

The Lord, the Lord, the Compassionate

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Exodus 33:12-34:7

Let me give you some context for our passage. Moses is in a bad place. Israel has just committed a terrible sin. Moses had gone up on the mountain to meet God, and Israel had taken that opportunity to abandon the Lord and make two golden calves to worship instead. They throw this wild party and the results are disastrous. 3000 people are killed in the camp. The Lord is furious. And from Moses' perspective, that all his hard work, all his years of trying to lead these people might come to a chaotic end. The whole episode had just about flattened Moses. Before he even tries to re-start the journey, he comes to talk to God in the tent of meeting. *He has two requests for his Lord*: First he wants to make sure that God will continue to go with them through the desert. It's not hard to see why he would ask for that. The second request is more profound and mysterious. Moses wants to see God's face.

Why does Moses want to see God's face? The text doesn't tell us, but I assume Moses wants what we all want when it feels like life is falling apart. We want to know that God sees us, that he cares. Moses is human. I imagine this whole golden calf incident has shaken him. I imagine that he's not so confident that he can lead these people anymore, so he says, "*Lord, show me your glory! Show me your heart! Because if I could see your face, if I could see your heart, I think that would give me the strength to keep doing this.*" I think we've all been there.

In our passage we see God responds to Moses' second request by giving him only part of what he asks. He tells Moses, "*I can't show you my face, because no one can see my face and live.*" "*But when you come up on the mountain, there is a place where you can stand in the cleft of a rock and I will pass by you. As I pass by I will shield you with my hand until I am all the way past. When I am all the way past, I will remove my hand and then you can see my back.*" Moses won't get to see God's face, but God will show him his back, the deepest and most intimate glimpse of God's glory anyone has yet seen. Now, pretend you have never read this story before. Pretend you were reading it for the first time and you got to chapter 34:6, you got to that incredible moment when the Lord passes in front of Moses and Moses sees God's back. What would you expect Moses to see at that moment? What would you imagine the back of a god to look like? I read comic books when I was a kid, and comic book artists sometimes like to use figures from ancient mythology in their stories. So once in a while you would have the Greek gods or the Nordic gods appear in a comic. Zeus! Apollo! Odin! Thor! When I opened my comic books and saw the artist's depiction of the backs and the faces of these gods, what do you think I saw? Strong backs and stern faces. I saw fierce men with rippling biceps and manly pecs. Comic book gods had a lot of hair and that hair was usually flowing. The gods in these comic books spent their days shooting fire out of their hands or casting lightning bolts down upon their enemies. The glory I saw passing in front of me in these comic books was the glory of big muscles, stern faces and supernatural strength. And this depiction wasn't something they created out of thin air; these comic book artists were reflecting conventional beliefs. What they drew on their easel was the kind of picture that pops into most people's heads when they imagine the glory of a god, the face of a god.

But now in our passage the true and living God actually passes in front of Moses, and what do we see? What's the first thing that we see when God takes away his hand and allows us

to glimpse his back? It's not enormous muscles. It's not flashes of lightning and rolls of thunder. It's not fire shooting out of his hands. It's love. "*The Lord the Lord. The compassionate and gracious God. Slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness. Maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness rebellion and sin.*" Compassion. Love. Grace. Faithfulness. Forgiveness. Those are the 5 words used to describe the God revealed to Moses on that mountain. This is the glory that Moses sees, and the glory is so intense that his face glows for months. This is so important.

Earlier I used comic books as an illustration of what we expect when we think of god-like power, but honestly, what we've seen and hear from God so far in the book of Exodus might have created the same muscular expectation. God has shown us plenty of thunder and lightning strength. This is the God who shook Mount Sinai with smoke and fire. This is the God who made the red Sea part and drowned his enemies. This the God who turned the Nile river to blood and sent clouds of locusts as a sign to Pharaoh. Given all that, it would be perfectly reasonable to expect that when God removed his hand and we looked out from the cleft of the rock we might see a towering figure with windswept hair whose back was like a mountain range. But instead the first thing we see is Compassion. Love. Faithfulness. Forgiveness. This is the most intimate self-revelation of God yet, so strong that it makes Moses' face glow, and in this surprising we learn that love is at the center of who God is. Love is at the center of everything he does. Behind the fire and smoke of Mount Sinai: Love. Behind the spectacle of the plagues: love. Behind the miracle of the Red Sea: love, compassion, love, faithfulness, forgiveness.

Of course that's not all Moses sees. In addition to the love and forgiveness of verse 6, we have the proclamation of verse 7. '*Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.*' This is not a love that expresses itself in a weak tolerance. This is not a love that looks the other way. This love has goals. This love has standards. It's a love that will lay a firm hand on your shoulder and steer you. Sometimes it might even give you a shove. But the vision makes it clear: behind the shoves and the firmness there is compassion, love, faithfulness, forgiveness.

I said this is so important. The rest of the Old Testament backs me up on this. This content of this vision becomes something like a catechism question in the Old Testament. When we learn the Heidelberg Catechism, we are learning a series of compact truths that can help us get our theological bearings in this world. In times when we are prone to stress and confusion, they help us remember who God is and what he's done for us. We experience the sudden loss of a loved one. Our minds are reeling and we are hurting. But at the funeral we stand up together and say the words of Question and Answer 1. "*What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.*" We go back to those words again and again to remind us who God is and what he's done for us. The words of verse 6 and 7 do the same sort of thing for Israel throughout the Old Testament. This vision is quoted throughout the Old Testament.

God's people turn their face toward this vision of a compassionate, loving, faithful, forgiving God in all sorts of anxious moments. I have 7 examples in my sermon notes; let me give you three. In Numbers 14:18 when the people rebel again, Moses turns his face towards this vision when he begs God to be merciful to his people. In Nehemiah 9:17 the people turn their face towards this vision as they rebuild the wall of Jerusalem in the face of opposition. In Jeremiah 32:18-19, Jeremiah turns his face towards this vision as he asks God for courage in the face of the Babylonian conquest. In times of failure and fear and anxiety and death the people would turn their hearts to the vision Moses saw. They would remind themselves that compassion and love were at the center of who God is, and they would take refuge in that truth.

The New Testament amplifies the truth of Moses' vision. God shows Moses his back on the mountain. But when God sent his one and only Son, he didn't just show us his back, he showed us his face. The life of Jesus reveals the Father's heart more deeply than Moses' mountain vision. That's Hebrews 1: "*The son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.*" And what glory does Jesus radiate? The central purpose of Christ's life, the reason he came to this world, is to give himself on the cross for our sins and for the sins of the world, and as He hangs from that cross what radiates from him, what flows from him like living water, is compassion, grace, love, faithfulness and forgiveness. This is the center of the Father's heart for the world. For us. Of course the love that Jesus shows isn't a weak tolerance. Just like we saw in verse 7 of our passage, his love has goals. It lays a hand on us. It means to change us. But in the life death and resurrection of Jesus we see that it starts with the love, the love comes first. Not holiness. Not wrath. Love.

At the beginning of our passage, God tells Moses that you can only see my back because no one can look upon my face and live. I've always imagined that the reason a human couldn't look upon God's face was because there would be such a radiance of divine power and light and holiness that the power and light would burn us up. Maybe that's how you thought of it too. But this week I wondered something quite different. Maybe if we looked right at the face of God we would see the terrible weight of everything he has had to bear because of us. Maybe we would be overwhelmed by the terrible weight of all the betrayals, all the cruelties he has endured. Maybe what we would see there is the pain of every neglected child, the horror of every concentration camp sufferer, the loneliness of every caregiver, the heartbreak of every widow, the dislocation of every refugee, the wail of every mother of every murdered child, the weight of a billion desperate prayers cried out to Him every day and dumped upon His compassionate heart. Maybe the glory that we would see in his face, the weight of what we would find written there, is the glory of all that his compassion and love has had to bear for us and our salvation. I don't know of course. I do know that all these things we see in the face of our Lord Jesus as he hangs on the cross for us. Love is at the center. Compassion. Grace. Love. Faithfulness. Forgiveness.

I want to close with a story...it may be one I've told before...if so I apologize for the repetition, but it says what is true. It's a story Walt Wangerin tells about the relationship between him and his son Matthew. Matthew was a difficult child. When he was only 7 years old, Wangerin tells how he came into Matthew's bedroom one night and found him sitting on his bed reading a big stack of brand new comic books. "Where did you get those?" asked Wangerin. "From...from...from the library," said Matthew. Evasively. He had indeed got them from the library. He had stolen them from the East Branch Library there in town. Wangerin was disappointed. He made Matthew bring the comic books back to the library and he made him apologize to the stern-faced librarian. Even though Matthew promised he would never steal again, a little over a year later Wangerin found a whole stack of brand new comics hidden in the bottom drawer of Matthew's dresser. This time Wangerin was furious. He took all the comic books into the living room, lit a fire in the fireplace, and one by one, he burned them in front of Matthew. More promises from Matthew that this would never happen again. But then it did. Wangerin caught his son with more comic book contraband and this time his anger was so hot he told his son to go into the study where he would receive a spanking. And there in the study he spanked his son. It was not a symbolic spanking, it was a real smacking. Matthew did not cry. He stayed stone-faced the whole time, but as soon as the spanking was finished Wangerin burst into tears because of what he'd done. He sobbed in his study as his son walked out. Matthew never stole comic books again. Many years later he was riding in a car with his mother and the topic of

the stolen comic books came up. “You know Mom,” said Matthew, “I never stole comic books again after that day.” “I know,” said Mom, “That’s because dad spanked you.” “No it wasn’t” said Matthew, “I stopped because Dad cried.” There’s the truth. Behind all Wangerin’s anger there was love, and the power was in the love. The back of the heavenly Father as he passed in front of Moses on the mountain, the face of Jesus as he hung upon the cross, the tear-stained face of Walt Wangerin after he spanked his child. All these tell the truth about the power that is at the center of the world. Compassion. Grace. Love. Faithfulness. Forgiveness. This is the glory of the living God. This is the glory that is changing us. This is the glory that will change the world.

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