

Meditation #1: Exodus 33:18-23; 34:5-7

For the first meditation, the Scripture reading is contained in the meditation.

What is one place you want to visit sometime in your life? Or, if you've gotten there, what was that moment like?

Asked this question, one woman in her senior years, when asked about the one place she wishes she could get to, said, "Ever since I was in school I always wanted to visit the Holy Land. I wanted to walk in Jesus' footsteps and imagine him teaching and doing his miracles where it really happened!" I have to say that I felt put in my place when she said that. What a credit to her—that one of her great desires of life is to know her Lord and Savior better!

That woman with her noble and godly desire is in good company. Listen to words of someone else whose highest desire was to know God better—to see God, if he could. Hear the first verse of our Old Testament reading:

^{33:18}Then Moses said [to the LORD], "Now show me your glory."

You might dismiss Moses' request as the sort of thing that super religious people who don't live in the real world might make. Fine for Moses, but he isn't a *real* person. Or maybe you think of Moses' request as a case of childish curiosity. Like, maybe he made a bet with his brother Aaron about what God looks like and here was his chance to prove it. I mean, a lot of our questions about God or heaven or angels are like that: trivialities.

Moses' request was neither idle speculation nor curiosity. Moses was at his wits' end. The Israelites had just gone through the whole golden calf thing. While Moses had been up on Mount Sinai receiving the Law from the hand of God, the Israelites had fashioned and bowed down to and engaged in a drunken party for an idol that looked like a cow. The LORD had been so enraged that he sent a plague among the Israelites and he refused to lead the Israelites any longer. Instead he told Moses, "You take them!" Moses was at the end of his rope. Neither curiosity nor speculation, but a need for the God led Moses to ask, "***Now show me your glory.***"

¹⁹And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. ²⁰But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."

²¹Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. ²²When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. ²³Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."

So, if the LORD is going to show Moses who he is, we expect God to take on some sort of form and meet with Moses. But God says that's not possible. Instead...

^{34:5}Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. ⁶And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

What would God look like in a picture? It doesn't matter. What matters is who he is. It's

kind of like people. Far more important than what they might look like is what is in their heart. This is God: He is compassionate, gracious, patient, loving, faithful, forgiving. That's God. Moses didn't see God in a physical form but he learned something better. He learned that God is a God who above all desires to be reconciled with humanity as a whole, and with every individual. And he has made a way for that to happen.

One last thought on this reading: Why is this the Old Testament reading for Christmas Day? I mean, I would have expected a prophecy of the virgin birth, or of humble Bethlehem. Why Moses on a mountainside? I'll give you a clue: It has to do with Moses' request "*Show me your glory,*" the fact that Moses only got to see the quote-unquote "backside" of God. We get to see something else on Christmas. More on that in a moment.

For now, let us contemplate what the experience it would be to see God, even in his compassion and patience, with the words of hymn 361, verses one and three.

Meditation #2 – Romans 8:31-32

Romans 8:31 What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Earnest money. You know what that is? Let's say you are selling your used car. You are dealing with people in person. Someone expresses interest but says he'll have to come back later, but you're not sure if he is just stringing you along. You might say to him, "If you put \$50 down, I'll hold it for you while you make up your mind and put that toward the payment if you decide to buy it." That's earnest money.

Over the last year I sold two cars online. All manner of people expressed interest—virtual online interest, which, it turns out is usually worthless. I would arrange a viewing, but people wouldn't show-up. Some texted question after question, and eventually it became apparent they had nothing better to do with their lives than ask questions. Meanwhile, I was telling other potentially legitimate buyers, "Just wait, I promised this other guy a look." I was wishing I could demand *just five bucks*; money to prove they were in earnest. Eventually I sold both cars, but for a while I was thinking about taking the cars to the junk yard and take scrap money, just to be done with all the insincere people.

If you ever get to that point with God, if you are ever at the point of wondering if he actually cares for you, if he is going to ever do anything for you, or if maybe he is just stringing you along, our reading from Romans would remind you of something. God has put the earnest money on the table—and then some. It's one aspect of Christmas that we can take great comfort in.

Christmas is first of all about Christ's great work of salvation. But it affects more than issues of sin and forgiveness. Christmas is wonderful because it gives us confidence in every moment and aspect of life.

Remember Moses from the last reading? Remember him at Mt. Sinai, wondering what he was ever going to do with the Israelites. He was having a crisis of confidence at that point. That's what it means to be human. It happens in the moment, when someone you were counting on doesn't just let you down, but turns out to be a cheat. We find ourselves there at

the holiday with an empty seat at the table for the first time ever. We find ourselves in crisis of confidence with the big things in life: You work, you plan, you pray, you save and the labor of a lifetime disappoints with something you had hoped to avoid at all costs. Life gives you the roller coaster treatment, the great ups and the terrible downs.

At those moments, let verse 32 ring in your ears: ***“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”*** Know that God has not become your enemy. He has not made an offer that he has no intention of keeping. Think about it. If that were God’s intention, then why was Christ born into this sin-wracked world, to suffer, to bleed, to die. No! And he didn’t do it on the cheap either. The Savior didn’t show up on Good Friday for a 9:00am appointment at the cross. He didn’t take a quick six hour flyby tour of humanity’s situation. The Christ was born a child, to live an entire life with us, for us.

Christmas is an assurance to God’s people in every moment of life, both the triumphs and the sorrows, that if God gave us Christmas, he will graciously give us all things.

We sing “Joy to the World.”

Meditation #3 – John 1:1-18

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning.

³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

⁶There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.

¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ ”

¹⁶From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.

¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.

So, like Moses, do you want to see the glory of God? Would you like walk your path through the dark alleys of life with caution yet confidence? Might you, like Moses, want to

actually speak to God?

These are the things the Holy Spirit would impart in the first words of John's Gospel. Of course, you are more familiar with the Christmas story in the gospel of Matthew. "*Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife... You are to name [the baby] Jesus...*" When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him." You are even more familiar with Luke. "*He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.*" These are straightforward narratives speaking in language plain enough for a child, even a very little child, to understand. That's Christmas Eve. But on Christmas morning, you wake up to the Gospel of John.

That's the difference between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. They are not mutually exclusive, but they are different. Christmas Eve centers on the *events* of Christ's birth. Christmas Day centers on the *meaning* of Christ's birth. In a way, that is the weakness of our Christmas Eve services. While we speak the Word of God—and I do trust the Holy Spirit to speak through the Word—the Christmas stories of Matthew and Luke don't "draw out" the meaning. The problem with that is that we humans have this marvelous knack for finding what we want to find, and ignoring what we don't want to see. "Oh, look at that distressed couple with nary a person to help them. I mean, really, a birth in a stable? We should help people more often." "Isn't it beautiful how Jesus was *not* born among the rich and powerful? Down with the rich and powerful!" Or simply, "I love it when angels sing!" And finally, "Why clutter this beautiful story with claptrap about sin?"

John's Gospel would take us by the hand and earnestly look us in the eyes. "You don't get it! You don't you realize what it means, do you! It is so much more than a nice story! It's way more than your sinful nature wants to allow it to mean. It's not about a distressed couple, shepherds or even angels. It's about the baby, and not because he was a cute baby or a poor baby or a happy baby. That baby was way way more. He existed before he was a baby. He existed before he was conceived. He existed before his parents existed. He existed before the mountains stood or the sun shone. ***'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'*** And then ***'the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.'*** And he had to do it because we are so sinful and hopelessly helpless that we could do nothing without him."

As that God/child grew, he became the embodiment of what Moses asked for on that mountainside when he said to the LORD, "*Show me your glory.*" John connects the dots of Exodus and Christmas for us, ***"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only."*** Stand with Moses and see God's glory! Look at Jesus! Just like the LORD said on Mt. Sinai: compassion, grace, slowness to anger, love, faithfulness, forgiveness. Do you want to hear God speak, not through a prophet, not in a dream, but speak face to face, human to human? Listen to Jesus.

You see, Christmas is not a story. It's not inspirational. Christmas is God chiseling a message into stone what he wants you to know, to believe, and to live like you believe it. ***"To those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."*** That's right, just believe, trust. Believe what? If you need to ask, just sit there and listen during the coming Sundays from now till April 17th. Just sit there and listen to Christ's birth, his baptism, his ministry, death and resurrection. Watch the story of your salvation unfold, and just accept it for what it is: it's what makes God glorious, and us confident. Amen.