

*Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."*

*<sup>19</sup> And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. <sup>20</sup> But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."*

*<sup>21</sup> Then the LORD said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. <sup>22</sup> When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. <sup>23</sup> Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen." ... <sup>5</sup> Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. <sup>6</sup> And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." (Exodus 33:18-23; 34:5-7)*

### Do You See God's Glory?

In 1966, the musicians Simon and Garfunkel released a recording of one of the best loved Christmas carols of all time, "Silent Night." Now, musicians release Christmas records every year and I bet we could find a version of "Silent Night" sung by almost every famous singer you could think of. But this version was a little bit different. In the background, they recorded a simulated news broadcast of the actual events from August 3<sup>rd</sup> of that year. So while Simon and Garfunkel were singing of heavenly peace, you hear the news reporter talking about race riots and protests and the Vietnam War. That contrast, I think, was intended to ask a question: what is real about our society? While they probably misunderstood what the angels were promising when they sang about peace on earth, it can be very hard to see and understand what God is doing in this sinful world. Today as we gather here again on Christmas morning to celebrate the birth of Christ, we too need to think about what is real in God's work.

#### I.

Moses helps us do that. Now, Moses was never even in Bethlehem. He died fifteen hundred years before Jesus was born and just before the children of Israel conquered the land we know as Israel today. Forty years before he died, Moses and the children of Israel were at Mt. Sinai. God had given them his covenant. He had just made a promise to Moses that he would go with his people on that march to the Promised Land. And Moses made a request that might just be the boldest thing that anyone in the Bible ever said to God: "**Now show me your glory.**" And the really surprising thing is that God gives him a qualified yes for an answer. God says, "**I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. ... But you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.**"

Moses had already seen God's glory in a number of different situations, so here, he was asking for something more. He wanted to see God himself. That's the real point. God's answer makes that clear. He says, "**You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.**" In the New Testament, St. Paul says that no one has seen or can see God. For a human being to look into God's face is to die. Why? Because we're sinners. Our sin means death. It means physical death – each and every one of us dies a little bit every day. Now, when we're young, we don't feel it so much. But when we reach middle age and we realize that our bodies don't do everything they used to, we start to get an inkling of it. When we reach old age, we feel it every day. But that isn't the only thing that the Bible means by death. Because we are sinners, when we die, we deserve to go to hell. So for a sinner to look God in the face is to invite his judgement, his death sentence and the eternal punishment in hell that God decrees for all sins. Moses was asking for something he simply could not have.

But God didn't shut Moses out completely. He put him into a cleft in a rock and he covered him with his hand as he passed by and Moses was allowed to see God from behind. It's not the same as seeing him face to face, but it's as close as any human being ever came. After this, in the Old Testament went on, God continued to reveal his glory at various times and places. Always, they were just glimpses, but sometimes they were amazing glimpses. When the tabernacle was dedicated and again five hundred years later when the temple

was dedicated, the glory of the LORD filled those worship spaces so that the priests could not enter. But none of those revelations was as complete as the one Moses had. Most people even in Israel never saw God's glory at all. Yet, God promised that would change. In his great prophecy about John the Baptist, Isaiah said, **"The glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it."**

How was God going to keep that promise? Through Christ. In Jesus' face we look into the face of God. In Christ and his work, we see the glory of the Lord. We see it in the love that God the Father showed when he sent his Son and in the love that God the Son showed when he took on human flesh and was born here for us. We see the glory of the Lord in the sacrifice Jesus made. He stood in our place and laid down his life so that we will live. We see the glory of the Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit which is built into the gospel, power that found us and claimed us and gave us faith, power that still changes our lives. All that is what Isaiah meant when he said that the glory of the Lord would be revealed and all mankind together would see it. He was talking about Jesus. Yes, the final and greatest fulfillment will be when Jesus returns. But every day that we hear about that love, every day that our sins are forgiven, we have a unique privilege to go back to Bethlehem and see something that wasn't obvious that day, but was absolutely real: God's glory had come into this world.

My friends, we have come here today to see that glory. Notice, that for us, God does not include the same warning he gave to Moses that we will die if we see him, because that warning comes from the law, from his wrath over our sins. With the same kind of love that God used when he covered Moses so that he would not look God in the face and die, God has hidden the glory of the Lord in human flesh so that he can show it to us and we will live with him forever. **Do you see God's glory? In Christ, we see it and live!**

## II.

When God promised to show Moses his glory, he said that he would cause all his goodness to pass in front of Moses and he would proclaim his name to Moses. Of course, that's what happened. God picked Moses up and set him into that cleft in the rock. God covered him with his hand and as he passed by, God proclaimed, **"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."** This has been called the John 3:16 of the Old Testament because it is *the* Old Testament summary of what God does and why. These words are quoted or paraphrased over and over again throughout the Old Testament.

But you can only see what these words really mean when you stand in the stable or at the foot of the cross or inside the empty tomb and hear them again. God proclaims his name to us, that is, God tells us who and what he really is, when he proclaims Christ to us. So picture that baby lying in a manger in Bethlehem wrapped in strips of cloth to keep him warm and think of God's name, the LORD, the LORD. If you look in your bulletin, you'll see that "the LORD" is written in all capital letters. This is God's proper name in the Old Testament. He is compassionate and gracious. Compassion is mercy. It's seeing someone in trouble and wanting to help. Ironically, it's what we feel when we see a baby who's hungry or cold and all he can do is cry. Even if it's not your baby, you want to do something. That's compassion. But when God is moved to compassion, it's not for that baby in the manger. It's for us. That baby in the manger is God's idea of mercy to us, because God himself came down and shivered in the cold Jewish night and had to cry to let his mother know he was hungry and had to grow up in a world that even we would consider primitive and hard. He did all that because even in that manger, the Son of God could clearly see how sin had destroyed our lives and earned us that death that sinners get when they look God in the face. So he became one of us to free us from that death.

He did that without even asking whether we really deserved it. Because not one of us does. We're all sinners who fall short of the glory of God. But God loves us anyway. He gives us what we need. That's grace. In that manger, we see the full measure of the grace of God: he gives us his own Son. He condemns his Son to a life of poverty and humiliation, a life when he can use his power to feed others but never to feed himself, a life when the very people he is dying for will taunt him on the cross and tell him to come down if he really is the Son of God. Jesus gives that life for us sinners who keep on sinning day after day, even after we know him. He owes us nothing but he gives us everything.

That baby in the manger is the God who tells us that he is slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness. Think about those poor parents that had to raise the one truly perfect child who ever lived. How many times did they mess up? I hope they were better parents than I have been, but if my life is any indication,

the perfect Son of God must have had many moments of disappointment in their efforts. Yet, the one time we see that in the scriptures – when Jesus was twelve and he was in the temple and it took them three days to figure out that that's where he'd be – we see no anger. And Jesus is just as slow to anger with us. Instead, we get love and faithfulness. He keeps all his promises to us. How many times have we promised to do better and then fallen into the same sin again? But his promise never fails. His forgiveness never ceases. His love for us continues and he blesses us sinners even when we're sinning.

So he maintains love to thousands – it goes on all our lives long. And he forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin. Even when we know better, he forgives us. But at the same time, he reminds us of the true nature of God's justice: he does not leave the guilty unpunished. As generation after generation follow the path of unbelief, they earn God's wrath and on Judgment Day they will feel it all. God points out to us here the twin pillars of his nature. He is a God of endless love and forgiveness, who will open his arms to the most horrible person. And he is a God of justice who never ceases to punish the wicked. How can both of those things be true? For us, it would be impossible. The most we could do is zigzag back and forth between justice and mercy. But God is both things all the time, completely and perfectly. And in Christ, all of God's punishment is satisfied. He takes it all for us. In Christ, all God's love and forgiveness is ours. He was born to die and suffer that punishment so we don't have to.

All that begins in the manger. **Can you see God's glory? We hear it proclaimed every time we hear the Gospel.** In Christ, we see just how rich God's wisdom and love are. In that tiny baby God hides his glory so that he can reveal it in his word. He hides his glory so that we sinners can see it in his love. He hides his glory so that on Judgment Day, we can look him in the face and live with him forever because Jesus took all our sins away. **Can you see God's glory?** It is the most real thing about this holiday, the most real thing in all the universe. And on Christmas, God gives it to us. Amen.