

Transfiguration Sunday
February 3, 2008

Exodus 24:12

12 The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and commands I have written for their instruction."

Exodus 24:15-18

15 When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, 16 and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud. 17 To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. 18 Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

Do you like mountain climbing? I enjoy it, although by that I mean hiking up a mountain, not rock climbing sheer cliffs. Also because of my fear of heights, I don't like narrow paths with a danger of falling. But the idea of making it to the top and the panoramic views I find exciting.

There are two mountains in the readings today. One is Mt. Sinai, at a height of about 8,000 feet above sea level, and an unnamed mountain where the transfiguration of Jesus took place. Our interest is in more than climbing those peaks. We look at what happened there and the impact it has on us. Peering up at Mt. Sinai in this account of many years ago we see

THE LORD REVEALS HIS GLORY

He does so

I. In giving the law

II. In showing grace

We come to this location after the Israelites had left Egypt. You will recall how it took some persuading for Pharaoh to grant permission to do so. God sent ten plagues on the land. Then after the Israelites left, the Pharaoh chased after them with his army. The miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, with the water walling up on both sides to allow the Israelites to cross and then crashing down to destroy the Egyptian forces, brought safety for God's people. They then journeyed to Mt. Sinai in the lower part of the Sinai Peninsula. There they stopped to receive the law covenant from God. There were the Ten Commandments and others as God governed His people. Moral laws dealt with issues of right and wrong for all time, civil laws regulated their life in society and ceremonial laws established their worship patterns for festivals to observe and sacrifices to offer.

Just before the verses we consider, Moses, his brother Aaron, Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of the nation had gone part way up the mountain and shared a fellowship meal in God's presence as the Lord affirmed His covenant or agreement with them. God summoned Moses to come farther up the mountain and indicated He would provide a copy of the law on stone tablets. There He used the word "teachings" for the law, which was fitting, for it instructed them how to live.

"When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai." That was not the first appearance of this phenomenon that involved smoke or fire or both. Remember when God called Moses at the burning bush? That was a form of the glory of the Lord. During the travels of the Israelites He used a pillar to guide and protect them. In the daytime it was a pillar of cloud that led the way and at night it was a pillar of fire to provide light. The pillar lifted when it was time to move forward. At the Red Sea the cloud showed toward the Egyptian army to block them, while the light was on the Israelite side. Later on the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle, their portable place of worship, to indicate God's presence with them. When Moses would spend time with God, his face shone with the reflected glory of being in God's presence. In the New Testament, when the angels announced to the shepherds the birth of Jesus, "the glory of the Lord shone around them."

The Lord revealed His presence in this special way when He was ready to perform extraordinary acts, especially ones relating to His plan of salvation for the world. That's why the name "LORD" is used in all capital letters when the appearance is identified, as that's the name that accompanied His gospel promises and assured faithfulness to them.

The sight communicated God's holiness, majesty and power. While described as a cloud for those on the mountain, at the bottom it was different. "To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain." Fire provides comfort with its warmth when it is chilly and brings delight as it dances in a campfire. It can help us by cooking food. Fire also destroys and burns up items. It has power. We fear and want to escape the fires of hell. The scene impressed upon God's people that He was serious about His law. He

wants it obeyed. He hates disobedience and punishes it. Although it appeared as a consuming fire, the mountain was not destroyed, nor were Moses and the elders.

God wants obedience because there is wisdom in His law. The law is not all bad news. In following it there is life. Our days go better when we walk in His paths.

The glory of the Lord caused people to take notice. It got their attention. Then wouldn't you think they would follow God's commands? They didn't, and we don't do any better. We frequently disobey our Lord. We sin again and again. It starts in our hearts, which are not fully one with God, as our sinful nature remains with us. We show it as we live for ourselves and our own ways. That separation from God finds expression in our behavior. Selfish thinking leads us to disregard the needs, concerns and feelings of others. What I want is all that matters. We mistreat those around us in our words and actions. We make cruel and thoughtless statements. We cheat and steal. Although all we have comes from God, we fail to honor Him with the use of His gifts. He allows us to manage those resources and what do we do? We place ourselves at the top of the list, looking for our needs, our pleasures, our wants and some extras as well. Only after all that has been met do we think about God or somebody else. We deserve the consuming fire.

II.

God could be that, but He has revealed something else in the glory of the Lord. His glory is evident in showing grace. Perhaps that part is overlooked when we first read through this account. He called Moses up the mountain. After he waited six days, Moses entered the cloud and was present with God. That was not supposed to be. A sinful man was with the holy God. Those opposites don't fit together. We can't bear the sight of God in His holiness. You cannot see God and live. Yet Moses did.

That He did so was an act of grace. It was an undeserved favor. Grace is God's mode of operating. He especially does so regarding our sins. He forgives them through Jesus.

There was grace and glory in the event we mark today. Late in His ministry, before heading to Jerusalem for the final time, the Savior took three disciples, Peter, James, and John, up a mountain in the Holy Land and was transfigured before them. That meant His form changed. His divine glory shone through His human nature. Even His clothes were affected as they became bright and shining, more than any earthly object can appear. Moses and Elijah joined the group on the mountain. A cloud was present, too. Then they heard the voice of the Father stating His approval of the Son and His work.

The topic of their conversation revealed God's grace. We didn't hear the specifics from Matthew in today's Gospel reading, but Luke supplies the information that they spoke about Jesus' upcoming departure in Jerusalem. That meant His death. There Jesus would offer Himself as the payment for the sins of the world. He would remove the entire load as He paid the price in full, enduring the agonies of hell. It happened on the cross. He was the solution to the sins that the law identified in all of us. Moses, the lawgiver, was there showing his agreement with the plans the Savior had. Jesus was the greater prophet that Moses had foretold.

The time Moses spent on the mountain lasted forty days. Apparently he did not eat during that span, at least we're not told that he did. But God sustained him through the time. Forty is a noteworthy number in the Bible. In the flood the original period of rain lasted forty days and nights. A meal from the Lord's angel kept Elijah going for forty days when he was fleeing the murderous threats of Ahab and Jezebel. In fact, he came to this same mountain. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness at the outset of His public ministry after His baptism, when He met and overcame Satan's temptations. We'll hear that account next Sunday.

All of those events were times of testing and strengthening. We are about to start a period of forty days, the season of Lent (not counting the Sundays). May we be strengthened in faith by the Lord as we are nourished with His Word!

We pray that God will fill us with His grace, whether we are in the exhilaration of a mountaintop experience or in the valley of trouble and despair. God has bestowed His grace in Jesus. He loves you, came to this world and served for you. He endured humiliation and pain. He died for your sins. You had no claim on Him. You had not earned His favor. But He did it. He has redeemed you. You are forgiven. God's grace is marvelous! And it's always there for you.

The Lord also impresses us with His glory so we respect and honor Him. Believe in the Savior. Have confidence for daily life and for eternity. Follow Jesus. Serve and obey Him. Reflect more glory on your Lord as you worship and praise Him and as you dedicate yourself to glorify Him in your behavior. Show that He is number one in your life. That response exists not because you are afraid of the consuming fire, but because of His grace. You love Him who first loved you. You want to thank Him for His goodness. One day you also will enter His glory, not for forty days, but forever.