

Sunday May 2, 2021
 Lesson 9: God Declares Who God Is
 Scripture: Exodus 33: 12-23; 34: 5-8

Context:

During the season of Easter, we celebrate who God is and how God reveals God's self to humanity. While of course we focus on the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the season of Easter, we also look at the many times God has been revealed to humanity. Today's lesson focuses on God's revelation to Moses as he stands on Mt. Sinai in the book of Exodus.

Of all the relationships God has with patriarchs of the faith in the Old Testament, the one with Moses is uniquely close. In this passage, God and Moses have a dialogue as Moses offers three pleas to God. For each instance, God reacts to him in remarkably open ways, graciously honoring the perspective of the chosen leader concerning the shape of Israel's future.¹ While others might read the dialogue and think Moses is being disrespectful, much of the conversation focuses on how Moses should lead the people and how God will be part of the process.

In the second pleas, Moses is quite direct in his request as he inquires as to if God will go with them wherever they may go. God relieves some of the tension built up in the narrative as assurance is given of God being a constant presence with the people.² This radical response illustrates how even though God is still omnipotent and distance in some ways, in other encounters God is open to moving from decisions made in view of human words and deeds in consonance with the gracious divine purposes.³ Yet even still, Moses needs assurance.

In the chapters preceding and following this one, the Israelites are shown to be stiff-necked people, content to complain and grumble, neglecting their part in the covenant with God. Thus, Moses presses on, asking for God to show God's glorious presence. In effect, this is a request for a sign that God himself will truly dwell among them without judgment.⁴ Yet God redirects the conversation to remind Moses of how God cannot be fully seen by humans and live. Thus, Moses must his other sense to experience and know God as God passes by him. This theophany (revealing of God's self) points to the graciousness of God.

As God comes down in a cloud, God passes in front of Moses with a proclamation. This is the Lord, the one who is merciful, patient, loyal, and faithful to all generations. Moses is struck by the momentous words spoken by God and falls to the

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, "Exodus," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 297.

² Ibid., 298.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 299.

ground and worships the Lord.

Application

This scene of awe transports us to a place most of us could only dream of going. Moses is able to stand in God's presence, using all of his senses to experience and come to know God. When we read of this scene in Exodus, we are given a glimpse of what it means to stand on holy ground.

Yet what is even more powerful in this scene is the response of God to humanity. God makes declaration not only of God's constant presence with humanity, God also describes how God functions. God tells us the characteristics we are to know and experience in God from compassion to faithfulness. Even though humans may not be able to see God, they can experience God's presence in their lives. God will be God and no one or now power can stop the majesty of the Lord.

This text speaks to us today in many ways. First and foremost, we are reminded God will be God. God does not need anyone to speak for God and yet God will speak through whom God chooses whether that is Moses or some other individual. And no human can fully comprehend and receive the manifestation of the Lord. Even Moses only experiences God as he is bowed down and kneels in awe. God will reveal God's self to whom God chooses to be revealed.

Secondly, we see how God has conversations with humanity. Often, people complain they perhaps have never heard God directly speak to them. While we may still hold hope for audibly hearing God's voice (perhaps sounding like Morgan Freeman), I have found God seeks other ways to converse with us. Nature is of course one means as we watch the sights and sounds around us. Scripture sometimes has a crafty way of giving us the words we needed and we didn't realize it until we read them. And then of course, there is the friend who says the words to remind you of the deep love of Christ and they didn't even know they were giving you the balm your soul needed. Who are we to limit how God speaks and methods employed to reach us?

Finally, we see how God tells us the words we need to know about who God is and what God does in our lives and for humanity. In the second part of the passage when God comes down in a cloud, God gives Moses all the words concerning the nature of God. God is compassionate, merciful, patient, loyal, faithful, forgiving, and just. God declares who God will be and the words are powerful.

God's diatribe to Moses reveals to us both the joy and the caution we are given in how we are to respond to God. We are given good news, reminding us of the goodness found in God. Yet we are also reminded of how God functions in ways we may struggle to function. God makes it clear there are certain attributes God demonstrates and if we try to hijack any of those, we rob our children and children's children of an opportunity to come to know God. God will persevere and yet we will have stained ourselves and missed opportunities given to glorify the Lord.

Just as Moses learned, we cannot control or fully comprehend God. We will try and we are often eager to have God fit in our nice, neat boxes. Yet the story of God and Moses at Mt. Sinai reveals to us how God is also in the business of surprising us, finding the ways God will speak to us on God's terms.

Why do you think God chose to enter into dialogue with Moses about leadership and God's presence? How do you have conversations with God? What are the spiritual

disciplines you practice to hear God's voice? Why do you think it is important to speak with reverence for who God is and what God represents?

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