

Majesty on Mount Sinai

Exodus 19: 10 – 20

June 13, 2010

I. Introduction

- A. To begin with this morning, I would invite you to use your imagination a little
 - 1. And envision ourselves as not only being outdoors
 - a. But, in your mind's eye, think of seeing a very large mountain in front of you
- A. Those of you who trace your family roots back to Switzerland
 - 1. Should have no trouble imagining a tall peak in the Swiss Alps
- A. Or some of us have seen the Rocky Mountains in the western US
 - 1. Mount Siani was not as tall as the highest peaks in either of those mountain ranges
 - a. But in terms of its rugged beauty, that's what I would compare it to
- A. Actually, I've done a bit of hiking in the Colorado Rockies back a few years ago
 - 1. And one of the things I discovered is that a mountain usually looks more beautiful
 - a. From a distance than it does up close
- A. One mountain that my brother and I climbed looked from the bottom
 - 1. Like an easy, half-day hike – until we were part of the way up
- A. And then, the higher we climbed, the farther away the top seemed to be
 - 1. Until finally we made it to the peak, and then the view made it all worthwhile
- A. I really did feel close to God up there on the mountain
 - 1. But I'm not sure if it was because of being so high
 - a. Or because the lack of oxygen made it so hard to breathe
- A. Mountains play an important role in many Biblical accounts
 - 1. Especially, it seems, in stories that have to do with God speaking to humans
 - a. Revealing the nature or characteristics of God
 - (1) Even God's love and desire for communication and fellowship with us
- A. Today, and over the next several weeks, I will be "borrowing" texts and themes
 - 1. For our sermons from the material published for VBS this year
 - a. All focused around Bible stories that are connected with mountains
- A. Next Sunday, we will look at the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal
 - 1. And the clash between cosmic forces of good and evil on the top of Mt. Carmel
- A. The rest of the texts will be from the NT – involving mystery, prayer and teaching
 - 1. As Jesus spent time on the mountains of Judea and Galilee

- A. And while we won't be looking at stories that are directly connected
 - 1. We might also remember that the city of Jerusalem
 - a. With its temple representing the dwelling or meeting place with God
 - (1) Is located on a high hill, often referred to as Mount Zion
 - 2. We still sing the song – “We’re marching upward to Zion”
 - a. In reference to that earthly temple, but also to the “new Jerusalem”
 - (1) As the Book of Revelation calls the heavenly dwelling place of God
- A. So prepare yourselves to do some mountain climbing for the next several weeks
 - 1. In many ways, it's a fitting symbol of our journey through life
 - a. As we meet with God on the mountain tops
 - (1) And as our journey moves us ever closer to heavenly home

II. The children of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

- A. That we heard about in God's covenant with Abram last Sunday
 - 1. Were also on a march at the time of the account in our scripture passage today
- A. Freed from captivity in Egypt, by direct intervention of God on their behalf
 - 1. They are traveling through a wilderness area that probably more closely resembled
 - a. The drier, more arid regions of some of our southwestern states
 - (1) Than the fertile hills and valleys of Wayne and Holmes Counties
- A. They've been “camping out” in this barren land for three months by now
 - 1. Traveling on foot day after day, and then stopping to rest from time to time
- A. Hundreds of thousands of men, women and children, Bible scholars tell us
 - 1. Carrying whatever possessions they had and could bring with them from Egypt
- A. Some of you, I know, enjoy hiking or walking, for pleasure or exercise
 - 1. But, can you imagine traveling that way for days and weeks at a time
 - a. Gives me a different perspective on the griping and complaining
 - (1) That they became known for during this journey
- A. But here they are, camping at the foot of Mount Sinai
 - 1. Do you still have that picture in your mind that we talked about earlier?
 - a. Tall, rugged mountain peaks soaring up into the blue sky
 - (1) Clouds barely skimming over or surrounding the highest points
- A. And then imagine you are there, and the word comes around
 - 1. That Moses, fearless leader of this great crowd of people
 - a. Has climbed up on Mount Sinai to talk with Yahweh, God

- A. If you are a descendant of Abraham, you've probably heard the stories
 - 1. Of this God who spoke to your ancestors
- A. Even while you were a slave in Egypt, there likely was some organized worship
 - 1. Of Yahweh, although many people seem to have been influenced
 - a. By the Egyptian worship of other gods as well
- A. You've experienced the fear of having the Egyptian army chasing after you
 - 1. When this journey out of Egypt began
 - a. And saw how Yahweh delivered you in the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea
- A. I don't know exactly what your image of this God is by now
 - 1. But imagine the excitement as the news spreads across camp
 - a. That Moses is meeting this great and mighty Yahweh on the mountain
- A. What would it be like to actually see God and speak with him
 - 1. Would it make you want to get closer? Perhaps partway up the mountain, too
 - a. Or, as we saw in the drama, would we be want to stay as far away as possible
- A. It was Yogi Berra who once said - You can observe a lot by watching.
 - 1. No doubt true, even if the statement doesn't make a whole lot of sense
- A. And I think those people, camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai
 - 1. Including you and me if we had been there
 - a. Would have been watching pretty closely to observe what was happening
 - (1) When Moses went up on the mountain
 - b. And then came down to tell what he had heard from God up there
- A. And Yahweh was very clear, in the messages that Moses heard
 - 1. When the presence of Yahweh is resting on the mountain, it is sacred ground
 - a. No one, not even an animal is allowed to so much as touch the mountain
 - 2. Until everyone is properly prepared and until the trumpet sounds
 - a. If anyone but Moses touches the mountain before that time
 - (1) They are to be put to death
- A. What do you suppose you might be thinking about this God by now?
 - 1. Does this make you want to get closer, or stay farther away
- A. And then, after everyone has washed their clothes, probably including a bath -
 - 1. Wash behind your ears, you don't want to have a spot of dirt anywhere on you
 - a. And Moses has performed a ceremony for inward cleansing as well
 - 2. Morning dawns on the third day, and what a sight meets your eyes

- A. The top of the mountain has disappeared in a cloud of thick, dark smoke
 - 1. The word comes that Yahweh has descended on the mountain with fire
 - a. Lightning is flashing, thunder is booming in your ears, and then...
- A. The piercing sound of a trumpet blasts across the camp
 - 1. Louder and longer than you have ever heard before
 - a. So loud that it makes your heart race and your hands shake
- A. And then Moses says, That's the signal, come on folks, let's go up to the mountain
 - 1. I'm surprised anyone moved out of their tracks
 - a. But our scripture says they people went and stood in front of the mountain
 - 2. While the sound of the trumpet got even louder
 - a. And now it's not just your hands, but the whole mountain is shaking
 - 3. I'm guessing there wasn't anyone sleeping in church that morning, Amen?
- A. As incredible as it seems, Moses climbs up the mountain again
 - 1. Up toward the billowing smoke, up where the lightning is flashing
 - a. And he speaks to God, and in the voice of the thunder, God speaks to Moses
 - 2. First, to repeat the warning that no one else should come up on the mountain
 - a. Although it's hard to imagine anyone needed to hear that warning again
 - 3. Next, that Moses' brother, Aaron should come up the mountain with him
 - a. Wasn't that nice of God to allow Moses to have some company up there
 - 4. And then, God spoke the words of what we know as the Ten Commandments
 - a. Beginning with – I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt
 - (1) Out of the bondage of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me
- A. How could they possibly think of worshipping any other god
 - 1. After this awesome experience of the majesty and glory of Yahweh
- A. And yet, surprisely soon, the people that were gathered at Mt. Sinai that day
 - 1. Would persuade Aaron to make golden images for them to worship
 - a. When it seemed that Moses might never come back down from that mountain
- A. That's why I believe it is important for us to be reminded...often
 - 1. Of the majesty and glory of the God we serve
- A. Not that we should be afraid of God, Moses would tell the people later
 - 1. That it was not God they should be afraid of
 - a. But God gave them this display of majesty so they would learn to fear
 - (1) The wrath and judgment of God against the sin in their hearts and lives

- A. That's why they needed to prepare themselves, wash their clothes, be purified
 - 1. Before they came into God's presence on the mountain
 - a. Otherwise their very lives were in danger
- A. God is holy, perfect in nature and character
 - 1. And the God we see on Mt. Sinai requires that same holiness, same perfection
 - a. In the people who dare to come into his presence
- A. The washing of clothing, or even of the body, can never achieve that holiness/purity
 - 1. But it was symbolic of the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus
 - a. That "takes away the sin of the world"
- A. And it required the same thing of the people that day at Mt. Sinai –
 - 1. That is, they had to believe God and obey what he told them to do
 - a. That is the essence of faith, and it is the same for us today
- A. In a couple of weeks, we are planning a baptism service for one of our young people
 - 1. A pouring of water that symbolizes the same cleansing power
 - a. And again, the water itself has no power to take away sin
 - (1) But by faith and obedience, we trust that Jesus' blood can do it
- A. And that is what makes it possible for us to come into God's presence today without fear
 - 1. We don't need to physically climb to the top of the mountain to be with God
 - a. And I hope we don't need the smoke and fire, thunder and lightning to remind us
 - (1) Although a good trumpet blast now and then might help us to remember
 - 2. That the God we come to worship is a God of awesome majesty and power
 - a. A God that we can only approach in faith, believing and trusting in his word
 - (1) And in his righteousness to make us worthy of being in his presence
- III. There's an old hymn that we used to sing that included the words - "Take Time to Be Holy."
 - A. As someone once remarked, "It takes time to be holy; one cannot be holy in a hurry"
 - 1. We sometimes complain that professing Christians today are so little like Jesus
 - A. But if we stop to think how little time many of us spend in God's presence
 - 1. We should probably be more surprised at how much like Jesus we are
 - A. Why did God make such a big deal about this appearance to Abraham's descendants
 - 1. At Mt. Sinai – well it certainly wasn't for God's sake
 - a. God is not like the Wizard of Oz, who depended on special effects
 - (1) To impress those who came to him for his help
 - 2. God's majesty is so awesome that even the great mountain trembled in his presence

- A. I believe God simply wanted to make a lasting impression on the people that day
 - 1. And in spite of their unbelief and forgetfulness at times, God was successful
 - a. The story lives on today, and it still has the power to touch our lives
- A. So think of this story the next time you see a mountain, or a picture of a mountain
 - 1. Or even remember the mountain that you imagined in your mind this morning
 - a. And let yourself be reminded of the awesome majesty of the Yahweh, God
 - 2. Remember the great love of God as well
 - a. The love that was shown in Jesus and his willingness to die for us
 - (1) So that we can come without fear into the very presence of God
- A. The next time this earth hears a trumpet blast like the one on Mt. Sinai
 - 1. May be the day when Jesus comes again
 - a. Are we prepared to go up the mountain with him?