



TRANSFORMING PRESENCE

SERIES: THE TABERNACLE: GOD'S PRESENCE WITH HIS PEOPLE

Exodus 34:29-35

14th Message

Bernard Bell

March 24, 2019

We continue our series about the Tabernacle: God's Presence with his people. God had called Israel to himself and for himself: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." He had entered into covenant with Israel, as signified by the Ten Commandments, the treaty document. God and Israel were now bound together. He had brought them into his benevolent domain, into his kingdom. In return, Israel was to have no other gods before him; this is the very first of the Ten Commandments. Israel was to be loyal and devoted to him. Israel owed its allegiance to him and was to maintain this allegiance. But within forty days Israel had broken this allegiance. Israel had turned aside to worship the golden calf, giving its allegiance to something made by human hands.

Our Call to Worship was from Psalm 115, about the idols which the nations make: they have mouths but not speak, eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear. How can such things be worthy of worship? The tragedy is that those who make them and gaze upon them become like them, deaf and dumb and blind. That's how it had become with Israel. It had given its allegiance to something not worthy of that allegiance. It had given its loyalty and devotion to something that didn't deserve its devotion.

Moses had shattered the tablets; the covenant was broken. Israel was no longer God's people. This could have so easily been the end of the story. But it was not. Moses, the faithful mediator, interceded with God on behalf of the people, even at great risk to himself. He even invited God to blot him out if he would only save the people. And God listened to Moses. Moses asked God to show him his glory. God invited Moses to come back up Mt Sinai and to bring two fresh stone tablets. Maybe there was hope; maybe God would write a new treaty. There at the top of the mountain, God proclaimed his name to Moses:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. (Exod 34:6-7)

Moses immediately fell down in worship. In homage and devotion he gave his allegiance to God. Here was a God worthy of worship. Moses dared ask, "Forgive us and take us as yours." And God did. He was indeed a God "abounding in steadfast love...forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." He made a covenant again, which Moses wrote on the tablets. Israel was once again God's people. He took her back, though he knew that she was a sinful people, prone to rebellion and grumbling, prone to breaking allegiance. Would Israel be any better this second time? Would Israel be more successful in staying loyal to the God who had saved her and brought her into his domain?

God knew Israel yet still loved her. God knows us yet still loves us. He accepts us as we are, but this doesn't mean he wants us to remain as we are. We are projects in need of work, a mess in need of cleaning up. When we accept God finding us we acknowledge this.

We acknowledge that we were lost and are now found, but we carry the marks of our lostness. We acknowledge that we are sinners saved by grace, but we carry the marks of our sin. We acknowledge that we are people with disordered affections now learning how to have true affections. We are all works in progress.

So how do people change? Some change is conscious. At the beginning of each year we make resolutions to be better, to do better. These usually don't last very long. The resolution itself is unable to change us. It must be accompanied by resolve that perseveres. Over time it may get easier as the resolve develops into a habit. Now we're in the season of Lent, a time when many people give up something. Generally you don't give up things that are good for you; you give up the things that are not so good. These things may appear very good and appealing, but you know you would be better off without them, at least for a season: chocolate, alcohol, social media such as FaceBook or Twitter. New Year resolutions and Lenten self-denial are conscious efforts to change. Only sometimes do they work.

Other change is subconscious. We change without consciously trying to, even without consciously knowing that we are changing. Newborn babies, after weeks of looking into their mother's face, begin to respond; they begin to imitate their mother's smile. The sounds that infants make gradually begin to form recognizable words. They imitate the sounds they hear. Slowly they sort their words out into a language. This is how children learn language: it is all inductive, mimicking what they hear around them. Watching a young child learn a language is amazing. Watching a child do this in two or three languages simultaneously is even more amazing. Children do this all by imitation.

As children learn language they adopt the accent of those with whom they speak. My accent has been very fluid. I grew up in an international setting as a missionary kid in South-east Asia. At 6 my accent was Australian, at 9 it was American. Then I went to school in Scotland, then in the south of England; my accent changed each time. Now I'm recognized as foreign wherever I am. On Thursday evening I was at a British event in San Francisco. People there wondered why I, an American, had been in Britain! I had to explain that I was actually British, despite the evidence of my accent. Meanwhile Americans recognize I'm foreign but have trouble identifying my accent. So wherever I am I'm different. Sue notes that my language quickly changes a little when I go back to the UK; I use different words and pronounce words differently.

I never tried to have any of these accents; they were an automatic response to what I heard. We are all born imitators. We naturally imitate those who are around us. Dogs come to look like their owners, or is the other way around? It is both the good and the bad that we imitate. It is disconcerting for a parent to see his or her poor speech or poor behavior reflected back by their child! It's no fault of the child. Every child imitates. We all imitate.

Nine days ago the world was shocked by the horrific mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand. Muslims stop and pray five times each day, wherever they are. But Friday midday prayer is special: Muslims gather for *jumu'ah*, for congregational prayer. It was into these gatherings in two different mosques that the gunman fired, killing fifty. Making the horrific slaughter even worse, he livestreamed his actions on FaceBook, whence it was reposted to other streaming sites. Eventually social media sites scrambled to remove the video. Why remove it? So as not to glorify the actions of the gunman. But also because watching such a video affects the viewer. Most would be sickened by watching such video. But others would be inspired; they would want to imitate, leading to copycat crimes. We are not detached observers. We are changed by what we see, whether for better or for worse. If you watch a video like that you are no longer the same person. It has changed you, and you cannot unwatch the video.

Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand's premier, has been widely praised for how she has led her nation's response. Last Friday five of us from here went to one of our nearby Muslim prayer houses to stand in solidarity with the community as they gathered for Friday prayers. We stood outside carrying placards, not of protest but of support and friendship: You are my friend. We are better together. We will keep watch while you pray.

Some of us may be afraid of Muslims. We are called to love our neighbors, and these are our neighbors. Every Muslim who entered the prayer house thanked us, and so many of them said it meant so much to them for us to be there. They invited us inside, and welcomed us with warm hospitality. I left wanting to imitate them—in their gracious welcome, in their generosity of spirit, and in their hospitality.

We are naturally imitators, for better or for worse. We are being changed every day by our encounters, by what we see and by who we see.

Moses was changed by an encounter. He had asked God to show him his glory. God had invited him to come up Mt Sinai.

So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights. He neither ate bread nor drank water. (34:28a)

Moses spent forty days in God's presence. This presence was a sustaining presence. Moses needed neither bread nor water, for he was sustained by the Lord himself. God was his food and drink, nourishing him. But the time came for Moses to descend from Mt Sinai. He had the two freshly-written tablets to deliver to the Israelite camp. He needed to return to his people to convey to them what God had told him, this good news that God would take them back as his people and would go with them.

We pick up the story:

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him. (Exodus 34:29-35 ESV)

Three times the text tells us that the skin of Moses' face shone. There has been considerable misunderstanding about the nature of this shining face. The verb translated "shone" is cognate with the noun "horn." The Latin Vulgate render this as "Moses's face was horned." As a result, in religious art Moses has been frequently depicted with two horns sprouting from his forehead. Michelangelo's famous sculpture of Moses portrays him this way, with horns. Much more likely, the idea is that twin rays of light were beaming from Moses's face, like the rays of light when the sun is about to rise above the horizon at dawn. So, Marc Chagall is more accurate than Michelangelo; in his many portrayals of Moses, he always shows him with two rays of light beaming upwards from his forehead.

The skin of Moses' face shone because he had been talking with God. Moses had a privilege unique in the Old Testament: "the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (33:11). His face shone with the reflected glory of God. Moses had asked God to show him his glory. God had invited him into his presence, into his glory. Forty days in this presence changed Moses. For forty days he was irradiated with God's glory. Some of this glory stayed with him and was reflected on his face as he came down the mountain. God's presence was a transforming presence. Moses spent forty days in that presence and was no longer the same.

But Moses did not know that he had been transformed. He sought God not transformation, but he was transformed because he sought God. Transformation was a by-product of being in God's presence. This change, though unbeknownst to him, was obvious to all around him. All Israel saw Moses, and saw that his face shone. Earlier they had been terrified of God's presence atop Mt Sinai; that's why Moses was serving as mediator between God and his people. Now they are terrified even of this radiation of God's glory from Moses' face. But Moses was the faithful mediator, able to look on God and on his people. He called the leaders to himself, and then all the people drew near. He communicated to them the word of the Lord, this good news that God had taken them again as his people and would go with him. And then out of consideration for the people, he put a veil over his face.

Moses' face shone because he had been in God's transforming presence. He was changed without trying to be changed. He sought God not change, but change came with seeking God. God has made us capable of himself. Now when I say that God has made us capable, you may think that he has made us capable of doing things, capable of activities. We can make tools and use them. We can transform our environment. But so can animals to some extent. What distinguishes us from animals is that we are capable of God. God has made us for himself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in him, as Augustine put it so eloquently. God has made us capable of relationship with himself, of seeking him and finding him. Our greatest capacity is our capacity for God.

David the psalmist cried out to the Lord,

You have said, "Seek my face."

My heart says to you,

“Your face, LORD, do I seek.”

Hide not your face from me. (Ps 27:8-9)

David’s greatest longing was to seek God’s face. To seek God’s face is our great calling. Throughout church history Christians have struggled with the tension between the active life and the contemplative life. The last two centuries have been dominated by the active life. Christians have been stirred up to evangelical fervor. We feel guilty if we’re not doing something for God. The pendulum is beginning to swing towards contemplation with growing interest in spiritual formation. But even this can become misdirected into activity: some who are in a hurry to be spiritually formed can make it into an active program. But that’s not how it works. Here in Silicon Valley with its frenetic pace of activity the contemplative life is a challenge. It can seem like a waste of time, as something that detracts us from actually serving the Lord. Seeking God’s face is not waste time. The forty days that Moses spent in God’s presence was not waste time.

How do we seek God’s face? How do we seek the face of Jesus? We can’t see him face-to-face. We can’t look at this 6th century icon from St Catherine’s Monastery at Sinai and say we see Jesus face-to-face. One of the most important ways we seek God’s face is when we gather on Sunday morning like we do now. During the week idols have drawn away our affections, and alternative narratives have drawn away our identity, as we saw last Sunday. During the week we have set our gaze on many things; this act of looking has changed us. On Sunday mornings we gather to seek God in Christ through his Spirit. We gather to set our gaze on him. We gather to contemplate God. And so on Sunday morning we need to be shown as much of God and Christ as possible. We gather to remind ourselves who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit. In one sense this *is* a waste of time. We do not gather to be productive or to learn how to be more productive. We gather to be in God’s presence because this is what we are made for. His presence is a transforming presence, and so we will be changed by this encounter. Having refreshed our vision of who he is, we are then reminded of who we are in relation to God, in relation to one another, and in relation to the world beyond. And this will change our behavior. It is a “waste” of time to seek God’s face, but it has a profound effect on how we spend the rest of our time. Contemplation changes our action. We imitate what we contemplate.

We have gathered to seek the face of God. And so we invoked God’s presence in this beautiful 15th century hymn by Bianco da Siena:

Come down, O Love divine!
 Seek thou this soul of mine,
 and visit it with thine own ardor glowing;
 O Comforter, draw near,
 within my heart appear,
 and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.
 O let it freely burn...

“Seek thou this soul of mine”: we are capable of God. “Visit it with thine own ardor glowing”: God is a passionate God and we pray that his passion fill us.

After last Sunday one of the worship team said how good it was to sing of God’s love for us instead of our love for God. Many may be unable to honestly sing, “I love you Lord.” They may be overcome with grief, worry, anxiety, pain. But we can all sing of God’s love for us, for that is always true. Singing of our love for God does not transform us; singing of God’s love for us does. Last week we sang:

O the deep, deep love of Jesus,
 vast, unmeasured, boundless, free,
 rolling as a mighty ocean
 in its fullness over me.
 Underneath me, all around me,
 is the current of Your love,
 leading onward, leading homeward
 to Your glorious rest above.

To contemplate such love is transformative.

I’m sure many of us can think of people whose faces have shone with God’s glory, with his love and joy. I think of two right now. The first is a Chinese nuclear physicist who, as both an academic and a Christian, suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution. I had the privilege of visiting him in his home in Beijing thirty years ago. I thought then, and I still think today recalling him, that his face shone.

The other is Marva Dawn, from who I took a summer school class at Regent College twenty years ago. I quickly realized that, though I would probably forget everything she said, I would never forget her. She had multiple chronic health problems but was one of the most joyful people I’ve ever met. She radiated Joy. In her many books she frequently writes about Joy and always capitalizes the word. She has written two books on worship; one is entitled *A Royal “Waste” of Time*.

These two people suffered greatly. They experienced God’s transforming presence not in his keeping them from suffering but in his being present with them through their suffering. If you are hurting and suffering, God’s transforming presence can be there with you in your pain and sorrow.

On Tuesday I will start teaching a small class on Revelation. Last week one of the people who will be in the class expressed apprehension; she was fearful of the book. This is a not-uncommon reaction. I find that most people are either fearful of or fascinated by the Book of Revelation. Unfortunately the people who are fascinated are fascinated in the wrong things: timetables, military hardware, the terrible destruction of judgment, the impending Battle of Armageddon. Fascination with these things changes us, and I don’t think it changes us for the better. It breeds a militaristic outlook full of violence and destruction. It is precisely these things that make the other people fearful.

If these are the wrong things to be fascinated with, what should our fascination be? Revelation is a book about worship. When I preached through the book here in 2001-2007 I said that many times. Most people were surprised the first few times I said it. It is a book about allegiance, about loyalty and devotion to the Lamb. In chapters 4 and 5 we are invited into the heavenly throne room, there to see God Almighty enthroned at the center, receiving the worship of the four cherubim and the twenty-four elders. Then we see the Lamb standing as though slain, also receiving worship. Prior to preaching these two chapters, Sue and I went to Belgium to sit in front of a painting for two hours: van Eyck’s *Ghent Altarpiece* (early 15th century), and specifically its central panel *The Adoration of the Lamb*. You might think this was a waste of time. We could have run around and seen so many more sights in Ghent during those two hours! But I didn’t care if this was the only sight we saw in Belgium. I wanted to sit and contemplate this painting, and I wanted this contemplation to form me. *The Adoration of the Lamb* is a static picture but it contains a story. We see the instruments of Christ’s passion: the pillar at which

he was scourged, the spear that pierced his side, the crown of thorns, the cross. He suffered and died on our behalf. But he is risen. And he is worshiped: standing on the altar, receiving the worship of great crowds. And we join that company in loyalty and adoration of the Lamb. And we are reminded that the Lion conquered by being the slain Lamb. He renounced violence, allowing violence to be done to himself while refusing to use violence against others. Looking at this changes you, and you go away with a different attitude about how to behave in the world.

God is a passionate God, burning in ardor. His presence is a passionate presence. It is also a transforming presence. As we seek his face, we are capable of having that ardor, that passion burn within us. We are transformed by contemplating him and we want to imitate him.

We are transformed by contemplating story. Stories are one of the most powerful agents of transformation. We gather on Sundays to pay attention to the greatest of stories, to the Biblical story, which begins, "In the beginning God," and ends, "Come, Lord Jesus!" It begins with God in eternal glory; it ends with us drawn into that eternal glory. In the middle is the Lord Jesus Christ. The eternal Son, in the Father's bosom, has always had the privilege of gazing on the Father face-to-face. But now, as the risen and ascended human, he does so as man also. There is a human gazing on God face-to-face. The Father's gaze confers glory. It confers pleasure: "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." The Lord Jesus Christ returns that gaze in worship. He is the liturgist with a liturgy (Heb 8:2, 6). He is the chief worshiper.

We are invited into this relationship. When we are in Christ, our life is hid with Christ on high. We too will one day see God face-to-face and hear him say, "You are my beloved daughter, my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased," as he looks on us with pleasure, conferring glory unimaginable.

How do people change? We are changed by what we look at. We imitate what we see. Throughout the week our gaze has been drawn away to things not worthy of imitation. God bids us come and seek his face and be transformed into his image perfectly expressed in Christ Jesus.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:18)

Lord God, the light of the minds that know you, the life of the souls that love you, and the strength of the hearts that serve you: Help us...so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, whom to serve is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord... Amen. (Collect for the Feast of Augustine of Hippo, August 28)

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*
(Num 6:24-26)

© 2019 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino