

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

Second Sunday after the Epiphany (2022)

We Shall See God, Face to Face

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“Moses said to the LORD, ‘See, you say to me, ‘Bring up this people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” And he said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”” (Exodus 33:12–14, ESV)

In the Gospel Reading for today, St. John tells us of the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine, and he says, *“This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory.”* His miracle of turning water into wine convinced His apostles that He was more than some ordinary man. They believed there was something very special about this Man, and St. John says, *“his disciples believed in him.”* (John 2:11, ESV) But that faith engendered by this first sign of Jesus was not always a strong faith. On more than one occasion our Lord had to rebuke His apostles, saying, “O you of little faith.” But should this surprise us when we also know how unfaithful the people of God were even after their rescue from Egypt. Having just been eyewitnesses and participants of God’s signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea, the people quickly abandon God at the first sign of stress. In fear they sought other gods. Giving up on God and Moses turning to worship an idol, a golden calf, and we cannot help but say, “O you of little faith!” It is the disloyalty of these people that brings us to our Old Testament Reading for today.

When the people abandoned Him and turned to idol worship, God was greatly displeased. He was angry. So angry that He said to Moses, *“I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.”* (Exodus 32:9–10, ESV) God was ready to destroy them all. But Moses intervened and asked God, *“O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?”* These people are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whom God had promised to make into a great nation. So Moses prays, Please God, *“Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people.”* (Exodus 32:11–12, ESV) Scripture then tells us, *“The LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.”* (Exodus 32:14, ESV)

The prayer of Moses was answered, God would not destroy these people. God tells Moses, *“Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give it.’”* (Exodus 33:1, ESV) These words of God were comforting to Moses, God would guide them to the Promised Land. But not so fast for God now tells Moses, *“Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”* (Exodus 33:3, ESV) Instead of leading the people Himself, God said He would send an angel to lead them (Ex. 33:2). When the people heard this news, they were greatly distressed. Why, they asked, has God abandoned us? But He hadn’t abandoned them, they had abandoned Him.

These conversations between God and Moses were one-on-one. They were so on Mt. Sinai and in the tent that Moses had pitched outside the camp where he could meet with God. Each of these meetings were intimate moments between God and Moses. Scripture tells us that during these meetings God would, ***“speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.” (Exodus 33:11, ESV)*** It is during one of the conversations that our Old Testament Reading for today begins.

Distressed that God was not going to lead the people to the Promised Land, Moses begins to intercede on behalf of the people, pleading with God in prayer, asking Him to change His mind and lead His people. Moses closes his petition asking God, ***“For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?” (Exodus 33:16, ESV)*** Thus, Moses asks God, if You are not with us, how will the world know we are Your people? How indeed! The pleas of Moses touch God’s heart and He responds, saying, ***“This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” (Exodus 33:17, ESV)*** Moses, is greatly relieved and asks God to, ***“Please show me your glory.” (Exodus 33:18, ESV)*** Moses, who has had intimate conversations with God had never seen the true God. So he pleads, let me see You Heavenly Father. Let me see Your glory, let me see You as You truly are. But this could not be, for any man who sees the face of God must forfeit his life. But God, loving Moses as He does, says to him, ***“Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.” (Exodus 33:21–23, ESV)*** Moses will see the true glory of the Lord, but only briefly and then only from the back of God.

In Exodus 33:11, the Scriptures say that God spoke with Moses face-to-face, but didn’t we just read that God said anyone who sees His face must die. So, we cannot help but ask, what does Scripture mean when it says Moses saw God face-to-face. The Church has always taught that in these encounters between Moses and God, God never appeared to Moses in all His glory, but appeared in some form that human weakness could bear. Such as the time He came to Moses in the burning bush. This was also true of God’s encounters with the patriarchs and the prophets, He came in a form they could bear, never in His full glory. We will see God as He truly is when He calls us to our heavenly home.

Most often when God hides His face from His people, it is during times of judgment. Without Moses’s pleas for mercy, God would have hidden Himself from the Israelites. After the fall, as a judgment, God drove man from the Garden of Eden, thus separating Himself, hiding Himself from man. In His judgment He withdrew from Saul, and He also hid His face from David having been offended by David’s grievous sin. Thus, in our text God hides His face from His people calling them a “stiff-necked people.”

But the good news of our text is despite their sin, God did not withdraw from His people, but fulfilled His promise to Moses. In the same way, God manifests His presence to us. He has not forgotten us, and He is working on our behalf as I speak.

In our text we see the power of intercession and through that intercession we see God revoking His threat to withdraw. Instead of withdrawal, God promises His gracious presence. In following Moses’ example of prayer, we who confess faith in God’s beloved Son know we can come before Him in boldness, trusting in God’s grace for the sake of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ. God’s presence is the highest blessing we can enjoy. It is the blessing that enriches every other blessing. The power of prayer is without boundary, for it is the power of God to answer. Not that

He will answer all our petitions, for more often than we want to admit, our petitions are asked with a spirit of self-seeking. But when our prayers are true petitions that desire to promote God's glory and help forward our salvation or the salvation or physical help of others, then we can with all assurance believe what St. James tells us, "***The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.***" (James 5:16, *ESV*) Such prayers are conversations with God face-to-face.

Such prayers are to be prayed when sullen and darkened days come upon us, when judgment appears to have fallen upon us and Satan seems to have gotten the upper hand on our civilization and church and all appears lost. When we begin to realize our frailty and we begin to fear, even despair in our hearts. When we begin to feel as though we are ships without moorings, tossed to and fro in the storm of life, sailing without chart or compass. At such times we long for a voice of reason and assurance, for a light beaming in the darkness, for peace and safety, thus, we cry out, "Where is God? Is He still with us? If He is, why doesn't He do something about the world we are compelled to live in with fear and trepidation?"

At such times we plead, God, Moses asked that You would be the One who would, "***bring up this people;***" therefore, we ask, bring us up with Your guiding hand. In this time of COVID when our elected leaders are teaching us to fear each other and our assemblies in Your name, give us courage to trust in You. To trust in the promises of the Gospel. Show us Your presence through the voice of the Gospel. Let us see You face-to-face in Your Incarnate Son. Lead us to point others to Your Son that they, too, may see His power to calm the raging sea of life as His presence goes with us to the Promised Land of heaven.

As God revealed Himself to Moses on the mountain and in the tent, speaking with him face-to-face, Jesus revealed His identity through His first sign, the miracle of turning water into wine, letting all who witnessed this miracle see God, face-to-face. Today, through the Word of the Gospel and His visible means of the Gospel, Baptism, Holy Communion, and Absolution, God comes to us and communicates with us, face-to-face. We see Him face-to-face in the comforting Good News of the Gospel as He promises eternal life to all who believe in His Incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. He lets us see Him face-to-face in the blessed waters of Baptism, where combined with His Word we are cleansed of all sin, and our hearts are filled with the indwelling third person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit. He lets us see Him face-to-face when His Son invites us forward to the Altar rail, bridging the divide between heaven and earth, coming to us in, with, and under the bread and wine of Holy Communion that thereby we may partake of His true body and blood given us to eat and drink for the forgiveness of our sins. And God's Holy Son lets us see Him and His Father face-to-face through the voice of the pastor, who stands in the stead of and by the command of Jesus, personally assuring God's people that He forgive their sins. Through each of these means God bridges the gulf between heaven and earth and communes with His people in a personal way, face-to-face, forgiving their sins. Oh, Holy Father, how we yearn that the world could see You face-to-face as we do, seeing Your love, Your grace, and Your mercy.

These great blessings of the Gospel engender and strengthen faith in the Incarnate Son of God. Through Christ, God chose a way to manifest Himself before His creation without the threat of death to those who see Him face-to-face. He chose to take on our flesh, our humanity, to become one of us that He could rescue us from sin, death, and the devil. That He could "***bring us up***" to be with Him in His Promised Land of milk and honey, His kingdom of glory, His Paradise, His heaven. He chose to become one of us so we could look upon His face and see His compassion, a compassion so great that He was willing to take on our flesh and suffer and die in our place that our sins could be forgiven. Through faith we see Him now face-to-face, and for all who believe in His atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness of their sins, but a day will come when God will not have to hide us in the cleft of a rock, shielding us from His glory, for on that day we shall stand

in His glory and we shall see Him as He is, seeing His true glory, face-to-face, in His heavenly home. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.