

Transfiguration—A
Exodus 24:12, 15-18
“Come Up To Me!”

It is much easier to text someone than it is to call them. You don't have to say “hello.” You don't have to ask how they're doing. Within a matter of seconds you can say what needs to be said and hopefully find out what you need. It is irritating to us when people don't text or “tweet” or at least do Facebook messaging. We claim that through these avenues of communication that we are “connecting” with people. But the “connections” are very shallow and quick. They aren't personal. You can't see people's reactions. But most of us like it this way. Like I said, it takes less work and more importantly less time.

Notice how much time was involved when God communicated with the Israelites. Moses sat on the mountain for six days before the LORD finally spoke to him within the cloud. He was on the mountain forty days and forty nights. God had a lot to say to the Israelites, it would take longer than a few tweets or text messages. God's instructions in the Law would take a book. They were in-depth and specific. They would need explanation by the priests. God told them to learn these laws, so the Israelites wrote them down and put them on their doorposts and even on their clothing. This wasn't meant to be a brief and light hearted relationship. It was meant to be in-depth and personal.

The way we do communication today—it reflects the way we try to do a relationship with God as well. We don't like the in-depth stuff anymore. Tell me a cute little story about something, slap some Jesus on it, and we'll be good. Don't try to make permanent commands of me. Don't make me memorize a bunch of Bible passages. Don't demand me to spend my time singing and learning his Word. Don't expect me to come to a Bible class. Don't even try to get me to come to a midweek service. Don't ask me to “join” a church or swear to be faithful to death. Let me just give Jesus a “thumbs up” once in a while, read a nice little post online, and we'll be good. It always has to be on our terms and our timing. Anything more than that—forget it. We will tell him when we will do what we will do, and we will only do it when it is easy and comfortable for us.

What a contrast this approach to God is when you compare it to what happened on Mt. Sinai! God didn't suggest they come for a nice comfortable devotion. He gave them commands on stone! This is not meant to be a democracy. “I am your GOD,” says the LORD. This is how this works. You bow before me. You come when I say. You do what I say. Don't just do it when it works for you or when you want. Don't treat me like a picture on a screen that you can give an occasional thumbs up to. For 40 days and 40 nights they were called on to sit and wait at the bottom of the mountain—for God to give his commands to Moses. It didn't matter how long it took. They were to sit in awe of the fire. This is how you live. We are to live in constant awe of our God. That's what we still try to reflect in our worship—to keep some semblance of holy respect to our powerful and holy God.

I. A holy command that frightens

After leading the Israelites across the Red Sea and out of slavery in Egypt, Moses guided them to the foot of Mt. Sinai where the two million refugees spent the next eleven months. The time at Mt. Sinai was no break for Moses. He made numerous trips up the mountain to speak with God and then went back down again to tell the people what God had said. That's the way the people wanted it because when they first arrived at Mt. Sinai God had spoken directly to them and it scared them to death

(Hebrews 12:18-21). It wasn't just God's voice that was frightening; the way God appeared was terrifying too. God descended on the top of Mt. Sinai in fire and billowing smoke. The mountain shook. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed while the sound of a trumpet growing louder and louder could be heard (20:18-19). It would have been scary enough to witness any one of those things but when you put them all together it's not surprising that Moses himself said: "*I am trembling with fear*" (Hebrews 12:21).

Why did God appear in such a frightening way to the Israelites? Isn't he a God of love? Weren't the Israelites his chosen people? What game was God playing? Was he frightening the Israelites to get them to do what he wanted them to do—like the coach who thinks that if he screams and yells at his players he will get results? No, God wasn't playing games. He was simply highlighting a couple of his characteristics. He appeared in fire and smoke to impress upon the Israelites his power and his holiness.

If you had been there at Mt. Sinai, how would you have felt if God said to you: "*Come up to me?*" Would you have done it? I might as well ask whether you would run into or away from a fire because that's what the glory of the Lord looked like (24:17). We would run away from a fire wouldn't we, because we wouldn't want to get burned? So when God says: "*Come up to me!*" this is a holy command that should frighten unholy people because just as fire can't help but burn straw, a holy God can't help but consume sinful people.

This glory of the Lord can be terrifying to the sinner. The glory of the Lord ought to be terrifying to the sinner. Our society is not terrified. No one is concerned about sin very much at all anymore. Because no one is concerned about sin, then no one is concerned about the consequence of sin. After all, the world looks at things thinking that everybody is good at heart. We know differently, don't we? We are born as God's enemies. We are born with sin in our hearts. As sinners, we would be like Peter, James and John and be afraid to go into the glory of the Lord. For them, too, it was their sinfulness in the presence of the holy and powerful God that terrified them. Isaiah asks: "*The sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling grips the godless: 'Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?'*" (Isaiah 33:14).

So did you feel scared when you came to church this morning? Did you fear for your life knowing that you were approaching a holy God? Probably not, and that's too bad. The reason we don't always fear God is because we don't always fully appreciate our sinfulness and God's holiness. Had we murdered someone this week, cheated on our spouse, or gotten so drunk that we couldn't remember the things we did the night before and this was all splashed in the newspaper, we may be afraid to come to church for we see those things as sins a holy God hates. But he hates just as much our dislike for our teachers, our fantasies of what we would like to do with people to whom we're not married, and our lack of self-control when we gossip about one another. These sins, any sin should make us scared of stepping forward when the holy God says: "*Come up to me!*" because doing so only brings us closer to God's wrath over our sins.

When God reveals his awesome and holy power, and lays before us his unbendable will, in other words, when we see God the way he is, there can be only one result. We first of all see that our holy God is not someone we can approach as we are. That's why God told the people: "*Have them wash their clothes. Be ready by the third day, for on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. You shall set boundaries for the people all around the mountain. Tell them: 'Be careful that you do not go up onto the mountain or touch the edge of it.' Whoever touches the mountain must certainly be put to death*" (Exodus 19:10-12). He was telling the people very clearly:

“There’s a difference between you and me, and it’s not just a matter of straightening out your tie or putting a smile on your faith. I am holy, you are not! You cannot approach me as you are!” The result of this view of God makes us say to ourselves: “I need for a mediator. Someone else has to climb this mountain, because there’s no way I can approach this holy God as I am!”

I realize that this picture of God may offend some. Many people may have been able to somehow look at God as a big cuddly teddy bear who just smiles when people defy his law. When they do this, they reduce God down to a kind old grandpa who just pats you on the back and says: “Now, now, let’s not play in that garden of lust. Let’s not put our fingers on the end table of hate. Boys will be boys.” That may be a “nice” God they’ve painted to somehow be able to stuff into their lifestyle, but it’s not the one that’s revealed on Mt. Sinai. So let’s stop pretending. Let’s look at God for what he is. Let’s get back to the real world. Because when you look at this big scary God on top of Mount Sinai, something else happens—besides sheer fear. We learn that God is approachable.

II. A gracious invitation that comforts

“*Come up to me!*” is exactly what God said to Moses and it’s just what Moses did (24:12, 18). The Israelites who saw Moses go must have thought he was crazy. Who in their right mind would walk into a consuming fire that was the glory of the Lord? Yet Moses went and he survived to tell about it. How was Moses able to survive so close to God? Was Moses himself without sin, and therefore holy like God? No. Remember how Moses had murdered an Egyptian. Remember how slow he was to answer God’s call to lead his people. Remember how he had failed to circumcise his sons. So why didn’t Moses die in the consuming fire that was God’s glory? Moses didn’t die because God’s call to come closer wasn’t just a holy command; it was a gracious invitation.

By allowing Moses to enter his glory without being destroyed, God revealed another one of his characteristics. He showed that he is a gracious and forgiving God who wants sinners to be able to stand in his holy presence. That truth was emphasized on another mountain covered in God’s glory 1,500 years later. On a mountain somewhere in Palestine Jesus was transfigured before his disciples. His clothes became as white as snow and his face shone like the sun. Then Moses, together with Elijah, appeared and spoke with Jesus about the work of grace he would accomplish on Calvary. There, Jesus would die for the sins of the world and through that death and his subsequent resurrection the whole world would be declared forgiven of their sins. Please don’t misunderstand. Jesus did not come to tell us that God has nothing against us. His life, death, and resurrection did not put out the fire that is God’s holiness; it protects us from the fire by clothing us in Christ’s holiness. Like a firefighter who can walk among flames because he is decked out in his protective fire suit, we can stand in the presence of God’s holiness and not be harmed because we are covered in Christ. Without Christ, however, God’s holiness is still fearsome for it continues to burn and will do so into eternity. Therefore all those who would dare expose their sins to God by throwing aside the forgiveness Jesus won for them will get burned.

Paul told Timothy and he tells us that “*there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all*” (1 Timothy 2:5-6). Jesus Christ bridged the gap between the holy God and sinful man when he as true God came down to earth as a man. Instead of coming in thunder and lightning, he came in a virgin’s womb. In a gentle yet powerful way, he conquered the very laws that terrified us. Instead of terrifying people with his wrath, he absorbed God’s wrath. On the cross he became what he was not—sin, and we became what we were not—holy. It is through faith in that ransom that we become holy in God’s sight. It’s that sacrifice that

makes us able to now approach God. As the writer to the Hebrews so eloquently said: *“You have come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God; to the heavenly Jerusalem... to God, who is the judge of all; to the spirits of righteous people who have been made perfect; to Jesus, the mediator of a new testament; and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better message than the blood of Abel”* (Hebrews 12:22-24).

Don't treat Jesus' forgiveness like a cheap coat we can afford to toss aside. Wear it all times so that when God calls: *“Come up to me!”* you are ready to enjoy the benefits of his gracious invitation. The elders of Israel enjoyed those benefits. After God's first fearsome appearance, Moses offered animal sacrifices and sprinkled the blood from those animals on the people saying: *“Here is the blood of the covenant, which the Lord made with you”* (Exodus 24:8). Then God invited Moses and the elders to climb Mt. Sinai where they ate and drank in God's presence. They knew God was there because they saw him and reported that under God's feet was *“what looked like a pavement of sapphire as clear as the sky”* (24:10).

Being sprinkled with blood and eating and drinking in God's presence is something that God still invites believers to do today. I'm, of course, talking about the Lord's Supper where Jesus said we receive *“the blood of the new testament, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”* (Matthew 26:28). Come to this meal with renewed zeal and appreciation for it clothes us with the forgiveness we need to see the holy God without fear.

After God told Moses to come closer, he spent forty days and forty nights on Mt. Sinai enveloped in God's glory. But what brought Moses closer to God was not the fact that he had climbed Mt. Sinai, it was what he had gone there to do. Moses had gone to receive the laws and commands he was to pass on to God's people. In other words, he got closer to God through the Word.

Starting this Wednesday evening we have the same kind of opportunity to get closer to God for this Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. Just as Moses spent forty days with God's Word on Mt. Sinai, use the forty days of Lent and our special Lenten services to hear more about your sin and what your Savior came to do about it. The more we hear God's Word about these things the more we'll see God's call to *“Come up to me!”* as a holy command that we'll take seriously, but not one we have to fear because it comes from a gracious God who has declared us to be holy in Jesus.

This Transfiguration Sunday there is a lot to be considered when we consider the glory of the Lord. It reminds us these next weeks as we journey down the path of the passion of Christ and see his humility and sufferings and death, that Jesus still is God's Son. We are privileged to see the sacrifice Christ made for each one of us. In that sacrifice we also see the glory of the Lord as it is told to us in his Word. As we study that passion, we also will see the glory of the Lord as we dwell in it and live in it through God's Word. In the first letter of John we are told: *“Let what you have heard from the beginning remain in you. If what you have heard from the beginning remains in you, then you will remain in the Son and the Father. And this is what he promised you: eternal life”* (1 John 2:24-25). This is what God has promised us—eternal life! That is the glory of the Lord, the glory of the Lord that God's Son is revealed to us in his Word; and his Word is in us. The glory of the Lord that dwells in us is because of God's Word that dwells in us by his grace. So the Lord invites us, *“Come up to me and see my glory and live with me in eternal glory.”* Amen.