



THE GOD WHO IS PRESENT – Exodus 33:18-34:11; John 1:14,18

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Last week we discovered the wonderful promise of God's presence in our lives. Over and over again in His Word He says to His people, "I will never leave you nor forsake you. I am with you always." (Joshua 1:5; Matthew 28:20; Hebrews 13:5) We saw that Moses discovered that God's presence was more important than His power or provision. God could give them everything they needed, but if He wasn't with them, they wouldn't be God's people.

But if God was going to go with them and give Himself to them, then they needed to get to know God better. In the cultures around them, there were many different gods, some good and helpful and some not so nice. What kind of god was their God? Moses asks God, "Then show me your glorious presence." (v.18)

Last week we looked at the presence of God. This week we are going to look at the God who is present. What is this God who promises to be with us always?

We begin to get a picture of God through His response to Moses' request. When Moses asks to see His glory, God replies by saying that He will show Moses His goodness. His glory isn't so much about what He is – His strong and eternal and all knowing – but who He is - His character. And He reminds Moses that He is Yahweh, the God who rescued them from slavery in Egypt. He has already shown them something about His goodness in the way He redeemed them and claimed them as His own, not because they did anything to deserve it, but just because He chose them. He says, "I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose." (v. 19) God delights in gracious action.

However, they must never treat His presence lightly. This God who graciously chose them out of His goodness, is so good, that He is too much for sinful mortals to endure. There are limits to how close they can get to Him, how much they can see and understand about Him. As the people camped at the bottom of Mt Sinai to hear from God, there were strict instructions that no one was to come near to the mountain. They could stand at a distance and see God's presence manifested in fire and smoke, but they couldn't come close. God re-iterates these prohibitions in these verses.

The only exception was Moses, who is about to be given a unique audience with God, but there were limits even for him. Of course, we know that God is spirit, that He doesn't have a physical body like we do. But in order to explain God, we are sometimes forced to use human terms to describe Him – we give human form to something which is not human. This is called anthropomorphism (*anthropos* – human; *morphe* - form) This is what is happening as God explains to Moses what will happen.

As my glorious presence passes by, I will hide you in the crevice of the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and let you see me from behind. But my face will not be seen.” (v. 22,23)

God will protect Moses from the full force of His holiness as if He was covering Moses with His hand. Then it will be as if Moses can see God's back, just a glimpse of the lingering remains of God's glory. Moses will be given a greater sense of who God is – as much as he can bear. God's desire is not to hide Himself from us, but He knows what we can handle.

But God does more for Moses. He doesn't just give Moses an experience of His presence, He also gives Moses some words by which to describe Him. And these words will be used over and over again throughout Scripture to describe God. They become foundational to the picture of God that God himself gives to us.

*Yahweh! The LORD!
The God of compassion and mercy!
I am slow to anger
and filled with unfailing love and faithfulness.
I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. (34:6,7)*

Each of these words are packed with meaning. **Compassion** is that gut-wrenching love and care for another person. **Mercy** is compassion put into action on behalf of another. **“Slow to anger”** is the quality of longsuffering, of not giving up easily even if it causes you pain. And then there are two extremely important Old Testament words that are hard to translate into English, which is why you will find them translated differently in different translations. The first is **hesed** which is loyal, committed love that loves forever. Nothing can stop it. The second is **emet** which brings out the difference between something which is real and something which is fake. The difference between a real Rolex watch and a cheap knock-off, between purified gold and fool's gold. God is the real thing, everything else is a dingy imitation. And finally, this God gives Himself to us with abundant **generosity**. God isn't stingy with His love! He is good.

But we humans are not good, not like God. So how will this God deal with us?

I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin.

This is good! There is hope for us if God's love causes Him to forgive our sin.

*But I do not excuse the guilty.
I lay the sins of the parents upon their children and grandchildren;*

*the entire family is affected—
even children in the third and fourth generations. (34:7)*

This is harder to understand and could be seen to contradict what God has just said. How can we understand it? There are a couple of things to add to the picture that may help us.

1. Later, God says to Moses: *“Parents must not be put to death for the sins of their children, nor children for the sins of their parents. Those deserving to die must be put to death for their own crimes.” (Deuteronomy 24:16)* This cannot mean that God will punish a child for the sins of their parents.
2. God originally says this as a part of the 2nd Commandment which says: *“You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations of those who reject me. But I lavish unfailing love for a thousand generations on those who love me and obey my commands. (Exodus 20:4-6)* They have committed themselves to God and any violation of that is like adultery in marriage. This is exactly the sin of which they had been guilty, and which had caused the rupture in their relationship with God. It may be that God is talking specifically about this sin of idolatry and its on-going consequences to this relationship.
3. In those times, extended families lived together – three or four generations in one household. Sin committed by any individual in that household affected all the rest. There is no sin that does not affect others, but this is amplified in a family. Unfortunately, we have all seen families torn apart by the sin of one of the members. We have also seen how patterns of sin can be passed down through the generations. However, I am sure we have also all seen situations when God has rescued someone from a horrible family situation and those patterns have been broken and God has enabled the person start anew.

We’d like to think that our sin only affects us. That there are no lingering consequences to what we do. But that is to be naive about the true character and impact of sin. Sin is serious. However, that is not the end of the story. If sin affects three to four generations of those who reject God, God’s love is lavished on a thousand generations of those who love and obey Him. Sin is serious BUT, as we saw last week, God’s grace and love is greater.

When God describes Himself, He chooses words like compassion, mercy, longsuffering, committed love, genuine, and forgiveness. However, this does not mean that He is tolerant of sin. He cannot be and still remain good. Would you really want a God that tolerated sin? You might like Him tolerating your sin, but would you want Him tolerating the sin of those who sin against you or cause pain to those you love? Of course not. God would not be good if He said that sin didn’t matter. But if we acknowledge our sin and turn to Him in repentance, He has made a way for us to

be forgiven of our sin so that the relationship can be restored. This is His desire, and this is exactly what the Israelites experienced.

The implications of God's revelation of Himself are immediately apparent. Moses falls down in worship and confession of sin. Now that Moses knows God better, he sees sin more clearly and realises how little they deserve His love and mercy. But he also sees how much they need Him, and his desire for God's presence increases.

God replies:

Listen, I am making a covenant with you in the presence of all your people. I will perform miracles that have never been performed anywhere in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people around you will see the power of the LORD—the awesome power I will display for you. (34:10)

God doesn't sound at all reluctant to restore the relationship! He seems eager to do so because He loves Moses and the Israelites and delights in being their God. He promises go ahead of them and do wonderful things in their midst.

Of course, there was one time when God revealed Himself in an even more amazing way than He did to Moses – when He sent His Son to earth as a human being. That was not just an anthropomorphism. God was not acting as if He was human, He really was a human being. John describes Jesus with some of the exact words God described Himself to Moses:

So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son. No one has ever seen God. But the one and only Son, who is himself God and is near to the Father's heart, he has revealed God to us. (John 1:14,18)

In Jesus, we can see more of God than Moses ever did. In everything He did and everything He said, Jesus showed us God's goodness. And the implications for us are basically the same. As God reveals Himself to us through Jesus and through His presence in our lives, we discover again how good He is and our worship is renewed. But His goodness also shows us how sinful we are and how much we need His forgiveness. It is wonderful to be able to remember this morning all He did to make that forgiveness possible as we celebrate communion together. The Israelites had seen God rescue them from Egypt but we have seen Him give Himself for us so that we can be cleansed from our sins. How amazing is that! And the God who loved us enough to give Himself for us can be trusted. We can trust His love and commitment to us and His presence with us.