

Exodus 33:12-23

Trinity 6, July 16, 2023
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

Moses 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.' ¹³ 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." ¹⁴ And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵ And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶ 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?" ¹⁷ And 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." ¹⁸ Moses said, "Please show me your glory." ¹⁹ And 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." ²⁰ But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." ²¹ And the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, ²² and 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. ²³ Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen."

Do you ever wonder what God looks like? I think everyone wonders about things like that from time to time. Not very often, of course. Instead, I think we spend most of our time wrapped up in the things we see around us and don't spend nearly enough time paying attention to eternal matters. But every now and then—when you're reading your Bible at home, or when you're gazing up at a starry sky, or when you listen intently to a sermon at church—every now and then your mind wanders from the finite to the infinite. At times like those, you might find yourself wishing that you could catch a glimpse of God.

Well, Moses felt the same way. And in our text for today, we hear of how Moses went one step further: he actually asked God if he could see His unconcealed glory. How did God answer this strange request? With a bit of a "yes and no." And that's the same answer God gives us when we want to "see" God, when we want to know more about God, when we want to see exactly how God works in this world. If we ever ask to "see" God, He will *always* grant the request, but there will always be limits on how much He allows us to "see." The theme we'll be considering today is:

Catching a Glimpse of God

- I. He never lets us see more than is good for us
- II. He always lets us see enough to save us!

You're all familiar with Mt. Sinai. That was the mountain upon which God delivered His Old Covenant to Israel with Moses as the intermediary. It was at Mt. Sinai that God handed those two tablets of stone, the Ten Commandments, to Moses. And it's on that occasion that the action of our text takes place.

As a prophet and leader of God's people, Moses was a pretty special person. God *Himself* said that, among the prophets, Moses was unique. All the other prophets of God received God's Word in visions

and dreams, but about Moses, God says, ***“My servant Moses . . . is faithful in all my house. ⁸ With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD.”*** (Numbers 12:7-8) The very fact that Moses had been up on Mt. Sinai communing with the Lord for forty days and forty nights showed the special position he held in God’s eyes. And all during this time, Moses had been growing bolder and bolder, requesting more and more favors of God. Moses asked God to give him wisdom so that he might know the right way to lead the people in their journey through the wilderness. And God granted that request. Moses asked God to continue to go before them in the form of a cloud of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. And God said yes. Finally, Moses worked up the nerve for a final request: ***“Moses said, ‘Please show me your glory.’”*** Moses wanted to see God!

Surprisingly, God agreed to this, too. But there were conditions. God told Moses to stand in a hollow place in the rock of the mountain. When he was in position, God covered the cleft in the rock where Moses was while the glory of the Lord passed by the place. Then God removed His “hand” from the cleft, and permitted Moses to glimpse the very “back” of the dazzling brightness of His glory. And how that all worked and what that looked like, we probably all have lots of questions about. You might also wonder, “Why the back?” Why did God only allow Moses to see the afterglow of His shining presence? Why not show Moses His glory head on?

A few years back, I was able to take part in a training session for the Fond du Lac, WI, S.W.A.T team. And at the very end of the training session, the leader asked us participants if we wanted to experience what a stun grenade, or a flashbang, is like. So, we all piled into a room, and before he tossed the grenade, he told us we had to tightly cover our ears and keep our eyes completely shut, or else we’d be temporarily blinded and deafened. He’d let us experience it, but only so much that we wouldn’t be hurt. God had the same reason for only letting Moses see his glory from the “back.” God loved Moses, and He knew that a head-on view of God’s glory would kill Moses. You see, ever since Adam and Eve’s fall in the Garden of Eden, every person is sinful and corrupt. A mortal human simply cannot survive the sight of the fulness of God’s glory. God explained to Moses, ***“You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.”*** So, Moses was allowed to catch a *glimpse* of God, but that was all. The same is true about us Christians today. God never lets us see more of Him than is good for us.

My older brother is in the US Navy, and as an officer, he is often privy to information that other sailors on his subs are not allowed to know. It works that way in the military or in other intelligence communities. Some sensitive information is required for some in order to carry out their work. For others, some information is unnecessary. In some cases, that information might even be dangerous for them! That’s just the way God, in His grace, allows us insight into His nature. He *does* let us “see” His glory, in a sense. He does allow us to understand certain things about Him and the way He works in our lives, but it’s always on a “need-to-know” basis. Beyond a certain point, our human minds aren’t given the power to understand God’s ways. It’s as God says to Isaiah, ***“My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*** (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Why is that? Is it because God is secretive? Is it because God delights in keeping us in ignorance? No, it's because He loves us! He wouldn't allow Moses to look Him full in the face and die, and He also will never give us more information about Himself or the way He works in our lives than is good for us.

Think about it—would you really want to understand *exactly* how God is working in your life and what He has planned for your future? Would you *want* to know beforehand when God will bring an accident or illness into your life to test your faith and make it stronger? Would you like to see clearly the times that God has chosen to take you or your loved ones home to Heaven in death? Personally, I don't want to know that part of how God works! It would be terrifying to know that information! Would you *really* like to see the full glory of God and heaven right now? I think that if we did, then you and I would find it impossible to go on living in a flawed and imperfect world! No, God knows what is best, and that's why He never lets us see more than is good for us.

The simple truth is that there are some things about Himself that God doesn't reveal to us, and He doesn't want us try snooping into. The best example is the question, "Why some and not others?" Those five simple words have had Christian scholars going around in circles for centuries, trying to figure out why some people are saved and others are not. The Bible tells us that if a person is saved, the credit is God's alone. But if a person is lost and condemned, only that person is to blame, while God is blameless. Do those facts seem to agree? Not at all! God just asks us to believe it. It's as God told Moses in our text: ***"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."*** Let's not try to rationalize and explain this mystery. Many Christian denominations have gone beyond what God's Word says on this matter and ended up with a completely distorted and misleading view on why anyone is saved in the first place. So, rather than doing that, let's just rejoice that *we* are among those to whom God has revealed His salvation!

And that brings us to the second truth that our text illustrates—**God never lets us see more than is good for us . . . but He always lets us see enough!** He certainly gave Moses an eyeful, didn't He? Even hidden in the cleft of the rock, Moses saw more than enough of God's glory to convince him that this mighty God, this dazzlingly bright Deity could accomplish anything! If Moses needed reassurance before, now he had no doubt in his mind. This mighty God could, and *would*, lead the Israelites in to conquer the land of Palestine, even though they were hugely outnumbered. This dazzling brightness even turned out to be enough to convince the Israelites, themselves, because they saw the glory of God reflected in Moses' face! We can see that in the next chapter: ***"When Moses came down from Mount Sinai . . . Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him."*** (Exodus 34:29-30) If they had had any doubts about Moses' authority as their leader, they sure didn't now. God's glory, even reflected in Moses' face, was enough to convince them.

The same is true about us. God doesn't reveal everything about Himself to us, but He always lets us see enough—enough to save us, that is! He gives us His holy Law so that we can see clearly that we're sinners. And He reveals to us the glory of His Gospel, so that we can see that there's a cure for our sin. Many things about God, and God's ways, are hidden from our eyes. But the glory of God's Gospel has

been clearly revealed to us. For instance, it wasn't too many months ago when we were in the middle of Lent. During our Lenten meditations, we followed our Savior into the Garden of Gethsemane and saw Him struggling in prayer, sweating great drops of blood in dread of the coming ordeal. We stood in the courts of Pilate as the lash of the Roman whip cut into Jesus' back again and again. We lingered on the hilltop of Calvary as the clanging strokes of the hammer drove the nails through His hands and feet. And we heard the final words from the parched lips of the innocent Son of God: ***"It is finished!"*** (John 19:30) There we got a head-on view of the glory of God's love for sinners. There, our eyes were opened, and we saw the real meaning of God's grace. On that hill of Calvary on Good Friday, we saw the *definition* of compassion. That's where the true glory of God was revealed to our eyes. As Paul later wrote, ***"For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."*** (2 Corinthians 4:6)

So we see that God's glory has already shone into your heart and into mine. For the Lord has let us in on His plan—a wonderful plan for the salvation of mankind. A plan which no one could ever have guessed. In His love for you and me, the Lord willed that His own precious Son should bear the punishment for the sins of the world. Yes, dear friends, His plan was that God's innocent Son should bear on His shoulders the full weight of your sins, and of mine. What a wonderful plan to see! By His substitutionary act on the cross, Jesus has freed us from all the guilt that plagues our consciences!

You can still look around you and see long faces of people still dragging that weight of sin around, still burdened by the knowledge of the wrongs they've committed. You could live that way too—many so-called "Christians" do—but that's a waste of time! How *can* you sorrow and despair when God in Christ has cast all your sins into the depths of the sea? (cf. Micah 7:19) How can you wear a long face when God in Christ has opened the doors of heaven to you and promised you that eternal paradise is your certain destination? Once again today, your loving Savior says to you, ***"Take heart, my son, [my daughter]; your sins are forgiven."*** (Matthew 9:2)

If you're like me, perhaps you've always had a secret curiosity about what it would be like to be super wealthy. One of my professors at Immanuel Lutheran College surprised me once by saying that he never had a desire for wealth. In fact, he said that he often prayed that God would keep him poor. (Which sounded strange to me.) But He explained that a poor man never has more than is good for him, and it's easier for a poor man to be thankful when God provides enough for his needs.

The same is true of our knowledge of God: **He never lets us see more than is good for us, but He always lets us see enough to save us.** For *now*, our vision of God is imperfect and incomplete. But on Judgment Day, that will change. Paul told the Corinthians, ***"now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."*** (1 Corinthians 13:12) Until that day, let other people theorize about who God is and what He is like. We have already seen all that we need to see. We've seen the glory of God in the face of our Savior, Jesus Christ. **We HAVE Caught a Glimpse of God!** Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.