

Soul Food: Divine Encounter

When I was asked to preach this Sunday, I took a look at our prompt, and I reflected on what Divine Encounter is, the message of today's passage, and what might unite us all in its story. Whether you consider yourself a person of faith looking for direction, a parched skeptic needing anything to keep you going, or an agnostic who would welcome any relevant glimpse, I think one universal truth is that all of us are looking to know or experience God in some capacity. Throughout the world, we see people seeking to accomplish this by going on pilgrimages to holy sites, reading and studying sacred texts like the Bible, praying and hoping to receive an answer, and attending worship services like we are doing now. All of us are seeking to get a glimpse of the divine in something, to receive a jolt of the spiritual, and to ultimately be told that we are not alone in the universe, that there is hope, and there is direction for our lives. And this desire for encounter is the backdrop to today's passage of scripture. (Pray)

Most of us are familiar, in part, with the story of Moses. Perhaps we've seen the children's animated movie *The Prince of Egypt*, maybe we've attended a Passover Seder, or maybe we've recently read the book of Exodus, maybe less of us there. Wherever you are, I think we could all use a refresher as we get into today's story. Moses was a Hebrew raised in Egypt at a time when the people of God were enslaved. Raised by the Egyptian ruling class, Moses did not know the history of his people, the promises proclaimed to his ancestor Abraham about God wanting to make a holy people through his lineage, or the identity of the creator God that would soon become known to him - one night, Moses stumbled upon God, speaking through a burning bush (weird), proclaiming that our protagonist would be used to free the people and deliver them to the "Promised Land" where they would be a people set

apart as a holy nation. Now, Moses had his doubts about all of this, but eventually followed the voice's prompting, and we then have all the wonderful stories of Moses standing up to Pharaoh, a long ordeal with plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, and then, after so much drama, the people make it into the "Wilderness," a deserted space between Egypt and their destination.

But there was trouble upon entering the Wilderness. You see, the Hebrews were raised as Egyptians, they worshiped Egyptian gods, they participated in Egyptian customs, they wore Egyptian clothes, and so on, but when God called them out to be his holy nation, he wanted them to change their ways and learn to reflect who he was, what he cherished, and ultimately for them to be a representative of his identity to the other nations. This was in part to be accomplished by the people following the Ten Commandments, but spoiler alert: they failed. The people did exactly what they were raised to do.

In response to God liberating them from their captives, they were good Egyptians and they made a statue of a golden calf, to represent their new found God, and then bowed down to it and worshipped it as their saviour - YIKES. This is literally, overtly going against the agreement they just made with God by breaking the first of the Ten Commandments! They failed! Spectacularly! After all this, Moses interceded on behalf of the Hebrews, asking for them to be forgiven, and for a greater revelation of this liberating God to be revealed to them and to guide them more fully, and this is where today's passage begins.

Exodus 33:18-23 says, "Moses said, "Please show me your glory." And He said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD,' and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live."

And the LORD continued, “See, 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.” - The word of the Lord.

Okay, you can be honest with me, this is a weird passage, right? It's as clear as mud, okay? Let's take a deep breath and remember this is a very old piece of literature, it's written in an ancient language, by a culture completely foreign to us, and is filled with metaphors and allusions we aren't familiar with, but I'm going to help alleviate that! Remember what I said earlier, Moses is asking for God to reveal himself to him, a Divine Encounter, but what he asks is weird to us. What does “please show me your glory” actually mean? Glory is a prime example of what I call “Christianese.” It's a word used in the Christian tradition that has gained popularity, and is used somewhat frequently in our culture, but has lost much, if not all, of its original meaning.

Let me show you some examples of how we Americans might still use the word glory. After someone has trained a long time, participated in, and won an olympic medal, one might say, “she's basking in the glory of this victory.” Or perhaps, your favorite celebrity just won an oscar for best actor, and during their speech they might say, “I accept this not for my glory, but for God's glory!” And one more example, being a 90's kid, imagine Tony Hawk climbing to the top of a half-pipe, placing his skate board, getting ready to drop in, and do a 900, a trick no one had ever successfully landed, and whispering to himself “no guts, no glory.”

You see, we still use the word glory, but it's hard for us to pinpoint exactly what we mean by it, but to clue us in, all of the examples I just gave we might describe as a weighty or heavy situation.

And in Hebrew, glory means just this: heavy. You didn't know you were going to learn some ancient language today, did you? The word we translate glory in Hebrew is kavod. So how I might literally use kavod is to say, "wow, this bowling ball is kavod." But why would Moses say, "please show me your heaviness?" You see, in Hebrew, they use the word kavod, heavy, to describe someone's reputation and the weight that their presence brings, the awe they bring to a room. And if you think about it, we use this image of weight to describe things like this too. We might say, "that guy's throwing his weight around," or in describing a difficult situation, we might say, "he just received some heavy news." Or, if you've ever gotten the chance to meet your favorite celebrity that just won an oscar and gave a poignant speech, you might describe the atmosphere as heavy as you approach to receive their autograph - the weight of who they are could be tangibly felt in the room around them. In Moses asking, "please show me your heaviness," he means, "God, please show me your awe-inducing, tangible presence," and this is the prevailing image we should keep in mind as we read today's passage.

For example, we might find it demeaning that, in response to this heartfelt request, God shields Moses from his actual presence, but carrying the metaphor of kavod throughout the story, we are left with the idea that God's greatness is so hefty, so other, that if Moses were to actually see it in its fullness, he would be crushed and die. This is the imaginative reason as to why God hides Moses in the cleft of the rock. In order for Moses to even see a

glimpse of God requires him to be shielded inside a rock so as to not be crushed by the heavy presence of the creator of the universe. Does that make sense? In the following chapter, we see one of the most robust descriptions of God's character thus far in the Bible, but this only comes following the heavy weight and awe inspiring revelation of God's presence in this story.

Remember, at this point, Moses has grown close to God, he has been called to do miraculous works by and through his name, he has seen a nation of people set free from oppression, he has spoken to burning bushes, he has seen oceans split in two, and while God is very real to him, Moses still wanted more, something personal. He wanted to know what set this God apart from all the gods worshiped in Egypt, and the answer to this longing was the revelation of a being so great, so other, so heavy, that perceiving him face-to-face would thoroughly annihilate and break him.

A being that cannot be limited to the bounds of reality and imagination but resides over it as its creator.

You see, as Christians we believe in a God that is perceptible, one that is relational, and one that wants to be known, but we also need to be reminded at the immensity, the holiness, and the otherness of a God that is so outside of anything we can fathom. This is truly a heavy reality, and one that I don't think we recognize nearly enough in our pursuit of Divine Encounters. Nonetheless, we receive glimpses of this creator in and through his creation all the time. The Psalms proclaim that creation declares God's glory, his heaviness, his awe-inspiring reputation. But how do we see that? Where is it?

The answer to that question is learning to see the extraordinary in what we normally perceive as mundane. Let me put this into perspective. We live on a tiny, insignificant rock,

floating in an infinite vacuum of space, that is made up of improbable, mathematical perfections just to make life even slightly possible. Nevertheless, here, unlike anywhere in the perceivable universe, we see life flourish. Not only that, we don't just have life, but we have it abundantly. If we'd take the time to look and see, we would begin to recognize that we are surrounded by extravagant and gratuitous beauty that point to it being lovingly designed.

For instance, we aren't just limited to voices that can communicate, but sound itself harmonizes and can create melodies. Birds don't just chirp, they sing with each having its own song. We don't just see contrasting levels of black, white, and grey so that we can navigate through the world, but instead we are surrounded by a technicolor and dynamic landscape that is forever fluctuating with the times and seasons. We don't just eat to sustain ourselves, but food comes in a plethora of flavors and textures that can be combined to elicit feelings of pleasure and cause us to reminisce of meals shared with loved ones. All of these unique privileges point us to God's glory. While we could just live in a boring, mundane world, we are graced to be in a magnificent creation overflowing with grandeur that points to a creator that finds significance and meaning in beauty.

Now while we desire to have constant otherworldly experiences of the divine like Moses did, we cannot expect these all the time, and it's not up to us to provoke them to occur, nor can we blame God for not showering us with them when too often we overlook the glimpses that are forever surrounding us. In fact, a relentless search for these spiritual highs can often lead us to doubt, confusion, and depression when they don't show up in abundance, but when we begin to witness the extraordinary in the "mundane" we are invited to recognize the glory and reality of such a knowable, holy, and heavy God.

It is here, where we turn our attention from the noun, glory, to the action verb, glorify. When we recognize God's glory, the noun, being reflected in creation and we allow ourselves to respond to it, we enter into the act, the verb, of glorifying. At the beginning of this sermon, I mentioned the many ways that we seek to know and experience God, but all of these can easily be mundane. We can come to church and sing songs and never glorify. We can simply sing songs because it's what we do every Sunday, but when we make the conscious decision to recognize the extraordinary, see God in the beauty of music, harmony, and melody, and sing to recognize him, his creation, and his works, and the goodness we've been graced with, we move from the basic passivity of mundane to the extraordinary, heavy verb of glorify.

Through this, any and all actions can become glorifying through the act of imagination and recognizing the reality of God in our everyday life. For instance, there is a major difference between just putting on the jacket you always wear and noticing, appreciating, and praising the one that made warmth and physical comfort possible. When we make the subtle shift from noticing the lack of divine experience in our world to seeing the glory everywhere we are, we become aware of just how inundated we are with divine encounters.

The Apostle Paul said, "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God," and I invite you to step into this reality and begin noticing all of the glimpses of the divine around us. Stop and notice the gratuitous beauty of tonight's unique sunset and recognize that no one has ever seen, and never will again see, its exact composition. As we sit down to lunch momentarily, don't simply nourish yourself, but take a moment to cherish its flavors and textures like you might have never done before. And

perhaps, consider the story of the individual sitting next to you, the countless miracles that brought them to life, and all of the scientific phenomena that sustain them each and every day.

Sadly, too often, I do not think we recognize the beauty always surrounding us. We've grown complacent with the abundance we've already been graced with and grown despondent because of our blindedness to it. While we all long for divine encounter, we all too often want a feast, and we've grown to turn our noses up at the manna that greets us every morning, so I encourage you. If you want to be satiated, open your eyes to what's already there.

C.S. Lewis said, "It was when I was happiest that I longed most...The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing...to find the place where all the beauty came from." Friends, let us all begin to notice both the beauty and the longing in and around us, let us revel in the weight of creation and the luxurious love with which it was crafted, and let us begin to glorify the one who put it there. AMEN.