

Christ Presbyterian Church
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Petey Crowder
Moses: Tent of Meeting | Exodus 33:12-23

Over the past several weeks we've been looking at the life of Moses. Moses is one of the central characters of the Old Testament and the life of Israel. I will catch you up with where we've been over the last several weeks, but where we are this morning is in Exodus 33. Moses is leading the Israelite people toward the Promised Land, and he has a conversation with God. Listen to what God says in verse 3; this is God talking to Moses.

³ Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey [that is the Promised Land]; 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)]

Very simply, what God says is, "Moses, you and the people can keep going to the Promised Land. That's fine, but I'm not going to come with you." It's quite the predicament the Israelites find themselves in. How did they get here? The book of Genesis tells the story of God coming to a man named Abram (who we then call Abraham) and telling him the whole world will be blessed by Abraham's family. The rest of the book of Genesis is the story of Abraham's family wrestling with God and trying to understand who God is calling them to be. They end up—Abraham's grandchildren and great, great grandchildren—living in the land of Egypt where they grow as a nation, but then Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, decides to enslave them. Now, out of this enslavement a baby boy is born named Moses. Early in the book of Exodus, Moses escapes the grasp of Pharaoh and Pharaoh's people and ends up being in this weird twist, living in the palace being raised by Pharaoh's family. Then when he is a young man, Moses commits a crime and runs into the desert away from Egypt as a fugitive. As he's on the run, he gets caught up by a burning bush. And as he gets closer to the burning bush, God says, "Moses." Now, Moses is on the run as a murderer, but God says, "Moses, I'm going to use you. You're going to go back to Egypt and you're going to lead your people—lead My people—out of slavery to freedom." And so God starts to work in Moses's life, forming him through a man named Jethro who is his father-in-law. Moses goes back to Egypt and through a series of plagues (we looked at the ten plagues of Israel, each more dynamic and more powerful than the previous), God leads His people out of slavery and into the wilderness. On their journey they go through all kinds of trials. They cross through a sea on dry ground, they're fed manna and quail and they're given water, and then they come to a place in the middle of the desert called Mount Sinai. It is here that Moses goes up on the mountain while the people camp below so that he can hear the voice of God and be told how his people should live. While Moses was on the mountain getting the Ten Commandments, the people below were thinking, *this Moses guy is never coming back*. They decide (it's a brilliant idea), to take all of their gold and make a beautiful golden calf to worship because they haven't seen God, and they don't know if Moses is coming back. So, they start to worship the golden calf,

and then what happens? Moses comes back, right? Moses comes down the mountain and he says, *not good, not good*. God sees it and is like, *this is a disaster*. That's when He tells Moses, *You can go to the Promised Land, but I probably shouldn't come with you because if I come with you, it won't end well if you keep acting like this*. God says, you can go, but I won't come.

I was reminded of Lewis and Clark. In the early nineteenth century, Lewis and Clark led an expedition across the United States to explore the Northwest Territory. They were looking for a pathway to the Pacific Ocean, charting their path as they went. They knew they would run into the Rocky Mountains in the area of what we consider Idaho. They thought they would climb the first range of mountains and then see the Pacific Ocean. If you've seen a map you know that's not what happens, right? They go through the first range of mountains and they see . . . more mountains. It's a gut punch! *Oh, we thought we were almost there. We were on our way. Things were looking up*. This is what Moses' experience is. *Oh, we were almost there. Things were going so well. I just had this holy encounter with God on the mountain and these people just messed everything up*. This is a critical moment in the life of the nation of Israel. Will they walk away from God or will they become the people that God intends for them to be? You and I are familiar with this kind of uncertainty. We make big decisions in life sometimes, but we don't know how they're going to turn out. We've moved our family across the country for a job, we've decided to date someone, or marry someone. We've bought a house, changed jobs, started a company...we've risked something and we're left wondering *Where's this going? Will this lead us to the future we've intended? Will this work out?*

So, this morning we pick up the story where Israel's future, the future of God's people, hangs in the balance. They're not promised that things will go well. So Moses goes into this tent at the very end of the encampment—and the tent is on the edge because God is not happy with him—to negotiate with God. We're told that all of Israel stands outside their tents to watch and wait and see. What will the verdict be? This morning we get to eavesdrop on Moses' very intimate conversation with God.

¹² 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.' ¹³ 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." [Exodus 33:12 (ESV)]

So, God has said, *you can still go, I'll even send an angel with you, but I won't go*. But the thing is . . . without God, the Promised Land isn't the Promised Land. I'd be curious to know if there's some way to measure this. How many of us would just take the deal? We'd just go ahead and go to the Promised Land, right? God's not coming BUT it has milk and honey . . . I love those things! There's an angel that's coming, that sounds awesome! It sounds like a good deal, and don't underestimate. These people have been wandering for years in the desert. They have no home to go to. You don't think they'll take the deal? "Go to the Promised Land, an angel will come with you."

It's also tempting for us to over-spiritualize this and say something like, *if God doesn't go with them they'll fail*. That might be true on some level, but there are lots of nations in history who have flourished and who knew nothing of the God of Israel. So my point is that they could go to the Promised Land and they could set up a perfectly fine kingdom that has land, and wealth, and an army, and power and they could get along just fine, but the truth is they'll still be missing something. They'll be missing the presence of God. It won't be the Promised Land because God won't be there.

Many of us are good at creating "promised lands" in our own minds. You know that thing or that place where, if you can just get there, all will be well. You can almost taste it, right? You can almost see it. If we can only get there, life will be perfect; it will be so much better. Would you be willing to give up your vision of the Promised Land, to walk away from it, to drop it if it meant staying with God? If God said, "You can go to the Promised Land, it will be fine, but I won't go with you", would you choose—like Moses is choosing—to say, "God, if You're not going, I won't go either." What was much more important for Moses was to say, "God, come close. Forget the Promised Land. God, just come close." If you hear nothing else this morning about this text, I want you to know the heartbeat of what is happening in this conversation between God and Moses is that the basic thing needed for God's people to move forward in right relationship with Him—with the God who has redeemed them and who loves them, who has rescued them from Egypt—is to be close to God and to ask Him to be close to them.

One of my favorite places on earth is Salt Lake City. It's just beautiful. You can be in the city and you look around and for almost 360 degrees there are these beautiful, haunting mountains just pressing in. It's gorgeous, and the nearness of the mountains affects the city; they change the city. Now, this analogy pales in comparison, but without the mountains, the city wouldn't be the same. It might still be a fine city, but it wouldn't be the same. So it is with the Promised Land. The Promised Land might still be a fine place to live, but the people would miss the opportunities and the blessings that are available because God is in their midst, present, and powerful.

Let's look more at how God's closeness affects the nation of Israel:

¹⁴ And God said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." (So, God says, "I'll come). ¹⁵ And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶ 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 33:14-16 (ESV)]

See, the only reason that God's people are distinct is because of the presence of God, because he is close to them. Even though God already said, "Okay Moses, I'll go", Moses says again, "God, if You don't come, I won't go." And what we know is that if something is repeated in Scripture, it should cause our ears to perk up; it should cause us to sit up and pay attention. What Moses is trying to get the people to see, what God

is trying to get us to see, is that to be in right relationship with Him means that He is near. It means He is close and that He is present. In fact, there's nothing else unique about the people of God than that God is with them.

Most of us understand the idea that we start to act like the people we hang around. We tell this to our kids and our grandkids. We were told when we were children that if we hang around those people we'll start to act like them, right? They start to rub off on you. What you'll notice is that after the Christmas services are over, my family will go and spend time in Alabama, and when I come back a few days later I'll be saying "y'all" a lot more and my accent will be noticeably thicker, right? Because I hang around southern people and it just rubs off on me. The same thing is true with God. If God was close to the Israelites, they would start to be shaped by His character, but if He wasn't close, they would revert to whatever else they knew, and for them the way of life they knew was Egyptian slavery. For us, we often just revert to whatever messages we are bombarded with—messages that tell us *this is what a good life looks like*—because all day long we're getting messages from social media, from the news, and from other people in our society. *Here's what a good life looks like...and those are the things that start to shape us if God isn't close. We start to lose what makes us distinct. God repeatedly reminds Israel, repeatedly . . . I did not choose you because you were special. I did not choose you because you were rich. I did not choose you because you were powerful. In fact, it was the opposite. You had no land, and no wealth, and no influence, and that's what made you the right people for me to go to work.*

So, when we understand that we bring nothing to the table, and we invite God to come close, then God starts to do something in our lives. Are we okay being nothing special without God? Are you okay having God close and letting your identity be wrapped up in who God is? Now, what might that mean for us specifically? Let's continue in our text.

¹⁷ And the Lord said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." (So, God again agrees, "Yes, I will do this.") ¹⁸ Moses said, "Please show me your glory." ¹⁹ And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. [Exodus 33:17-19]

What God is trying to communicate to Moses is, *I will do this because I want to, not because you've earned it, but because of who I am.*

²⁰ But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." ²¹ And the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, ²² 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. ²³ Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen." [Exodus 33:20-23]

What Moses experiences here is that when you come close to God, you start to find out who you really are.

This summer how many of you tried to get a glimpse of the eclipse? It wasn't easy to see here in Minneapolis, was it? But none-the-less, at around 1:00/1:30PM we found ourselves milling about in the parking lot just outside looking into boxes at a cloudy sky. We had friends that drove all the way to places like Nebraska to see the eclipse, but the thing is, the eclipse is weird because we don't really look at it, right? You don't look directly at it. We're more than satisfied to catch a glimpse of it dimly, to see a reflection in a homemade box, right? Because the thing about an eclipse is, we don't need to look directly at it; it's the experience of something rare, of something that's once in a lifetime. So when you think about this moment for Moses, of being put in the cleft of a rock and God passing by, I don't want you to get caught up in what Moses saw. I want you to imagine what Moses experienced as God came near, because Moses continues to double down.

God, come with us.

God, if You don't go, I won't go.

God, we are nothing without You.

God, show me Your glory.

God, please come so close that I will never be the same. That it will be engrained in my brain and my life that I saw something so special that it will change me forever.

The thing is, when you come near to God, you find out who you really are. This past summer a friend called me and said, "I'm coming back from vacation and our house sitter said that she thought she saw a bat in the sink in our basement. Would you be willing to go over and check it out—see if the bat is still there? We think it's dead, but would you be willing to go over and check and see if it's still there?" And I said, "Sure, I'd love to." I didn't really want to, but how do you say no, right? So, I go over, I get in the house and on my way down the stairs, there's a kid's baseball bat, like a little foam bat. And I grab it because I thought *I need to be armed, it's a bat!* So, I go to the basement, I open up the door, and sure enough in the sink there's a little bat about the size of a donut just sitting there. So, what do I do? I take the baseball bat and I whack the sink several times and the bat doesn't move, so I think it's dead. I go outside to get a shovel, and back inside, I reach in the sink to scoop up the dead bat. All of a sudden, its wings extend and I scream! I ran out the door and called my friend and said, "I can't do it." Oh my goodness. How many of us, when we come close to God, when God comes near, we find out who we really are, and we find that we're holding on to inadequate and insufficient promised lands, and dreams and hopes that are nothing compared to what God has for us. When God comes close it erodes away all the fanciful visions we have of how special and unique and powerful we are on our own, because we are nothing in comparison to the God of the universe.

If you see nothing else in this story, I want you to see it's not about speculating what the hand of God looks like, or the backside of God as He passes by. It's about the truth that God was gracious enough to come close, and because God came close, Moses was never the same. God came close.

In this series about Moses, we haven't talked much about one of the unique roles that Moses plays in both the Old Testament and in the life of Israel, but it's very important.

Moses plays the role of mediator. Moses is the mediator between God and Israel. He stands in the gap for them. What that functionally means is that over and over and over again, Israel does something really dumb, but Moses goes before God and says, “God, don’t look at them. Look at me and remember the favor I have with You. Don’t treat them how they deserve to be treated, treat them how You would treat me.” And because Moses stands in the gap, God does not withdraw His presence and His blessings from Israel. Instead, God comes near and His nearness means all is well. And that’s the point. That God comes close. And so it is with Jesus.

Hebrews 12 tells us that Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. And in so doing, Jesus says, “God, don’t look at them. Look at Me and treat them how you would treat Me.” Jesus stands in the gap solely by His grace and that allows God to come near to us, to come close. Jesus is the God who comes close. We come into this space this morning, into this worship center, into this gathering of the body of Christ from all kinds of places—physical places, emotional places, spiritual places. I know all over this room we’re in different spots. No matter where you find yourself, where do you need God to come close? Where do you this morning, this week, need God to come near? Maybe God is calling you to enter into a relationship with Him on an intimate level for the very first time in your life. Maybe you need God to come close. Maybe He’s asking you to hold off on or to set aside your vision of your promised land so that He may come near. Maybe God wants to mend something in your life, to heal some brokenness—for you to walk away from the things that are causing pain in your life or causing pain in the lives of others. Maybe He’s asking you to take a risk and to trust that it will all be okay—that when you walk out on that ledge, you won’t be alone because God is near. Where do you need to say, “God, come close?” Where do you need to, like Moses, come to the point where all that matters is, *God, come near, be with me?* And when you ask God to come close, and you start moving toward Him, you will find Him moving toward you.

The four Gospels are fascinating because they all tell the story of Jesus differently. The Gospel of Mark starts with the message of Jesus and Jesus says, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is near.” Centuries after Moses had this very same conversation with God, Jesus reminds us that a relationship with God is rooted in the nearness of who God is, of the God who comes close. And so as you gather in worship, may you experience His nearness, and as you walk out of this place into the world, may you feel how close God is and that He desires that you would never be the same. May God’s presence rub off on you, and change you, and woo you, and transform you, and remind you that He has redeemed you and rescued you so that you may know for all the days of your life that God is close. Amen. Let’s pray.

Holy and loving God, we thank You that You are a God who comes close. That you are a God who loves us enough to not leave us to our own devices. We thank You for leaders in this story like Moses who earnestly and honestly sought Your face and stood in the gap the way that Jesus does for us, so that we may know that even though we don’t deserve it, You love us and You come close, and that only by Your mercy may we walk in right relationship with You. May that

transform us, and transform our relationships, and transform our church, and transform the world. We love You and praise You. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.