

September 15, 2019

## Lesson 3: The Thick Darkness

Scripture: Exodus 19: 16-21; 20:18, 21

### **Context:**

The next focus on God moves to the Exodus account. The book of Exodus narrates the story of the Hebrew slaves to the Promised Land out of Egypt. As the people move into the desert, they receive several manifestations of God.

The scripture lesson today focuses on the Hebrew people being consecrated and receiving the law at Mount Sinai. This is the only instance in the Old Testament where a gathered community is confronted with a direct experience of God, hearing the voice of God without an intermediary.<sup>1</sup> The result is that the people are left in fear and trembling. They have never heard nor seen God, and the set up to the scene is terrifying.

In what reads as more of a fantasy scene from the *Lord of the Rings* series or *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the setting of the encounter is indeed nerve wracking. There is thunder, lightening, the blare of a trumpet, a thick cloud, smoke, and glimpses of a mountain on fire. Mount Sinai is transformed from a quiet ordinary mountain in the wilderness into a blazing inferno. This is where God speaks to the people and it is anything but comforting or inspiring.

Moses mediates at first and the people are warned not to get too close, to search for a “glimpse of God.” As the people see the thunder and lightning alongside the smoking mountain, they are not tempted. In fact, they are afraid and ask Moses to do the talking for the fear of God’s voice. Moses reassures them that the effects are not meant to kill them or make them feel like God will haunt them.

Instead, the effect of God’s presence and interaction with the Hebrew people is to “test them and put the fear of them so they do not sin.” The word “test” focuses more on relationship building and how parties must learn to show loyalty to one another. The word “fear” can actually be tied to reverence as the proper response to God as Lord.<sup>2</sup> The people are meant to want to stand before God in a reverent posture.

It is the same with the phrase: “that you may not want to sin.” It does not mean sinlessness, or that the law will never be broken, but it means that it is possible to live lives that are in fundamental accord with the relationship with God intends.<sup>3</sup> The people are to have a healthy relationship with God in which they obey God, revere God, and understand that this is a personal relationship that needs attention and development.

In this passage the people see God in a mysterious way, particularly with the lightning and thunder. The people are still figuring out God, testing the limits and learning that there are boundaries in their relationship with God. There are things they

<sup>1</sup>Terence E. Fretheim, “Genesis,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 1982), 214.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 216.

understand, and things that are a mystery. God is God and no human can control the God of life.

### **Application**

Such a scene as described today does not bring us warm fuzzies when we think about God. As I read the account, goosebumps developed on my arm. Images of a burning mountain are not comforting or reassuring. The idea of God's voice coming out of nowhere does indeed sound utterly terrifying.

Yet the point about this text is that there is mystery that surrounds God. Humans are not to know every facet of God or even necessarily how God works. God as mystery reminds us that we do not control everything as we would like to sometimes believe.

A more practical point about today is that a relationship with God should inspire us to be reverent when it comes to our walk with God. It is not a casual relationship in which we call the shots or treat the means of grace as something that we are entitled to receive. The mystery of who God is should inspire us to approach this life as a gift, in which we are to honor both God and others along our journey.

I often think that one of the things we have lost in the western world, particularly in America, is a sense of the mystery and wonder of God. We are so driven by efficiency or "what you see is what you get," that we miss out on the power of God's holiness occurring all around us. We even try to squash it when we do things like eliminating silence or making worship performance oriented instead of a service in which all people use the best they possess to say "Thank you God for life!" We like timetables and charts that show numerical growth. We measure the effectiveness of churches by obsessing how many people are in the pews instead of asking how many of those people are becoming maturing disciples who want to grow as followers of Jesus.

In seeing God as mystery, we can appreciate things and simply have awe at them. It's in the moment of Holy Communion being given in which we hear the words: "Do this in remembrance of me," and we imagine all the saints gathering with us at the altar table to feast with us. Suddenly, the saints who have died surround us and when we receive Holy Communion they are there just as much as the person next to us. It is why Holy Communion is to be a high point of worship, not just something to rush through at the end so that everything can fit in the service. The mystery of God is being ushered into the place.

In seeing God as mystery, we can simply stare at the sunrise or sunset and think about how God transcends the days and nights by which we qualify time. Sometimes they are beautiful and majestic, and other times they are barely there. Yet God is at work in the midst of them.

God as mystery reminds us that people who are in the midst of our paths may be placed or sent there to teach us lessons for both bad and good. An unexpected friendship gives us a different perspective to how we see ourselves and we realize that God sends us people who help us grow in different ways. A person who annoys us reveals to us some of our deeper values and maybe some growing edges for us. We are then given the challenge to find a way to love them anyways.

How do you experience God as mystery? Where are those encounters when you feel like your breath is taken away and God is in the midst of it? Do you look for mystery and just soak it in? Or do you rush through life not ever just pausing and giving thanks

for the complexity that is God? How do you understand reverence and your walk with God? How does seeing God as mystery also inspire you to see others differently as if they are part of God's mystery too?

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