

# God Invites Us To Approach and See His Glory

Exodus 24:9-18 • 2023-02-19 • Transfiguration Sunday



Have you ever felt completely out of your element when visiting a place? If you are not familiar with a place it can really make you feel out-of-sorts. I once took a language immersion trip to central Mexico. I thought that I would probably be comfortable only speaking Spanish and be able to navigate my way. But after a long flight and a late-night bus ride even the English-speaking part of my brain was tired. We arrived at a dimly lit street corner. And then I left the group and got into a cab. The streets were dark. I had never been to that part of the world. And the cab driver didn't speak my native language. And I had no idea where we were headed. I began to feel like I was out of my comfort zone and unsure of what was ahead.

Different people feel out of place in different ways. A library bookworm might be out of place in a crowded concert. On the other hand, some others might feel out of place in a quiet and empty library. But there's one place everyone should feel out of sorts and uncomfortable: in the presence of God. And, yes, I know that God fills heaven and earth. He is always present everywhere. But God's Word makes clear that he makes himself present in a special way with people. We find throughout the pages of Scripture times when people recognized they were in the presence of a holy God. And they recognize that to stand in God's holy presence is an awesome thing. They are beyond their comfort zone and out of their element. How about you? How would you feel when in his holy presence?

This transfiguration Sunday we will look at one of the first times God invited sinners into his presence. And we will see why we don't need to feel afraid or uncomfortable to approach God's holy presence.

God first made his presence known when he interacted with Adam and Eve. For them, it was not out of the ordinary to recognize that God was present in a special way with them. As sinless and holy they were able to interact directly with their holy Creator. They were unafraid and completely comfortable being in his presence. But that all changed in one terrible day. After they questioned God's goodness and listened to the lies of the devil, they lost access to God. It began with them trying to hide from the presence of God. And it ended with them shut out from his presence and cast out of the garden he had made for them in paradise. They lost the right to approach God. Instead, they would live in a world under a curse because of their sin. They would turn back to dust. Anything higher than the dust was out of their element. They, and all their children born from them, were unrighteous, condemned sinners, lost in a dark world.

But in Exodus 24 we read about the start of God's great plan to reverse this sad separation between himself and sinners. It is the first step in a grand plan to restore the relationship. I don't think it is an overstatement to say that the events of this chapter shape the entire history and writing of the Old Testament. For the first time in recorded human history God invited sinners to come into his presence.

The people of Israel were camped at Mount Sinai. God made his presence known by the way he spoke the Ten Commandments to them. He terrified the people with his thundering voice. He emphasized how they could not approach his holy presence. He commanded them not to even set foot near the base of the mountain. His presence became known by sounds of trumpet, thunder, and lightning. A dense cloud covered the mountain. This experience was so terrifying the people said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die." And so, that is what Moses did. He approached God alone.

Do we view God with such awe and with such trembling? If he is the one who made all things and whose commands we have broken, ought we not to tremble at the very thought of approaching him? He is not a God to trifle with or belittle. How would you feel if you heard the thunder, the trumpets, saw the lightning, and witnessed the fiery cloud of his glory?

But Moses came down with a shocking message. He told Aaron, two of Aaron's sons, and the seventy elders of Israel, "Come up to the Lord. He wants you to come near and worship." They prepared to come up the mountain to meet their God. They offered up a sacrifice for sin and a fellowship sacrifice. Moses read the words of God's covenant with them. They responded in agreement. And then Moses sprinkled the blood from the sacrifice on them and said, "This is the blood of the covenant." By this sacred ritual they entered into a solemn agreement with God, a covenant. And by their sacrifices they offered up blood for their sins and expressed desire to be in fellowship with God.

That brings us to what we read in our worship this Sunday. Moses and the leaders of Israel went up. And they saw the God of Israel. Apparently, they were either not able to even look up directly at God because the only thing Moses recorded is what they saw at his feet, a bright blue pavement like the sky. No doubt God veiled his glory so that the people would not die. But it says very plainly here, "They saw God." And then they expressed fellowship as they ate and drank the food which would have been the meal from the fellowship sacrifice. By that meal they not only entered God's presence, but expressed peace with God. They saw God! And God did not lift a hand to strike them -even though they were sinners. And they ate and drank in his presence at peace.

This is the first time any sinner ate and drank in God's holy presence and beheld God's glory since Adam and Eve first took a bite of the forbidden fruit in the garden. How is this possible?

God invited them. He graciously came down from his holy throne to be with them. And even though they were terrified to be in his presence, he invited them to approach, to eat, to drink and to see God. And he made it possible by inviting them into a covenant relationship in which he would deal with them. Moses went further up the mountain by himself and was gone for forty days and forty nights. The cloud that filled the mountaintop was described as “the glory of the Lord.” And to the people of Israel, it looked like a consuming fire.

But when Moses returned, they had already broken their side of the covenant and worshipped an idol they made. They might have been invited to approach God, but they were still out of their element. The presence of God they had just enjoyed was so close but so far away now. How could they return to face him after what they had done?

How could we ever come to face God? He invites us to come into his presence daily. Whenever we open his Word Jesus says, “wherever two or three gather in my name, I am with you.” (Mt 18) God is present. When we sing our hymns and read his Word, he is here among us. And in baptism we are promised we have “received the gift of the holy Spirit” (Acts 2). God is present. And when we partake of his meal he says we receive his own body and blood. It is the blood of the covenant which establishes peace with God so that we eat and drink in his presence and his body and blood are present with the bread and wine. How could we ever think ourselves worthy of all this? Do we honor his Word and sacraments like we ought? Or do we at times, like ancient Israel, despise his invitation and forget about his Word? Sometimes we fashion other things to devote ourselves to which take the place of our love for God. Dare we as sinners to approach our holy God, have his Spirit dwell within, and partake of his holy supper? If you don’t think that you are out of your element when you worship him and are fed by him, you might need to open your eyes!

It would never work to have a sinful man approach a holy God. No one could ever reach such a height. Every man and woman will always be unworthy and out of their element. Except for one man. Since we could not approach our God. He first approached us. The Son of God came down. He didn’t speak with thunder or look like fire. He ate and drank with his disciples. He came down to be a true man.

But he was always true God. Jesus took three of his closest disciples up on a mountain one day to pray. And there those disciples realized just what God was doing for them. Jesus’ face changed and shone like the sun. His clothes became as bright as light. And they saw the Son of God reveal a sight of his glory. And as if being in the presence of the glorious sight of Jesus wasn’t enough two prominent men appeared. They were not dead but living. Moses was there. And the great prophet Elijah. Peter was out of his element and stammered something which he later acknowledged he only said because he didn’t know what to say. Then that same cloud that had surrounded Mount Sinai enveloped them. Peter later recorded it and called it “the Majestic Glory.” A voice spoke from the cloud which caused the disciples to fall face down in terror. They were in the presence of God and knew they were far out of their comfort zone. They could not gaze at the glory or bear the weight.

But so that we could approach a glorious God he came in lowliness to approach us. A covenant could not be kept by sinners that would please God. So, he sent his Son to keep it in our place. And when the voice spoke there was only one man who was worthy to stand in the presence of his Father. *“This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased. Listen to him.”* Jesus was in his element. As the Son of God from all eternity he alone was worthy to stand.

Later he would establish the fellowship meal as he gave the body and blood that were part of the sacrifice. And he offered up his body and blood as the sacrifice to make the covenant complete. As he hung on the cross, the Son was cast out from the presence of his Father. He was holy, but he was bearing our sins, our separation.

Just as Israel could not approach God without an invitation, we could never. But the invitation is there. “Come to me,” says the Son. “And I will give you rest.” Though we are sinners pouring less than pure water the promise is there “Receive the gift of the holy spirit.” We are cleansed in baptism and have access to God. We gather in his name and he chooses to come because he has invited us. And that we might be assured and part of that covenant he made the sacrifice on our behalf. “Take and eat. This is my body. Take and drink. This is my blood.” We eat and drink in his house, and we are at peace with our God. And the risen Son will one day invite us to eat at his eternal feast. What was briefly true of the leaders of Israel and the disciples on the mount will be true for all believers: they saw God, and they ate and drank. And God did not lift a hand against them. They are at peace forever!

On that trip I took to Mexico there was another occasion when almost everyone in our traveling group felt out of their element. We decided to head to a restaurant one evening. Upon arriving we asked if we could have a table. I don’t know if the place had already closed for the night and they opened for us, or if they were just saving power, but they led us to a dark room. They had us sit there in this dark room with only the slightest lighting. The place fell silent, and we wondered if we had made a mistake. One of our group leaders joked, “vamos a morir.” “We are going to die.” We laughed at that a little, but remained unnerved until they turned on some of the lights. Finally, someone came to take our order. That is how we should feel when we try to invite ourselves into God’s presence. But the light has come. And soon the feast will begin. God invites us to come into his presence now and forever. Be at peace with him as your host. He invites us to approach and see his glory!

