

Seeing the Glory of God

Sermon for the 2nd Sunday after Epiphany

Sermon Text: Exodus 33:17-23



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.

When God first spoke to Moses, Moses thought: “nothing good will come of this!” Moses was actually scared. He was scared of the great task that God had set before him and used his poor public speaking skills as an excuse. But God still called him. God used him despite all his weaknesses. Then when Moses finally came to the Sinai wilderness with the people of Israel, the little Moses with the weak voice had become a faithful man of God! And you could even see that in his face. Each time Moses spoke with God, his face was brightly shining afterwards. Now that’s what I call enthusiasm for God! We also wish for such God experiences like what Moses had. We want to feel God’s nearness. We want to see Him in a dream. Or perhaps even speak with Him directly. That would warm our hearts so much if God spoke directly into our hearts today, if God would say: “I understand you! I know what bothers you, what hurts you, and I am right there with you.” Moses had experienced all this and yet he wanted more. It wasn’t enough that he had found favor in God’s sight, nor that God knew him by name. No, he wanted to break the last barrier between God and man. He wanted to see God face to face... “Show me all Your glory, God!” That is very exciting, especially if we could understand a little better the word “God’s glory” that Moses so urgently asks for here. In Hebrew, the word ‘glory’ can be translated as magnitude or gravity. One could also say that the word ‘glory’ can also mean trustworthy. Now one thing becomes clear to me. Moses doesn’t ask the question about God’s glory out of pure philosophical or theological interest – he asks because of a brand-new crisis. He had just seen how the people of Israel worshipped the golden calf and then he had to listen to how God wanted to destroy the people of Israel. Moses himself had to ask God for mercy for the people of Israel. Now, after 40 days and 40 nights, he has to return to these people. Questions upon questions must have flooded his mind: how should I challenge this entire people all by myself? How can I point to the one true God, who can’t be seen, against the golden calf, which they had seen and worshipped with such enthusiasm? All this was certainly a power struggle between different parties among the Israelites. Moses felt powerless and weak against all these powers and that’s why he wanted even more of God’s power! “Show me Your magnitude, O God! Show me Your trustworthiness! Show me that I don’t need to go on by myself!” That is Moses’ question. All who are interested in God should now listen closely because there are many who ask about God. Some out of curiosity. But others because they have had bad experiences and now reject God, maybe because He has done nothing against evil. Dear congregation, that moves me today and I wonder, along with Moses, if we can lay something as a counterpoint against all these questions? The good thing is that God wants to reveal Himself to Moses. But not as Moses had imagined. Moses would not have survived that! Even Moses was burdened with sin and couldn’t get to God without safeguards. So in a safety check, God explains to Moses what to do. A cleft in the rock is declared as Moses’ bunker. Moses could hide himself there while God passed by. God’s protective hand would safeguard Moses from the worst of it. Moses would experience God’s glory, but he would only be able to do so from behind a protective shield.

Through this old story, God also wants to show us today something fundamental. We all want to see God. We even desire it. But that can't happen according to our conditions. God and humans are opposites. There is a human desire to break down this border between us and God. Just as Adam and Eve wanted to be like God, we want to break the boundary between heaven and earth. We want to make God our own. We want to change Him to fit our own terms. We don't want to take risks on God, but we want to adapt Him to fit our needs. God should adapt to our questions, He should adapt to our morals, He should adapt to fit our ideas. He should be how we think He should be... because of this, we made an experience of God "lite"... in other words, an easily-digestible God that we always take out of the drawer when it suits us, mostly just to validate ourselves, a kind of seal that we place upon our plans. Out of our little faith, we want to make God solid, we want to make Him tangible. In the story of Moses on the mountain, it becomes clear that this doesn't work. God can't be taken over by us and He also isn't predictable.... the temptation to predict God and to make Him tangible is great and has been repeated throughout history. In the history of the Christian Church, there were always attempts to merge Christianity with a political power so that the Church could be made bigger. Martin Luther explained all these attempts as theology of Glory and placed this theology against the theology of the Cross. Luther referred to Paul and the Church father, Augustine to make it clear that the attempt to make God's glory tangible here on earth would ultimately lead to legalism and separation from God. The theology of glory defiles God and robs Him of His true glory, the theology of glory "puffs up, blinds, and hardens hearts," said Martin Luther in the Heidelberg Disputation (1518).

On Mount Sinai, Moses seems to have succumbed to the temptation to pin God down in the here and now. What is impressive is that God nevertheless sees to it that Moses can see as much of Himself as is possible. Not as Moses wanted it but in a way that was good for him! We can expect exactly that from God too. God answers prayer in ways that are good for us. Most often, it is only afterwards, in hindsight, that we can see that it was good for us! This is how the holy and sanctifying God deals with us. Moses received a cleft in the rock from which he could see and experience God. We have received an even bigger space. The space is the place under the cross of Jesus. This is not a nice place for us. This place is the opposite of the theology of glory. It is the theology of the cross. It is the place where we at first can't recognize God at all. Under the cross, we recognize the deepest abandonment by God. There is only powerlessness and shame to see. But that's exactly how God wanted it. God wants to be recognized in the suffering of the cross and not in glory. Luther expressed this in the 20th thesis of the Heidelberg Disputation: "Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in His glory and majesty, unless he recognizes Him in the humility and shame of the cross." This *recognition* that God reveals to us in the cross is not logical. One could even say that the cross contradicts our healthy human reason. That's why the cross is and remains a stumbling block. But it is precisely on the cross that it becomes clear that people cannot approach God unconditionally and without limits. The people who think that they can simply approach God despite their sin, are mistaken. God Himself must show us where we can stand. Moses receives exact instructions: you may stand there and nowhere else. God shows us all of this in the New Testament but even more clearly. We too must not simply approach God unprotected. God shows us the exact spot. That place is in Christ. We can't get to God on our own. But in Christ, God reveals Himself to us.

The Cross shows us two things at the same time. First, the profound condemnation that is upon us because of sin. Second, it shows us that God reveals Himself to us here. He gave us a place here where we can experience Him, where we can be near to Him, and where we can recognize His glory. Jesus tells His disciples: "Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father!" (John 14:9) That is truly glorious and lifechanging! John wrote earlier: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory!" (John 1:14)

When Moses spoke with God for the first time, he couldn't predict what would happen. But he could always look back and reflect on where God had worked wonders. Perhaps Moses even said: "How great that God didn't answer all my prayers." We can also reflect on our lives like Moses. We can't say what will happen to us, to our church, or what will happen in general. But we can reflect precisely on what God has already done for us. He showed us Jesus. "You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased!" (Mark 1:11) This is more than what Moses heard. This Jesus has shown God's nearness more than ever before. In Jesus, He not only gave us His name, but His whole person. He took on flesh and blood and became human! This means that I can now lay my future and my life completely in His hands. Amen.