by in this passage, with respect to our relationship with God. For me, the main points of inspiration, information and instruction are as follows:

1. Prayer is a genuine two way conversation with God.
2. We should always be seeking more of God, not just falling back on past experience.
3. God's glorious presence is awesome to behold!

1: Prayer as conversation

This encounter with God follows on from the devastating betrayal of the Golden Calf. The Lord has called the Israelites a perverse and stiff-necked people! They had seen such amazing and very recent gracious provision from God and yet they rejected Him in favour of a golden idol made with their own hands.

Stiff-necked is an interesting phrase – when I hear it I think of taking a dog for a walk. We have friends with a pit bull Staffordshire cross – it has a strong neck! Sometimes I take it for a walk. I know where we should be going, but Hudson has other ideas. He strains his neck against the collar to go his own way, not my way! In fact, his owner has a very sore shoulder from such walks as these, pulling Hudson away from his own destructive desires! So it was with God here; He was very sore at the disobedient, ungrateful betrayal of the people. In Exodus 33:3 he has stated to Moses: *“You are going to a rich and fertile land. But I will not go with you myself, because you are a stubborn people, and I might destroy you on the way.”*

What follows on Moses' part is very interesting. He does not accept this from God, arguing instead for God to go with them. It presents a fantastic model for our prayers of intercession and supplication. Sometimes I think to myself, why pray for the woes of the world, because God knows the problems better than me and He has power to act if he wills. But what we see here is

- (1) An initial reaction from God that is justified and deserved.
- (2) Moses standing up in his given leadership role and advocating for his people, calling God to stay with his redemptive plan and not abandon them.

It is a bold display of caring leadership. It is a bold display of intercessory prayer. And this moves God to proclaim in v14 *“I will go with you.”*

2: Moses asks for more!

What then follows inspires me greatly! Moses, fresh from a series of close God encounters, beginning at the burning bush, and most recently up the mountain receiving the 10 commandments, asks for more experience of God's presence. At the age of 80, with much experience of God, he wants more!

He is not content to simply rest in previous experiences of God. I find that challenging, for I think I do that a lot. I have some significant past experiences of God which sustain my faith, but it is easy to simply rest in those. A test for me is the preaching task and the illustrations of God working in my life that come to mind – are they from way back in the past (often) or can I call upon more recent experience?

The second aspect that struck me in this “asking for more” is just that. He had seen great evidences of God at work and yet he was hungry for more. That challenges me. He is saying effectively ‘I want all of you God, don’t hold back. I want to see the full extent of your glory’ (Kabowd)

The Good News Bible call it ‘the dazzling light of your presence.’

Literally this means ‘weight’, figuratively, when related to God in this sense, the full weight of your splendid and copious reality!

Moses is saying, I hunger for all of you God. I have encountered you in wonderful ways, I love what I have seen, but it feels like a glimpse only, t feels like you have been holding back, I want all of you!

Do I have that hunger for God? Or do I place that hunger into other things.....

Even just a little of Moses’ hunger here translated into my prayers would be amazing.

3: God shows himself to Moses!

But it comes with conditions in the fine print! So often we discover these conditions in the fine print and they are all designed to look after the seller, not me the buyer! But here it is all one way; the conditions in this display of God’s glory are there to protect Moses.

The conditions are:

1. The presence of God will be passing – why only fleeting? I think it is because while those very vivid experiences of God are amazing, we are called to live out our lives in the concrete world of human existence. These experiences are to inspire us, uphold us in the memory of them when walking through the valley or desert times, but we are not meant to swell there exclusively. This is a constant theme of scripture, whether with Isaiah in the Temple, Jesus, Peter, James and John at the transfiguration, or John on the Lord’s day on the Island of Patmos, the intense experience of God’s presence propelled them back into the world with a message and a task.
2. Not all of God. Not all of God is seen here, certainly not his face, rather, Moses gets to see God as he walks away, simply his back and the back of his head.
Two things strike me about God here. Firstly, the retention of mystery and wit this the idea that we in our puny (compared with the glorious weight of who God is) minds will never fully be able to know God in this human and earth-bound existence.
The second aspect is God’s holiness when compared to our sinfulness, so clearly on recent display in the stiff-necked Israelite disobedience! The very clear message of the Old Testament is that a clash of God’s holiness and our sinfulness means devastations for us! If we want to find acceptance from God on the basis of our obedience to his Holy Law, we are universally doomed. So God avoids a face to face clash of holiness and sin, and thus saves Moses from the consequences of this.

3: He provides Moses a safe place

The rock, the cleft of the rock, gives Moses a safe place to view God, one that will protect this sinful man from the full impact of the holiness of God!

This is in fact a forerunner of what Christ does for us! By dying on the cross for our sins, Jesus is the cleft in the rock that provides us a safe place to experience God. In the New Testament over 70 times the phrase ‘in Christ’ is used.

To be in Christ is to find this safe place, this rock cleft from which lovely experiences of the presence of God take place.

As in the wonderful old hymn 'Rock of Ages'

*Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.*

*Not the labour of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.*

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die!*

*While I draw this fleeting breath,
When mine eyes shall close in death,
When I soar to worlds unknown,
See Thee on Thy judgement throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.*

Sermon part two (1 Thessalonians 1:1-6)

There is a well known 15th century Icon by Andrei Rublev, a copy of which has been at the back of our church for most of this year. It depicts the Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit, sitting around a table with a welcoming gap for us to join them. I was at a retreat over the last few days where this icon became very significant. The leader of the retreat had people come up the front and take the positions of the Trinity in the icon, and then he entered into the welcoming gap they had left. He talked about how so often we pray at God, seldom do we enter into his fellowship of the Trinity and have the insider's conversation. He spoke of the repeating phrase used over 70 times in the New Testament 'in Christ' (often Paul). He also spoke of the dual idea in the New Testament of us in Christ and Christ in us. This does indeed bring us into the centre of this fellowship of Father, Son and Spirit. It is a lovely thing to sit with the father who affirms us as a loved child, the Son who graciously forgives our sin, and the Holy Spirit who empowers us from within; this we see in progression here from Moses in the Old Covenant seeking God's presence yet prevented from full experience because of his sinful human nature, to this New Covenant picture of easy, available communion with God. In Christ, Christ in us, practicing this lovely presence of God. What a beautiful, lovely picture!