

FACE TO FACE WITH GOD

Exodus 24:8-18

After weeks of trying to keep up with the lectures, you have finally made an appointment to see the professor. Or you are about to do an interview with a company headhunter. Or after days of thinking about that girl or boy you finally get the nerve to introduce yourself to that person. After years of being taken for granted at work, you finally get the nerve to approach the boss and ask for a raise. In each case you are about to talk to someone you have noticed before, but only from a distance. So it can be frightening to meet them face-to face.

Can you imagine meeting God face-to-face? What would it be like? Would He be a kindly, old man dressed in white with a long beard in a white robe with a halo over his head? Would he look like George Burns in “O God,” or Morgan Freeman in “Bruce Almighty?” Or the figure in “Monty Python and the Holy Grail”?

Moses and the elders of Israel got to see God face-to face. “Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel.” Back in chapter 19 of Exodus we hear this about where they were at Mt. Sinai:

There was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it with fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder.

Stand by a jet engine as it revs up. Look straight down a 2,000 foot cliff. Feel the heat of a blast furnace. Those are things that can make us hesitate and freeze. We realize how small and weak we are compared to the power of a jet engine, the height of a cliff or the heat of a furnace. That is what happens when people are in the presence of God. Isaiah’s reaction to being in the presence of God was to say, “Woe is me for I am lost. For I am a man of unclean lips. My eyes have seen the LORD of hosts.” The shepherds froze in fear when God sent the angels to them on Christmas night. Paul and his soldiers were thrown to the ground when they encountered God on the way to Damascus. Face-to-face to God is terrifying.

In the movie “Raiders of the Lost Ark” the hero of the story is looking for the long lost Ark of the Covenant. When the ark is opened at the end of the movie, all who are looking at it cannot bear it and are grotesquely destroyed. The movie was of course a Hollywood image, but it does give us an impression of what it is like to stand face-to-face in the presence of God. Why is it that way?

Because God is holy. But what is holy? We may say “Holy cow!” or “Holy mackerel!” but what does that mean? Normally we think of “holy” as being “perfect.” A “holy” person never does anything wrong. That person never drinks, smokes, wastes his time, or has fun.

Singer Billy Joel said in his song, “Only the Good Die Young,” “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than die with the saints.” We use the expression “holy rollers” to describe people who think they are holy. Isn’t “to err” human? If so, then instead of trying to be holy, why not just accept ourselves the way we are?

Think about this in terms of TV. In the 1990’s TV heroes were on “NYPD Blues” or “Buffy the Vampire Slayer.” Comedy heroes were absent minded teenagers to families experiencing the hilarious side of suburban life. Then with the “Sopranos” came a new set of “heroes.” In shows like “Breaking Bad,” “Mad Man,” and “Games of Thrones” the “heroes” are bad guys. Why? Because they are more interesting. And we end up thinking, “They are not all that bad.”

We need to understand what “holy” means. It means a lot more than “perfect.” It means “other,” “set apart.” God is holy because He is set apart, beyond us. To approach God would be like taking a rocket ship to the sun. It would be brilliant and spectacular, but we would never survive it. One glimpse of God would destroy us. He is too powerful, too bright, too much for us. In the presence of God evil and bad is a big deal. We may laugh at it now, but we each will have to face that holy God.

Only then do we see how big a deal it is that the holy, devastatingly unapproachable God is also our Savior Christ Jesus. If we try to pick up a tiny bug with our big hands, we might crush it. But with a delicate instrument we can. Jesus is God become human, become totally approachable for us. Though we are unclean with sin, Jesus entered our world of sin. He didn’t daintily avoid sinful people like we carefully step around puddles of melted snow. He rolled up His sleeves and touched the sick, the dying, the confused, and the lonely. He got His hands, His arms, all of Himself filthy dirty in our unholy world.

Later in our worship service we will partake of Holy Communion. Moses and the elders got to see God and share a meal. In the ancient world if you ate a meal with someone, you were close to that person. That is why many people spoke against Jesus when He ate with tax collectors and other “sinful” people. God invites us, not just once, but again and again to share His supper in Holy Communion. It is not something casual or just a nice thing to do. We unholy, sinful people get to dine and be intimate with the Holy God.

Moses, Aaron and those 72 other men got to see God, but only for a while. Likewise Peter, James, and John got to see Jesus transfigured on the mountain with Moses and Elijah, but only for a while. But in Jesus we get to see the holy God each and every day. Jesus tells us that “where two or more are gathered in My name, I am with them.” Anytime we are sharing with other Christians, Jesus is there. And Jesus said, “What you do to one of the least of these, you do to Me.” Anytime we see someone who needs our love, we see Jesus.

On the internet there is a segment showing pop singer Billy Joel doing a lecture to students at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee. During the question and answer time a group of students gets the singer’s attention and points to one student. The student asks if he could play

on the piano Joel's song "New York State of Mind" while Joel sings it. There is a brief pause until Joel says, "Okay." Imagine the thrill it must have been for that student.

But that is what God does for us in Jesus. The God who is holy, way beyond us "on stage," "off limits," to us like the people of Israel could not approach God on Mt. Sinai, says to us "okay." He accepts us on to His stage to "make music" with Him. He doesn't need us. He can do it all better than we ever can, but in His love for us He invites us to do it with Him.

Think of the child who gets to show his friends who his father is. Even though dad is a lot bigger and as Bill Cosby's dad used to always say, "I brought you into this world, and I can take you out," he knows that dad loves him. How much more because of Jesus we know the mighty, holy God loves us—and we want to show our friends who He is! For through us they can see Jesus. They can be face-to-face with our almighty, but all-loving God!