

God's Continual Presence and Our Response Exodus 33.7-11, 34.29-35

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This morning, the final sermon in our series on God's encounter with his people at Mt Sinai after he delivered them from Egypt.

Following Moses up the mountain into deeper intimacy with God.

We've seen at each step God's initiative
in bringing his people to himself,
in inviting them to approach him,
in revealing aspects of his glorious nature, his holy character, and his loving heart,
in making sacrificial provision for his people to approach a holy God as unholy people,
in inspiring and preserving his word as a faithful record of his heart toward us
in carrying out his will and fulfilling his purposes, and in bringing our will in line with his own

In his spiritual classic, *Testament of Devotion*, Thomas Kelly writes:

We suppose man is the initiator and God is the responder. But the Living Christ within us is the initiator and we are the responders. God the Lover, the accuser, the revealer of light and darkness presses within us. 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock.' And all our apparent initiative is already a response, a testimonial to His secret presence and working within us. 4

Our quest is of his initiation, and is carried forward in his tender power and completed by his grace. 13

My sense is that this has been an important series that God has had us in. Before we go any further, think back over the series and pause and ask the Lord to highlight what he has been saying to you during this series

Where have you been moved by his initiative?
Where have you been stretched or challenged by what you've heard?
Where have you heard his invitation?

This morning, we explore two final dimensions to the story.

We'll be looking at the *basis* for our intimacy with God, and the *fruit* of our intimacy with God.

Part One: The Basis of Intimacy – the Presence of Christ

The first of those takes us to Exodus chapter 33, verses 7 through 11.

God rescued his people from Egypt, and brought them to Mt Sinai, which God has used symbolically to represent his home, and there he is practicing hospitality towards his people, welcoming them and sharing fellowship with them.

So for fifteen chapters God has been meeting Moses and his people on the top of Mt Sinai. Then we find this unexpected development:

Exodus 33.7-8

Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the “tent of meeting.” Anyone inquiring of the LORD would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp. And whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people rose and stood at the entrances to their tents, watching Moses until he entered the tent.

Moses *used to* pitch a tent. “Used to” is a way to capture the verb tense of that verb. It could also be translated “continually.” It suggests doing something regularly or even all the time.

Exodus 33.9-10

As Moses went into the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the entrance, while the LORD spoke with Moses. Whenever the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the tent, they all stood and worshiped, each at the entrance to their tent.

The pillar of cloud would *come down*. Remember that earlier in the story, Moses had to go up to the cloud, which came down from heaven to the top of the mountain. Now the cloud is coming down from the mountaintop, all the way down the mountain, right to where Moses is.

And we're told the Lord *speaks* to Moses. God doesn't just give his presence. Speech opens up a mind and a heart. He comes revealing, sharing, opening up, speaking his heart, revealing his character, making his will known.

Exodus 33.11

The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.

Now the text elaborates on God speaking. He isn't just speaking to Moses. He is speaking *with* Moses. “Face to face” might be better translated “heart to heart.” It

conveys more than just two faces turned toward each other. Faces turned toward a person represent the person's regard, their affection, their concern, directed toward you.

This isn't just two faces turned toward each other but two hearts open to one another.



Imagine that kind of intimacy with God – the Lord speaking to you face to face, heart to heart, as one speaks to a friend.

Even across these few chapters we see a profound progression taking place in the way God relates to his people . . .

It starts with *proximity*:

God brings his people to the foot of the mountain. God brings us near to himself.

Exodus 19.4

The Lord said, "I brought you to myself."

Then it goes further to *availability*:

God invites his people to the top of the mountain. He opens the way for us to approach him, holy and perfect though He is.

Exodus 24.12

The Lord said, "Come up to me on the mountain."

Then it culminates in intimacy:

Comes down and makes himself present to his people, meeting them where they are. God comes down *to be with us*.

Exodus 33.14

The Lord said, "My Presence will go with you."

If you are a follower of Christ, you know there is one more profound and boggling dimension to God's intimacy with us as his people.



He doesn't just come down and draw near as a *power*, as a pillar or a cloud. He comes down and draws near as a *person*.

There is a wonderful link that John makes in the prologue of his gospel between these meetings God has with his people at Mt Sinai and our encounters with God through his Son.

John 1.14 and 18

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling 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.

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.

Look at these four very intentional parallels:

God visited Moses in the tent of meeting (Exodus 33.9), and in John 1.14, we're told the Word became flesh and it literally says he "pitched his tent" among us.

In Exodus 33.18 Moses asked God to "reveal his glory" and when the Word became flesh, John says, "we have seen his glory" (1.14).

And when God passes before Moses and declares that he is "abounding in love and faithfulness" (34.6), John uses the exact same phrase, translated from Hebrew to Greek, to describe Jesus in 1.14 as "full of grace and truth."

And in Exodus 34.5 and 6 it says "the Lord came down and stood there with him and passed in front of him, proclaiming his name," which means making himself known, and in John 1.14 it says Jesus, the Word, the proclamation of God, "came from the Father," and in 1.18, he "has made him known."

That culminating stage in God's revelation of himself is what allows our experience of worship to be so vibrant and profound.

God has made himself present to us here, at the bottom of the mountain, through his son.

We can encounter the Risen Lord Jesus every Sunday morning, here in our midst, during our corporate worship, which is meant to be the starting point and center point of our life together as a church family each week, as we recalibrate our life on his life.

But we can also encounter him at the start of each day, and throughout each day, as he pitches his tent right beside us, wherever we are.

Several times along the way during this series on Exodus we have gone to the Book of Hebrews, which compares that encounter with God at Mount Sinai with the access we have to God today through Jesus. Putting the two passages side by side really brings them to life, doesn't it?

Listen to this passage from Hebrews 12.18-29:

Hebrews 12

¹⁸ You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death." ²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁸ Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our "God is a consuming fire."

Hebrews 13.15

Through Jesus, therefore, let us *continually* offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.

It is true, but it is not sufficient, to say that God was present to us in Jesus. God *is* present to us in Jesus.

We can encounter him not only in our worship together on Sunday morning, where we pray each time we gather that God would give us eyes to see him as he passes through out midst.

But we can also encounter him at any moment, we have access to him at every moment, and we can walk through life enjoying and empowered by his presence with us.

Frances de Sales, in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*, describes a practice that he calls "Spiritual Retreat"

During the course of the day recall as often as possible that you are in God's presence. . . . Remember to retire at various times into the solitude of your own heart even while outwardly engaged in discussions or transactions with others.

Our tasks are seldom so important as to keep us from withdrawing our hearts from them from time to time in order to retire into this divine solitude. Therefore withdraw your spirit from time to time into your heart and there, apart from the world of men, you can converse heart to heart with God. 96-97

That idea is echoed in the wonderful little book about Brother Lawrence called *The Practice of the Presence of God*

Brother Lawrence began by cultivating in his heart the deep presence of God. He occupied himself with continual acts of adoration, love, invocation of the help of Our Lord in what he had to do. He thanked him after having done it, he asked his pardon for his negligence. . . . These acts were so united with his occupations . . . that he made them with the more ease. 47

It was evident in his deportment, when he was busy in the kitchen, that underneath his continuous work and in the midst of the most distracting occupations he kept his spirit recollected to [focused on] God. 23

He said, "I turn my little omelette in the pan for the love of God; when it is finished, if I have nothing to do, I adore my God who gave me the grace to make it." 49

The good brother found God everywhere, as much while he was repairing shoes as while he was praying with the community. He was in no hurry to make his retreats, because he found in his ordinary work the same God to love and adore as in the depth of the desert.

And Thomas Kelly, in his beautiful and inviting spiritual classic *Testament of Devotion*, explores the same theme

Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place . . . to which we may continuously return. . . It is the Shekinah of the soul, the Presence in the midst. 3

The basic response of the soul to the Light is internal adoration and joy, thanksgiving and worship, self-surrender and listening. The secret places of the heart cease to be our noisy workshop. They become a holy sanctuary of adoration. 4

A practicing Christian must above all be one who practices the perpetual return of the soul into the inner sanctuary. 8

Some questions for us to ponder before we go on:

How aware are you of the presence of God with you as you go through each night and day?

How intentional are you to access that presence?

What stands in the way of that?

Are there different choices God would have you make related to how you begin and end the day, or the way you use your phone, or the kind of screen time you have?

Where do you hear God's invitation this morning?

Part Two: The Fruit of Intimacy – the Radiance of Christ

That brings us to the final dimension of this story that I want to briefly explore with you. We've talked about the basis of our intimacy with God, which is the presence of the Living Christ with us and within us.

Now I want to focus on the fruit of our intimacy with God, which is that the more time we spend in God's presence, the more Christ will be radiant in us.

For this part of the story, let's flip one chapter to Exodus 34.29-35

Exodus 34.29-30

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him.

Exodus 34.31-32

But Moses called to them; so Aaron and all the leaders of the community came back to him, and he spoke to them. Afterward all the Israelites came near him, and he gave them all the commands the LORD had given him on Mount Sinai.

Exodus 34.33-35

When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever he entered the LORD's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had

been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with the LORD.

When Moses spent time with God, his face reflected that encounter.

When can spend time with God at any time, because his Son, risen from the dead, is present to us by God's spirit, always, residing within, and the more we turn to him, the more our lives will reflect his radiant presence.

When we spend time in the presence of the sun, ultraviolet rays penetrate our skin and trigger cells to produce a pigment called melanin, which causes our skin to change color. Others will notice that we've been in the sun.

When we spend time in the presence of the Son of God, his spirit penetrates our soul and triggers spiritual growth such that more and more, the life and likeness of Jesus is formed in us. And others will notice that we've been in the Son.

Here's another one of the great passages that contrasts the encounter of God with his people at Mt Sinai with what we have available to us in Christ . . . and then describes the fruit of that kind of intimate access we have with God in Christ.

II Corinthians 3.7-18

⁷ Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? ⁹ If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! ¹⁰ For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. ¹¹ And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

And hopping down to 16:

¹⁶ But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

When we spend time with God, when we turn our face to him, our lives will reflect that encounter.

And the more often we turn our faces toward the Son, the more we walk through life oriented toward his presence, the more our lives will reflect those encounters.

It makes me think of that mysterious passage in the Book of Acts. In which John and Peter are brought before the highest spiritual officials in Jerusalem, and threatened, and they both speak with grace and peace and power of their allegiance to him.

In Acts 4.13, speaking of the religious authorities, it says:

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled ordinary men, they were astonished, and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

As I was working on this section, Alan Sutton came immediately to mind. Here was a man whose whole life was radiant with the joy and purpose and peace and grace of Christ's presence. I want that.

Abiding life practices like weekly corporate worship and daily private worship and scripture reading and centering prayer and solitude and silence and quieting prayer are ways that we draw near to God, giving him fuller access to our interior, and opening our lives to his transforming presence.

Evelyn Underhill wrote an incredible little book that I try to reread each year called *Concerning the Inner Life*. In it she describes the way that time pursuing the face of Jesus, time opening our lives to the presence of Jesus, is the crucial difference maker when it comes to a life in which others encounter God.

Concerning the Inner Life, Evelyn Underhill (pages 9-12)

Ignatius Loyola based the whole of his great *Spiritual Exercises* on one fundamental truth: "Man was created for this end – to praise, reverence, and serve the Lord his God." . . . It means that man's first duty is adoration; and his second duty is awe; and only his third duty is service. And that for those three things and nothing else . . . you and I . . . were created.

Adoration and awe. Unless those two are right, the last of the triad, service, won't be right. Unless the whole of your life is a movement of praise and adoration, unless it is filled with awe, the work which that life produces won't be much good.

And if that be true, it follows that the Christian revelation, the work done by Christ in men's souls, has also as its object the promotion of God's glory, the shining out of His Reality more and more fully through our [lives], the increase of our wide-open, loving, selfless adoration, the deepening of our creaturely awe, the expanding of our consecration in service.

[Only in this way will we] show them in your own person the literal truth of the other great Ignatian saying: "I have come from God!"

Only a spirituality which thus puts the whole emphasis on the Reality of God, perpetually turning to Him, losing itself in Him, refusing to allow even the most

pressing work or practical problems, even sin and failure, to distract from God – only this is a safe foundation for spiritual work. This alone is able to keep alive the awed, adoring sense of the mysteries among which we move.

You will only bring [others] to the love of God in so far as you yourselves have got it; and can only help them to make sense of that world of time and events which so greatly bewilders them, in so far as you are able to bring into it the spirit of Eternity. That is what you are for.

The more our lives are opened to the presence, the more it will be Jesus, and not us, that people encounter when we they interact with us.

Let me tell you about a conversation I had a number of years ago. I share this not as a reflection on me, not at all. This is a reflection on how God works in me and through me and in spite of me.

Years ago, I did the memorial service for someone whose life and death were both really difficult.

A few days before the service, I spoke on the phone with a woman who was part of the family. She lived out of town and I'd never met her before. She called because she needed some place to process the pain of her brother's death

I remember when she called I was just heading out the door. I was in a hurry and feeling a bit overwhelmed with a bunch of things I needed to get done, and I didn't really feel like I had the time to be present to her.

But I asked God to give me what I didn't have, and to help me be present to her and reflect God's love to her.

Very quickly it became obvious that this was an appointment that God had for us both. She was wide open spiritually, and we had an amazing conversation.

The next day I went to the funeral home to meet with the family and asked the director to introduce me to this woman.

When we came around the corner I introduced myself, and I watched her face fall.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It's nothing. It's just . . . I thought you were going to look like Jesus."

We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Remember that the word “Christian” means “little Christ.” They may not be telling you in so many words, but wherever you go, you bring the radiant presence of Christ with you.

John’s gospel says, “In him was life, and that life was the light of men.” When people look at your life, they see his light.

What is God’s invitation to you this morning?
How do you want to respond to that invitation?