

GOD FRONT AND CENTER

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

1968 was a year marked by the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr, the Tet Offensive during the War in Vietnam, the bringing down of the “Czech Spring” democratic movement by the tanks of the Soviet Union, and protests all around the world. Yet Time magazine declared that the most important event took place on Christmas Day. For the first time in human history people left the orbit of earth. Astronauts, Frank Borman, James Lovell, and William Anders became the first humans to experience “earthrise.” The televised event was watched by an estimated 1/4th of the world’s population. As we saw the shape of earth rising up from the surface of the moon, the astronauts read Genesis 1. “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”

At that moment God was front and center. Atheists protested the use of religion by government workers, but the Supreme Court turned down the protest because it took place outside the jurisdiction of the United States. In fact astronomer Neil de Grasse Tyson, who is an avowed agnostic said, “You experience the force of a rockets many times the pull of gravity, spend days in space, leave the orbit of earth, and see the earth coming up the moon’s horizon—how can anyone blast them saying, “In the beginning God created the heaven and earth”?”

God was front and center even more for the people of Israel as they stood around Mt. Sinai. But they experienced not just an amazing sight, by the noise of thunder and the shaking of the earth shaking like it would around an erupting volcano. And they weren’t in the comfort of their homes watching TV. It wasn’t just amazing; it was frightening! That is why they pleaded with Moses, “Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die.”

But is God front and center for us today? The people of Israel lived at a time when so many things were explained as being the direct result of God or the gods. It is how they explained rain and drought, ice storms and fire, disease and parasites. But we have been so trained to look for explanations from human intelligence. Across the street is not “Iowa State University,” but “Iowa State University of Science and Technology.” Instead of just praying for healing, we can take a drug. Instead of repenting as a people, we look to our advances to solve our social problems. The result is that God is not front and center. He is pushed off to the side. And who is in the center? So often it is “me.”

The generations born before World War 2 grew up in environments where gathering with a group was a whole lot better than what you could do at home. Going to church and seeing people you knew didn’t have any big competition at home. But then came TV, and people could sleep in and let their kids be entertained by Sunday morning cartoons. Now why bother with any kind of physical interaction with other people of faith when there is so much to keep us preoccupied right in front of our faces? When families had a single radio or TV, at least you had to learn to do it with others. How could you really play baseball or jump rope without other people? Now each individual has his/her own means to keep himself or herself entertained. No wonder God ends up so often to the side. It isn’t just Him who is ignored, but His people the Church.

The people of Israel didn't have that luxury. All they seemed to have is God. They were out in the middle of nowhere with God providing their daily food by manna and quail and water from a rock. They lived in a tent city following a God who led them by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Therefore they really feared God. God was important to them. He had their attention.

By we don't seem to need that. There are so many other things to fill our lives.

Albert Einstein came up with brilliant ideas that radically changed our view of the universe. But he died not being able to reconcile the apparent disconnect between what would make sense of the universe and how it really acts. Michael Jackson was the king of pop, but died a confused, drug ridden death. Thomas Jefferson still influences our ideas of democracy, but he never got free from a life of debt. The typical life of a rock star involves drug and alcohol addiction. Maybe we can avoid all the ways we can be confronted by "Mt. Sinai" events that show us just how really weak and helpless we are. But in judgment we are placed front and center before God.

That will be terrifying. It will also be too late. But in His love God puts Himself front and center in a special way. The people of Israel asked for another way for God to come. "For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb (Sinai) on the day of the assembly when you said, 'Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die.'" God did not respond to this by chiding them for being cowards. Instead He said through Moses, "What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put My words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him." God was promising the coming of His Son, Christ Jesus, who would not only speak the Word of God as His prophet, but who literally is the Word of God.

We see in our Gospel lesson how the demon responded to Jesus. He didn't call Jesus "the Holy One of God" to mock Him, but because the demon realize he was in the presence of the almighty God. Placed in front and center with God, all evil will be destroyed.

But that almighty God is Jesus Christ, who became one of us. God brought Himself front and center into our lives, not to overwhelm us, but to take our evil on Himself and die with it on the cross. In Jesus we have a God that we can approach and embrace, a God who we can run to, not away from.

Jesus placed Himself front and center when He came to earth and became a human. Now He does that through His people, the Church. That is why it is so important for us to gather together with other Christian people as we are right now. And isn't just for Sunday mornings. It is when we gather for Bible Study and prayer with other Christians, when we pray with our families for meals and visit with them about what is going on in their life, when we text our concerns to a friend, and as we stop to visit with someone in the store. Through people Jesus puts Himself front and center.