

*The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and commands I have written for their instruction." ... When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it,<sup>16</sup> and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud.<sup>17</sup> To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain.<sup>18</sup> Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. (Exodus 24:12,15-18)*

### Why Does God Reveal His Glory?

Many years ago, when I was in college, I took a survey course in psychology. The teacher claimed that at some big university, a psychology professor gave a final exam in which he asked only one question, and he wrote it in giant letters on the blackboard: "Why?" Some of the students wrote pages and pages trying to summarize all they had learned about why people do the things they do. But all those students failed. The passing students all left almost immediately and they fell into two groups. One group wrote a single word: "Because." They all got a C. The other group wrote two words and got an A. What were the words? "Why not?" Now I've never believed that story, even though I've heard it more than once. I think it's an urban legend. But if it really did happen, then clearly that psychology professor would've been trying to make a point in a pretty memorable way. Certainly, no one who took a test like that would forget it God did something like that in the portion of his word that we have before us today. He did something dramatic. He had a reason for doing it. What did he do? He revealed his glory. What was the reason? **Why does God reveal his glory?**

#### I.

**To show that he is really there.** This wasn't the first time he showed his glory. But it may have been the most famous time. The children of Israel had arrived at Mt. Sinai after marching up out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. God told the people to prepare for his coming. They were to purify themselves and build a barrier at the foot of the mountain so that they could not cross it. On the third day after they arrived, the glory of the LORD came down and settled on the mountain and completely covered it. God spoke out loud to the people and then six days later, Moses went up onto the mountain, where he stayed for forty days.

What did the glory of the LORD look like? The chapters around our text speak of smoke covering the mountain. In this passage, Moses writes, **"To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain."** Now, I've never been to Mt. Sinai, but since it is a mountain, I assume it's a fairly good sized piece of real estate. This was perhaps the most dramatic appearance of the glory of the LORD in the whole Bible.

But it wasn't the only one. In fact, in the Old Testament, the glory of the LORD appears so many times that I can't even list them all this morning. The earliest appearance was to Abraham, centuries before this. Moses saw the glory again and again, starting at the burning bush. It protected the Israelites from the Egyptian army and went ahead them the whole time they were in the wilderness. When Moses dedicated the tabernacle, the first worship facility, the glory of the LORD filled the sanctuary so that the priests could not enter and do their work. Almost six hundred years later, when King Solomon built the temple, the same thing happened. And centuries after that, when God was about to destroy Jerusalem and Solomon's temple, Ezekiel saw a vision of the glory of the LORD departing from the temple. So this powerful image appears throughout the Old Testament. But what does it mean? Very simply, it is the visible indication that God is present. Now, God doesn't have to show the glory of the LORD to be present. He's here with us now. But sometimes, God wanted to make his presence known in a dramatic way. So he came in fire and smoke, and he struck awe in the hearts of the people.

That presence of God had very intense implications for sinners. You see it in the way people reacted to it. I said before that when God came down on Mt. Sinai, he spoke aloud to the people. What did he say? He recited the Ten Commandments. And do you know how the people responded? They trembled with fear. They kept their distance. And they said to Moses, **"Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."** They didn't want to hear God's voice anymore because it terrified them. And they were right to feel that way. God had warned them not to go past the barrier at the foot of the

mountain because if they did, they would see God and die. What was this all about? Very simply, sin. The whole structure of the covenant that God gave at Mt. Sinai is designed to teach God's people that we are sinners, through and through. Our sin means that we deserve to die, both now and forever in hell. But God has provided a way to deal with our sin.

That is also the lesson of the glory of the LORD. Seeing God without the benefit of Christ was deadly because the totally holy God has to deal with sin. He has to punish sinners because that's what they deserve. God says to every person who has ever lived, **"Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."** Not do your best. Not have a standard of excellence. But be perfect. It's about more than God keeping a record of all the times that you and I have sinned. God certainly knows that. He knows all things. But when God descended on Mt. Sinai, the people weren't engaged in any of the sins that they later became famous for. They were there because God had brought them there to make them his people. They rejoiced to come. Yet, they were still sinful. Sin corrupts all that we are.

Understand what that means. Some people believe that it means that sin touches every part of us, that there's no part of us that isn't contaminated. That's true as far as it goes. But those same people also think that that does not mean that there's no good left in us – just that our hearts aren't perfect. We need God to make us all that we should be, but they believe there is some goodness left inside us. That's just not true, at least, not the way we were born. The way we were born, we were totally and completely sinful. St. Paul says that nothing good lives in our sinful nature. Before we had faith, we only had a sinful nature. So if we had to stand before the glory of the LORD on the basis of our lives and our hearts, we would be in trouble because on their own our hearts are totally corrupt.

That's a hard teaching for us to accept today. In fact, the Lutheran Confessions say that no one would ever accept it if God didn't say it in his word. But he did say it. And when his people came in faith to his mountain and his glory appeared, they were terrified and they were forbidden from coming up the mountain because even in our redeemed state, we still have that sinful nature that works against all that God is doing inside us.

But the glory of the LORD isn't just about law. When the angels appeared to the shepherds in Bethlehem, the glory of the Lord shown around them. When Isaiah spoke of the coming Messiah he said, **"The glory of the LORD will be revealed and all mankind will see it together."** When Jesus comes back, he will come in glory with all the angels accompanying him. That glory will not terrify us at all. Why not? Because it is the glory of God's love. It is the glory of the gospel. The greatest act of God's glory was the coming of Christ. He wasn't just a man. He was the Son of God, even though he hid his glory in that human body for 33 years. That's why the angels revealed it to the shepherds – so they would know who this baby was. That's why in our gospel lesson for today, Jesus went up on to another mountain and he revealed the glory of the Lord to Peter, James and John. Even then, those disciples were terrified. But God spoke to them and told them what this glory really means: **"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"**

God is well pleased with Jesus. He lived the perfect life that you and I cannot live. No part of him was corrupt. His heart was perfect and so was all his life. Because he was the Son of God, that perfect life and perfect heart count for all of us. On the mountain of transfiguration, Moses appeared with Jesus bathed in the glory of heaven and he looked into Jesus' transfigured face, because now he has no sin. He and Elijah talked with Jesus about his coming death. Then Jesus hid his glory again and he went down that mountain and he set out for Jerusalem to lay down his life so that we sinners are paid for. So that all the individual sins we've ever committed are washed away. So that the sin that infects our hearts and minds and souls and bodies is washed away. So that we now stand before God holy and righteous like Moses and Elijah did. In the gospel of Jesus Christ is a glory that will be ours, the glory of eternal life. When God takes all the sin out of our hearts, we will be able to look our Savior in the face with no fear or dread, because we will be perfectly holy

## II.

Every appearance of the glory of the LORD on this earth was temporary. It remained on Mt. Sinai for a year, but if you go to Mt. Sinai today, you'll see no trace of it. If you could find the spot where the parting of the Red Sea took place or where God filled the tabernacle with glory, you wouldn't see any trace of it there either. We only know about those events because God wrote them down in the Bible for us. If you study the appearances of his glory throughout the Old and New Testaments, you'll see that most of the time, if not all the

time, the glory of the LORD appears because God has something to say – something that he again preserves in his Word. So, **why does God show his glory? To reveal his word.**

Now, God doesn't need miracles to make his word work. He built the power of the Holy Spirit into the word. The word has the power to convince people that its message is true. In fact, every time it gives us faith or it strengthens our faith, God actually does a miracle. It may not be as dramatic as the glory of LORD covering Mt. Sinai with fire and smoke, but the miracle of faith is every bit as important as those dramatic events were.

But God did give those appearances to authenticate his word to witnesses. He was underlining that this was what he had to say. He was telling people of every age to sit up and pay attention to what he was telling us. At Mt. Sinai, the message God gave was the Old Covenant with all its sacrifices and laws, all of which were designed to prepare the people for Christ. At the transfiguration the message was different, but parallel. Christ was about to go to Jerusalem and offer the one sacrifice that pays for all our sins. He was about to complete his mission by dying and rising. In both cases, God wanted the witnesses who were there to see and understand.

The goal was to underline the message. For you and me, that message is the only way we get to see God's glory. I think it's funny. Most Americans picture the events of the Exodus and Mt. Sinai in terms of the Charlton Heston movie, *The Ten Commandments*. The glory of the Lord was far and away the hokiest looking scene in the whole movie. They obviously used cartoon animation to portray God as a pillar of fire. But if that visual helps you to see and understand what really happened there, I guess it's not all bad. The wonders God did for us in the Old Testament as he gathered a people that was to give us Christ, as he prepared them and prophesied to them and kept them on the path to Bethlehem and Calvary – those are the glory of God. But in truth, those miracles pale in comparison to the miracle of the Son of God taking on human flesh and laying down his life for us. God died so that we will live. The judge of all the earth was condemned in our place and punished for our sin. Or as one of our Lenten hymns says, "God the mighty maker died for man, the creature's sin."

That is God's greatest glory. Not his most dramatic or his most spectacular glory, at least not the way we see it here. In fact, for some people trudging through the Old Testament or bearing with a sermon like this may seem boring beyond all belief. But in the work of God to bring us Christ we see the glory of God's love. We see him willing to trade places with us so that we will live. And he gave us his word and he underlined that word with the glory of the LORD so that we know about that love, so that we have faith worked by the Holy Spirit, so that we will live with him forever. Amen.