

And Then Everything Was Clear!

Sermon for the Last Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon Text: Exodus 34:29-35



When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountains, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰ 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. ³¹ But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. ³² Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the Lord had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. ³³ And when

Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. ³⁴ Whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, ³⁵ the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Moses was again on his way up the mountain. He always did that when he had a crisis and didn't know how to go on. Before dawn, he was already on his way with his staff and two stone tablets. The 10 Commandments were written on these stone tablets. God's Will was firmly and clearly written on these tablets. They conveyed the meaning of life because the Will of God was rooted in it. What worried him was not what was on those tablets. What worried him was that which was rooted in human hearts because the human heart is like a stone and the Will of God wasn't carved into it. Quite the opposite. Therefore, man was always lost and condemned. Man couldn't find his way to God and therefore couldn't understand his purpose for living. This problem lay heavily on Moses' heart and gave him a crisis of meaning and purpose. If God's Will is good and right but people can never satisfy His Will, everything would have been pointless! Moses reflected on his own long journey. It began in the house of the pharaoh of Egypt. In Pharaoh's house, he enjoyed all the rights and privileges of a prince... and yet, all of that wasn't enough. Despite the wealth and luxury of Egypt, Moses knew that he could never be happy there. He wanted more. And God gave him more. Moses received a special assignment from God. He was given the task of leading God's people out of slavery in Egypt into freedom. When Pharaoh tried one last great act of power to bring the Israelites into slavery again, God drowned the whole Egyptian army in the Red Sea. As the waves of the Red Sea swept over Pharaoh's horses and soldiers, everything became calm and all the people, together with Moses, realized that they were finally free. Moses thought to himself: Mission accomplished! God's people were safe and were free from oppression! Perhaps now he could enjoy his old age in peace. But no, it went on and on and came to a climax here on this mountain. Moses finally realized what everything was about on this mountain. God

had revealed His covenant to Moses. It was the same 10 Commandments he tremblingly held in his hands. When he stood on the mountain, everything was so clear! God's Plan on two stone tablets. There on the mountain, Moses realized that God's plan was a good plan. It was so obvious! So convincing! He was delighted and filled with a deep peace. These Commandments would finally make the path between humans and God clear. Here at last! If people would live according to this covenant, there would be peace! Peace between God and peace between people. No more bloodshed or wickedness or hate or lies or deception... only peace and freedom! And yet, everything turned out very differently.

As Moses came down the mountain, he was struck – the people had already broken the first and most important Command in the worst possible way. They had made a golden calf for themselves and abandoned the Creator of all things. The peoples' deeds struck at the heart of the Commandments, struck God Himself and hurt Him deep in His heart! That day Moses knew: Peace was not possible, not for Israel nor for the entire world. As good as God's plan was, people were not good. If something is rotten from within, no matter how much a person changes the external conditions, the inside would still fester from within and produce evil. The people were rotten from within! Moses then realized that a bad tree can only produce bad fruit. And so he stood there, between God and the people. In his hand, he held God's good plan and before him, he saw this plan being broken. Peace was not possible. So close and yet so far. In his hand, Moses held peace for all people, and he saw something before him very clearly: murder and mayhem would fester in peoples' hearts until the end of time. Moses could no longer stand this contrast. Filled with sadness and anger, he smashed the stone tablets with the sacred writing. When he saw these tablets broken to pieces in front of him, the last spark of hope that things could be good again shattered inside his heart. Personally, for him, it meant that he had failed in his mission. And God's plan had also failed because of the hardness of human hearts.

And yet Moses couldn't forget. He couldn't forget what was written on the stone tablets! Above all, he couldn't forget about the loving Will of the Almighty that stood behind these words. The 10 Commandments burned in his heart. They burned in his heart precisely because he knew that the plan they contained was good and right! And so, he tried it once again. With tears in his eyes and in a loud voice, he cried to God. Moses would himself prefer to die but asked God to have mercy on His people once more. And God heard him! He would try again and that's why God has Moses come up on the Holy Mountain again. And now it was time: Moses again stood before the Holy Mountain. He again climbed up the narrow path to the peak of the mountain. Again, he received these Holy Words out of the hand of God. With steady steps, Moses went up the path and got to the top faster than anyone could have guessed. From below, the top of the mountain looked like the tip of a pin. Upon arriving at the top, you felt as if you were on top of a table and truly had the feeling of standing between heaven and earth. Moses stood here and once again the white clouds came over him and the Holy Words were again carved onto the stone tablets that Moses himself had carried up. But it wasn't like the previous time. Just as he couldn't forget the Holy Words of God when the stone tablets were shattered, so now he couldn't forget the disloyalty of God's people who stood at the bottom of the mountain. And then he was struck...again! They would do it again...again and again and again. They would even now abandon and hurt God. They haven't learned anything yet! They would also never learn! The people would never keep these sacred Commandments of God. And peace would never come. Tremblingly he examines the Holy Words. With horror, he thought about the outcry that would come from the base of the mountain. Speechlessly, he could only guess how much bloodshed and hate would overflow from down below! And then God's Holy Commandments...? How could a person ever bring these things together? He didn't exactly know anymore why he came up with these words as they spilled from his mouth, but in his heart

burned the innermost wish that God would not just remain on the mountain. He should come with him down the mountain! Moses didn't want to be alone anymore. He didn't want to see God just on top of the mountain. He didn't want to be alone among the people and bear this wickedness alone! God should come with, and He should not only come with Moses but be with all the people! He ought to live with them and also forgive them in the future when they would sin again. Because so much was made clear to him now. They would do it all again! His desire to see God became even more obvious and then God did just that – God revealed Himself! And God also promised He would go with Moses. God would live among His people. As Moses arrived at the bottom of the mountain, there was a visible sign that God was now with Moses, but he was not aware of it at first. However, his face shone so brightly that the people ran away in fear, and he had to cover his face.

This story about a shining face seems a bit crazy to us but it's not that crazy. Moses and his shining face are repeatedly referred to in the New Testament. The shining face pointed to the glory of God and everyone knew that God was present. Jesus was also impressively filled with the shining glory of God – it was therefore clear for Peter, James, and John that the presence of God was with and in Jesus. When His disciples asked Him: "Show us the Father!" Jesus answered: "Look at me! Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father!" And in the New Testament, it says that we Christians are a letter from Christ to the world. In other words, God shines in us and that's how people will be able to see something of God in us. People have a strong desire to see God. They have that feeling even if they don't want to admit it. A deep longing burns. There is a burning desire to understand the meaning of life. There is a burning desire to be loved. Unfortunately, most people think that they can be bright lights themselves. That's why they persistently search for recognition – they want lots of likes on Facebook and YouTube and Twitter! And God shows us a completely different path. No matter how hard we try, we can't make light shine out of us. And that's also why we never understand the meaning of our lives until the moment when God's light comes to us. When Jesus came to the world, He did exactly that. He tore down the barriers between people and God and made His home among us. And then everything became clear – all the secrets of life, all the things that lay heavily in people's hearts, the unfulfilled wishes and dreams, the broken paths of life. Like Moses on the top of the mountain, we are filled with the presence of God and can radiate God's light! Amen.