June 14, 2015 Don Riley

What Moses Could Not Handle: Exodus 33:12-23

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.’ 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.” And he said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”And he said to him, “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. 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?”

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.” Moses said, “Please show me your glory.” 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. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the LORD said, “Behold, 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.”

Let us pray, “Gracious heavenly Father, we ask that you would peel back the roof of this place and open up heaven. We ask that you would open up our spiritual eyes of faith and gather a glimpse of your glory. We pray this in the wonderful name of Jesus. Amen.”

I am grateful and honored to be in the pulpit of Woodland Presbyterian Church today. Thank you to this session and the sabbatical committee, your enthusiastic staff and your key disciple-making pastor, Matt Miller. Discipleship is key for spiritual growth, especially in adherence to the Great Commission in Matthew 28: 18-2-, to go make disciples. This is my passion and my heartbeat. To tell you about myself, I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet, but I work for a non-profit. Discipling Men is a 501(c)3 in the state of Tennessee committed to growing men in Christ by meeting with them, ministering to them, and mobilizing them. I am ordained in the Presbyterian Church in America, ministering primarily in Second Presbyterian Church and First Evangelical Church. I bring you greetings from Sandy Willson and Cole Huffman. Both Sandy and Cole think a great deal of how God is using Woodland and Matt Miller to grow men and women in Christ in advancing God’s kingdom. Sandy called and asked if I would do this. Cole meets with Matt. They know each other, the three of them each other well, and they are excited about what is happening in this church. And so this is very dangerous because I am a substitute. Remember in school, when subs came in your classroom and it was a field day to see what you could get away with, and this morning has been a demonstration! So quit playing those substitute games with me like switching your nametags.

It reminds me of the time Leighton Ford filled in for Billy Graham in a cathedral in Europe one time. He noticed the back of the balcony there was a stained glass window of various hues and colors. But in one place there was a piece of cardboard that had been inserted into the broken stained glass. Dr. Ford said that filling in for Billy Graham was like being that piece of cardboard inserted in the beautiful stained glass. An elderly lady met him at the back of the cathedral and said, “Dr. Ford, you may not have been a stained glass, but you certainly were a pane!”

This morning we being a 6 week series on God’s glory. God’s glory in prayer: three messages from the Old Testament and three messages from the New Testament. We sang earlier the Welsh hymn by Walter C. Smith “Immortal, invisible, God only wise.” Smith, a Free Church of Scotland hymnist, poet and minister understood the splendor of God’s glory. “In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes. Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days. Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise. To all, life Thou givest, to both great and small. In all life Thou livest the true life of all. We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, and wither and perish--but naught changeth Thee.” Moses was there. Moses could’ve written those words of our hymn because of the similarity of the high fresh air peaks of theology, but in Moses’ case he lived it. When we sang, “All laud we would render; O help us to see, ‘tis only the splendor of light hideth Thee,” it is in Exodus 33 Moses experiences it. And all in the chapter before, Moses as a leader implored the Lord on behalf of his people so much so that in chapter 32 verse 10 God actually said, “Leave me alone.” Then the people made a golden calf and Moses’ anger burned hot. He asked the question, “Who is on the Lord’s side?” Not “Are you republican or democrat?” No, “Who is on the Lord’s side?” Not Vols vs Florida. Not Memphis vs Ole Miss. Not Alabama vs Auburn. Not Duke vs. UNC. Who is on the Lord’s side? After the Lord repaid them with a plague, Moses still intervened.

In Exodus 33 verse 12, Moses asks, “Who will you send with us?” The Lord says His Presence. He is essentially saying, “I am going to go with you.” Where? Into the land of Canaan, but Moses wanted more. It raises an interesting challenge. Moses was hungry for more. Caught between the holiness of God and his love for the people, Moses wanted more. He wanted to know more about this God who promised to be with them. Moses, how much more do you really want? I mean, God called you at the burning bush. He’s a calling God. He directed you to Pharaoh to release the bound, brick-laying slaves. He’s a liberating God. God performed ten different miracles to astound Pharaoh. He’s a miraculous God. God parted the Red Sea so the Israelites could walk on dry riverbed, but only to drown the mud-dragging, chariot riding Egyptian army. He’s a protecting God. God provided manna in the wilderness. He’s a providing God. He brought forth water from the rock. He’s a thirst-quenching God. He called Moses into the Shekinah Glory to give him the ten commandments of the law, but still it was the time to ask for more. How easily we forget the way God has provided for us in the past. How easy is it for us to want more without acknowledging all that he has done for us. The fact that he’s been there when he called us, he’s been there when he liberated us, he’s been there when he’s performed miracles, when he has protected us, he’s been there when he’s provided for us. But notice in the passage, God never rebukes Moses for asking for more. In fact Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.” Our prayers should be for more. We should pray for more.

If somebody were to walk out from here as ask you, “What did he preach on?” I hope you would say, “He preached about my life.” Because what I am really preaching on is everything that is happening in your life right now. We will get to a better definition in a moment, but everything I am going to preach on is going to impact and to affect because God impacts and affects every aspect of our lives. Moses asked 3 questions. He asked, “Can I see your glory?” This is what Moses could not handle. Why could he not handle it? What are we called to do?

Exodus 33:18 Moses says, “Please show me your glory.” We don’t know if this is a prayer. Isn’t every conversation a prayer? Maybe his life was so consistent with God that he could ask these things. But God said no. This reminds me of the most famous person that ever lived. He prayed the most powerful prayer that had ever been prayed. In the Garden of Gethsemane when he said, “Lord, please take this cup,” and God said no. Moses asks if he can see God’s glory and God says no. He says he can’t handle it. He says that his goodness will pass by. He says he will proclaim his name, the Lord. He says that he will be gracious and show mercy. Goodness, his name, he would be gracious, and show mercy. Now think about this, in calling Moses to the burning bush, God had demonstrated his goodness. In confronting Pharaoh on behalf of the people of Israel, he was proclaiming his name. In producing the ten miracles and drowning the enemy, God was being gracious to him. In providing manna and water from the rock, God was showing him mercy. God had already shown him all these things, and yet Moses asks for more. Moses asks to see God’s glory. He says, “Look I’m going to make my goodness pass in front of you. I’m going to proclaim my name. I’ll be gracious to whom I’ll be gracious to. I’ll show mercy to whom I’ll show mercy, but you cannot see my face. Wait a minute. He asks to see his glory and God is talking about his face? His face. Moses wanted to see his glory.

But now we start to see the connection when he says, “You will stand on a rock. I will put you in the cleft of the rock and I will cover you with my hand until I pass by and you can see my back, but my face shall not be seen.” You see his hand, in the Old Testament, represents his power. His back represents his shining. His face represents his glory. All those coming after will stand on the rock and sing, “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me!” All those following John the Baptist will say, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” God is telling Moses that he will cover him with his hand. It’s a clear reference to the atonement at Passover, the removal of the wrath of God to the wooden cross of Golgotha that takes away the sin of the world. God used the Hebrew language to depict this hand. God is essentially saying, “I am going to protect you from me by me.”

What could Moses not handle? God’s glory. Why could he not handle it? Verse 20 answers: because you will die. God’s glory: a definition--God’s glory is the sum of all of his attributes. The sum totality of everything He is. God’s glory is His goodness. God’s glory is His name. God’s glory is His grace. God’s glory is His mercy. John Calvin said, “God’s glory is when we know what He is!” Moses could not handle this or he would die. God protected Moses from God that is right. God protected Moses from God’s own self. Moses wanted to see God’s glory but God knew Moses could not handle it. God knew that Moses wanted everything explained. Moses didn’t want to worry about the future. Moses wanted immediate drive-through service. Moses didn’t want to wait to see how His prayer requests would be answered. Moses wanted it all explained. The nation of Israel didn’t want to worship, they made a golden calf of their own mirrored lives just as we worship self today.

What if God explained it all to you? I guarantee that If God explained everything that would happen in your life, you would not be here today. Would you be able to confront your future? Experience in a flash all the future joy, celebration? Would you be able to absorb all the pain, the loss, the tragedy, the disappointments, even your own time of death? The exact month. The exact day. The exact hour of your death. We are all tenants subject to eviction without notice, but God knows all of our outworking, all that frustrates us, all that worries us, all that makes us squirm in the pew, is His glory because it is His story, His plan, His character working out the very details of our lives where nothing is random in the universe. If it had not been for hand-hid glory, Moses would have disintegrated in a consuming laser burn of God’s gaze. His glory hotter, stronger, a thousand times more brilliant that the brightest day. God put his veil between his glory not to keep Moses from His presence which He promised earlier in the chapter, but to protect Moses from being consumed by His brilliance. That is why He said you will see my back, my shining. God knew Moses needed progressive revelation. Would we adore Him, praise Him, if we lived by explanation instead of by His promises? The more Moses would have seen, the less He would have lived by faith. When we want to see, when we want to know, when we are ungrateful for what we do not have, when we feel we deserve better, when we feel we should have more, what are we called to do? We are called to wait, worship, and glorify.

We are to wait on God. We are to worship God. We are to glorify God. Waiting is not passive. Waiting is exhaustive. Waiting is strenuous. Waiting in prayer for God’s answer is hard. Robert E. Lee walked the upstairs hallway of his Arlington home, walked in prayer. Should he take command of the union army as offered or should he stand with his Virginia ancestors whose legislative body was voting to leave the succeed? He spent all night walking.The only man in the history of the world who has been offered the command of opposing armies. Maine Colonel Joshua Chamberlain waited all right in prayer trying to receive the surrendering Southern troops slowly making their way up the Appomattox road that morning to lay down their arms? Joshua chamberlain did something very politically incorrect. When they approached Appomattox Courthouse, he called the Union soldiers to right arm out of respect and they stood at attention to honor the defeated Southern soldiers. When General Borden of the Southern Army saw the salute, he touched the tip of his saber to the heel of his boot and called his soldiers to salute in return. They walked through in pride. That one act brought greater reconciliation than any other act in southern history. It later cost Chamberlain his chance at running for president, after serving for three terms as Governor of Maine. Constituents said that he should not have done that to the southern soldiers. We wait and hold on to the promises of the Bible. Martin Luther said, “The Bible is alive. It speaks to me. It has feet; it runs after me. It has hands; it lays hold of me.”

The Gideons say of the Bible, “The Bible contains the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the happiness of believers. Its doctrines are holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true, and its decisions are immutable. Read it to be wise, believe it to be safe, and practice it to be holy. It contains light to direct you, food to support you,and comfort to cheer you. It is the traveler’s map, the pilgrim’s staff, the pilot’s compass, the soldier’s sword, and the Christian’s charter. Here Paradise is restored, Heaven opened, and the gates of hell disclosed. Christ is its grand subject, our good the design and the glory of God its end.” If you are not holding onto the Bible, you are holding onto the world. If you hold onto the world, you will worry. If you hold onto the word, you will worship.

On a commuter flight from Portland, Maine to Boston, the pilot Henry Dempsey heard an unusually loud noise at the back of the plane. He turned the controls over to his co-pilot and went back to check on the back door. As he approached the tail of the plane, the plane hit an air pocket, hurling Henry against the back door which opened, sucking him out of the plane. The co-pilot radioed for an emergency landing and emergency response. After the plane landed, they found Henry Dempsey holding onto the door of the plane. Somehow, he held onto the outside ladder as the plane flew at 200 miles per hour for over 10 minutes until the plane descended from over 4,000 feet and then landed keeping his head, which was only 12 inches from the tarmac, from hitting the pavement. It took airport personnel several minutes to unfreeze and unlock Henry’s grip on the ladder for he had held on so tightly. We are called to wait and hold on.

Yesterday afternoon I got back from spending a week at Kia Kima Boy Scout Summer Camp. They put up a rock range near the shooting range. A rock throwing range. Three empty juice cans hung from a horizontal pole where boys could throw rocks at them. As I drove by with a carload of Scouts, I pointed out the rock range. One Scout in the back seat, very innocently asked, “Where do you get the rocks?” The other Scouts laughed at the absurdity of the question, so I pulled over, looked up at a nearby tree, and said, “Here is one tree that produces rocks, but it is not in bloom yet.” The other Scouts said to the quizzical Scout, “You did not just ask Mr. Riley where do you get rocks!”

When God appeared to Moses in chapter 34, Moses fell down and worshipped. We are to wait on God. We are to worship God. When Troop 86 met at the church to leave for summer camp, we prayed and worshipped God. When we got to the campsite, we asked God to guide. Sunday morning we had our own worship service. Wednesday night vespers, we led 450 other scouts in worship. When we got back to the church after unpacking the trailer, we worshipped. There was a man, a valiant Christian, that was trapped in a hotel fire. He was burned over 90% of his body. He wanted to be able to read the Bible, but he was blind. He had learned braille. But what was he to use? His hands and fingers were tested and found to be too burned to be able to read. His feet were tested with the same negative results. He determined that he was, however, able to use his tongue. And because he wanted to worship God, with his tongue, he read through the Bible three times. Worship is more than a matter of the heart. It’s a commitment. It’s ok to have questions. When troop 86 got to camp, there were a lot of questions, but we waited and we worshiped. When we left camp, we left the campsite cleaner than when we found it. We made a difference. We made a lot of memories. We glorified God. It is like our own lives. We come into the world bare. We leave this world bare. But do we make a difference for the Kingdom by waiting, by worshipping, and by glorifying God? What do we do in the interim?

Troop 86 won the Tech Challenge. Troop 86 won the water carnival which involved the Scoutmaster doing a face-front bellyflop off a moving dock-even though yours truly fell flat on his face. I was going up against a gentleman who was about 290 pounds and six foot seven. When he hit the water, he displaced half the lake. There was no way I could have won that. But what the water carnival director told me later was that our guys cheered so much. Isn’t that what a church is supposed to be as we go through the process of falling flat on our face. We won because we cheered the guy who fell flat on his face. We won the Golden Dust Pan award for best campsite. I mean with a box hockey game, with tiki torches, with a giant cooker equal to a Memphis in May cooking contestant, with a giant airplane cargo netting the troop turned into a hammock holding 15 scouts, yes we won best campsite and finally won Thunderbird troop for best troop. It is like our lives, isn’t it? We come in with nothing, we leave with nothing, and along the way, we may win some ribbons, some awards, but is it really all to the glory of God?

Dwight Pentecost said, “God has chosen believers today to do that for which the earth was created, for which Moses was called, for which the tabernacle was erected, for which the temple was built, that for which Jesus came into the world the first time. He has chosen us so that we might be instruments to bring glory to God.” We are called to wait on Him. We are called to worship Him. We are called to glorify Him. He is glorified and lifted up when his name is lifted up. Paul says in 1st Peter, “He who speaks, let him speak as the utterances of God. Whoever serves, let him serve to the glory of God.” In the high priestly prayer, Jesus says, “I have brought to you glory on earth.”

On August 16, 1854, the first telegraph was connected. President James Buchanan and Queen Victoria sent a telegram to each other that said, “Glory to God in the highest. On earth, peace and goodwill toward men.” Would that the leaders of our nations would say that today, giving glory to God in everything. Whatever you do, glorify God in putting him first. I remember back in 1975, a little 6th grade girl was walking down the sidewalk and she said, “Excuse me, why are we here?” I remembered the first catechismal question. “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” I told her that. I had a lot of answers back then. I have less answers today. But it is still true. It is great to ask questions of God. It is great to want more of God. It is great to want to be distinctively godly. Remember Moses said, “How will they know that of all people that we are a people set apart?” It is great to pray boldly to God. It is great to wait upon God. It is great to worship God. It is great to glorify God. May that be true of each one of us, that we wait, and we worship, and we glorify God for it is in him that we live and move and have our being.

Gracious heavenly Father, thank you that you did not show your face, even as you do not show your face to us now for we could not handle it. Thank you for your showing us your goodness, your name and your grace and mercy. Thank you for standing us on the rock of Jesus and hiding us in the cleft of the rock. Thank you that you have brought us Jesus and we have beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father. It is Jesus’s name that we wait. It is in Jesus’ name that we worship. It is in Jesus’ name that we glorify. It is in Jesus’ name that we pray, Amen.