



THE PRESENCE OF GOD – Exodus 33:1-17; John 14:16-21

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It was Christmas Day, 1939. Almost four months earlier, the United Kingdom had declared war on Nazi Germany. There was much uncertainty as to how the war would progress and many who had lived through the first world war were understandably anxious. Wanting to encourage people, as he finished his Christmas message, King George VI quoted a poem written by Minnie Louise Haskins:

'I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year,
"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."
And he replied,
"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.'"

As we enter this new year, we may not be facing a world war, but if the past few years have taught us anything, it is that there will be things waiting for us around the corner which will upend our lives. This time four years ago, we would never have imagined that a virus could keep us confined to our houses for months. We could not have anticipated how the weather would bring wave after wave of storm and flood, drought and fire. We could not have anticipated how all of this would work together to raise the cost of living and decrease the availability of everyday staples. The world changed on us.

And our personal lives have changed tremendously during that time as well. Some of us have entered retirement, and some have entered aged care. Some have discovered new opportunities and others have discovered new limitations. Some have said goodbye to those dear to them and others have welcomed new family members and friends. Could we have imagined the lives we now live?

All these circumstances cause us to wonder what awaits us in 2024. We don't know what will happen tomorrow, let alone six months from now. The future is unknown and that can bring anxiety and fear. However, as the poem quoted by King George

reminds us, we do not have to go into the new year alone. We can enjoy the security of God's presence.

To explore this idea, we're going to look at a time in the history of God's people where they faced the possibility of losing God's presence. We're not doing this because I think we are in danger of losing His presence – but I think we can learn from their experience, nonetheless.

Background

First, let's look at the background of these verses. The book of Exodus starts with God's rescue of His people from Egypt. Then, at Mt Sinai, God gives them the 10 Commandments, guidelines for their worship and other laws to make sure that their behaviour reflects His goodness. The people affirm their desire to be God's people and abide by His laws.

Then God says,

*Have the people of Israel build me a holy sanctuary so I can live among them.
(Exodus 25:8)*

Moses goes back up the mountain to receive instructions for the Tabernacle and its functioning, but after 40 days, God sends him back down because the people are already doing the wrong thing. They have decided Moses has been gone for too long and so they decide to make up their own way to worship God. They have made a golden idol in the form of a calf. God had just told them not to do this in the Ten Commandments. But instead of following God's instructions as to how they are to worship Him, they have made something up based on the religion they knew in Egypt. This brings God's judgement upon them with sickness and death.

A new normal

This is where we come in at the beginning of Exodus 33. God says:

Go up to the land I swore to give to Abraham ... And I will send an angel before you to drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. Go up to this land that flows with milk and honey. But I will not travel among you, for you are a stubborn and rebellious people. If I did, I would surely destroy you along the way." (v. 1-3)

In spite of their disobedience, God will keep His promises to provide for them and give them the power to overcome the obstacles they will face. However, He will not be with them – there will be no Tabernacle, there will no longer be a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to signify His presence with them. Because they are not willing to bring their behaviour in line with His character and follow His will, there is really no point in Him going with them. In essence, they are no longer God's people in the way that He intended them to be.

I am sure that the people of Israel had no idea what God's presence meant to them. They had taken it for granted, but now they will see its importance as they have to live without it. The people go into mourning, taking off their jewellery. God's intention was for the Tabernacle to be set up in the middle of the camp to signify His presence among them. However, now there will be no Tabernacle, just a *"tent of meeting"* set up *"some distance from the camp"* (v. 7) and Moses acts as an intermediary - conveying their questions to God and relaying God's words back to them. There is distance between them and God – both physically and spiritually. This is their "new normal" and it is not good.

Let me be clear here – I don't think we as a church have sinned. God hasn't withdrawn His presence from us. I don't think that any difficulties we may have faced individually or corporately over the past couple of years are to do with any sin on our part. We are not like the people of Israel in that way. However, I think we always need be reminded of the wonderful privilege and inestimable value of the presence of God. We must never take this for granted or minimise its importance. When we look to the future, we would be wrong to think that our biggest need is for more money or younger people or new ways of doing things. Our biggest need is for the presence of God, and we must make sure that nothing comes between us and Him.

A conversation

By the grace of God, things didn't end like this for the Israelites. For our benefit, we are given the opportunity to listen in on the conversation between Moses and God as they talk through the situation.

Moses pleads for God to not give up on them. He realises that God is more than just a rescuer when they need help; He is their Lord and He is to be worshiped and honoured in every situation.

"Let me know your ways so that I may understand you more fully and continue to enjoy your favour. And remember that this nation is your very own people."
(v. 13)

Moses asks God to reveal more about Himself so that he can understand who He is and how He acts. He wants to learn how to live in God's presence and with God's favour. As I read this, I think of the safety directions when flying – put the oxygen mask on yourself first and then look for anyone who might need help. Moses is asking God to teach him first so that he can teach others what they should do. Moses is beginning to understand more of what is involved in being God's people. He's also reminding God that He chose the Israelites, now He needs to help them!

God rewards Moses' desire with a promise to him, personally.

"I know you by name, and I look favourably on you ... I will personally go with you, Moses, and I will give you rest—everything will be fine for you." (v. 12,14)

All these instances of “you” are singular. God is not promising to be with the nation yet, He is just talking about being with Moses. God will continue to meet with him at the tent of meeting outside the camp and will continue to guide Moses’ leadership of the people. This is an important first step. A God-honouring leader can have a tremendous impact on a group of people.

But Moses’ thinking expands, and he realises more is needed. It is not enough that God goes with him. All God’s people needed God’s presence. Without God, they are nothing. Notice the change from “me” to “us” in Moses’ reply.

“If you don’t personally go with us, don’t make us leave this place.” (v. 15)

God had promised that He would still give them the land – a land flowing with milk and honey – a good land that would meet all their physical needs and more. He had also promised that He would send an angel before them to fight their battles for them. They would still have everything they needed. But, without God’s presence, none of these things matter. Moses comes to the point where he is willing to stay in the wilderness with God rather than live in the Promised Land without God.

How will anyone know that you look favourably on me—on me and on your people—if you don’t go with us? For your presence among us sets your people and me apart from all other people on the earth.” (v. 16)

It wasn’t God’s power or God’s provision that makes them God’s people, it is His presence. Not His presence outside the camp helping them, but His presence in their midst. God’s presence among them is costly, because God requires them to honour Him and obey His commands, reflecting His righteousness. But without His presence, nothing else matters.

Moses finally sees what it really means to be a person of God, to be the people of God. And at that point, God, in His mercy, agrees to start again with the Israelites and give them His presence.

“I will indeed do what you have asked, for I look favourably on you, and I know you by name.” (v. 17)

When God talks of knowing Moses “by name” it means that He knows Moses intimately. He knows that Moses is far from perfect and that even he would fail to obey Him in the future. But He knows that Moses wants God’s presence and is willing to learn to walk with Him. He also knows the people intimately. He knows that there will be times when they will forget this lesson and have to learn it again – and again! They will presume on His promises and power and dishonour Him with their behaviour. God knows that there will be times in the future when He will have to remove His presence so that they would be reminded of its importance and come back to Him. But God’s grace is greater than all these failings.

Lessons for us

But what does all this have to do with us? Let me reiterate that I don’t believe that we as a church have sinned like the Israelites. However, that doesn’t mean that we don’t need the reminder that sin is serious. Just because we can go to God and receive

forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ does not mean that we can sin with no consequences. Sin always comes between us and God and must be dealt with. It is good for all of us to ask God to show us if there is anything in our lives which is pushing Him away and limiting our experience of His presence.

But even though sin is serious, God's grace is greater. God had every right to walk away and leave the Israelites in the wilderness. They had done the worst possible thing they could do by worship other gods and making idols – right after pledging their allegiance to God. But God forgave them, and we will see in the following verses that He renews His covenant with them and gives them the chance to start again. He knew what they would do and chose to love them anyway. And the same is true for us. God knows us, knows that we will fail Him, and loves us anyway. God will always be there, waiting for us to turn back to Him. Sin is serious but God's grace is greater.

There is something else, however, that has significantly impacted my thinking as I have studied this passage. It is the realisation that we need God's presence more than His power or His provision. Too often, I find myself often asking God to give me something – the wisdom to make a good decision, the ability to manage a difficult relationship, healing in sickness, or money to accomplish a task. But as I have thought about this, I wonder if that is not what is really needed. What is really needed is God's presence. I need God to go with me into the dark valley. I need God to go with me as I seek to serve Him. I need God himself, not just what He can give me.

And this is true of our church as well. We know that we have limitations as a congregation. We are bereft of young people and we miss their energy and innovation. We work within a less-than-ideal denomination that doesn't always support our beliefs and values. We do have a healthy bank balance, but it is not unlimited, and we can't do everything we would like to do. Many of us are facing uncertain futures as our health declines. Sometimes it is hard work to live as God's people in a society that does not honour Him.

The temptation is to start asking God for His power and provision. We could ask Him to give us new ideas and lots of money to start new programs. We could ask that we would live long healthy lives and have new young people join us to ensure the work of the church continues. But is that what we really need? It is possible to have a church full of young people with all sorts of innovative programs and heaps of money – and not have God's presence. That is not the church that God wants. On the other hand, it is possible for a handful of God's people with limited skills and no money to change the world – just read the book of Acts for that story! I love what the religious leaders said after interrogating Peter and John soon after Jesus went back to heaven:

The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13)

It was the fact that they had been in the presence of Jesus which made all the difference. And when Jesus physically left them, He hadn't really left them at all. Jesus told them:

No, I will not abandon you as orphans—I will come to you ... When I am raised to life again, you will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. (John 14:18,20)

When the Israelites were in the desert, God dwelt with them in the Tabernacle in the middle of the camp. Now we dwell in Christ and He dwells in us through the Holy Spirit. This is an experience of God's presence far beyond what Moses and the Israelites knew.

As we start this new year, I pray that nothing will hamper God's presence in us – individually or as a church. It is God's presence that will enable us to face the uncertainties of the coming year. It is God's presence that will set us apart and make us a church that honours God. It will not be because we are the most skilled group of people or have the most money. It will not be because our programs are the most innovative or contemporary. It will not be because we are special, but because God is with us.