

“At the Foot of the Mountain”

Maundy Thursday

Exodus 24:3-11

“They beheld God, and ate and drank” Exodus 24:11b

At the foot of the mountain on a Holy Thursday. In the Old Testament reading the people of Israel stand at the foot of Mount Sinai while God summons to the top Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel (Exodus 24:1-2). They alone ascend Mount Sinai to meet their God. The rest of the people of Israel stand at the foot of the mountain.

And so on this Maundy Thursday we, the Church, part of God’s New Israel, we stand at the foot of the mountain and hear the Word of the Lord and witness anew the leaders of Israel commune with the God of Israel, our God. They eat and drink in his presence, foreshadowing Jesus’ eating and drinking with his disciples at a Passover meal during which he institutes the Lord’s Supper close to two thousand years ago. Foreshadowing also our eating and drinking of the body and blood of our Lord this night in the Lord’s Supper. And foreshadowing even still the Marriage Feast of the lamb and his kingdom in the heavenly banquet at the promised second coming of our Lord.

As I have heard one person suggest,¹ we can learn at least three useful things about our God as we stand at the foot of the mountain and listen to his Word from Exodus, chapter twenty-four. The Word of the Lord that we heard is an account of our Lord’s confirmation of the covenant and promise that he made with his people Israel on Mount Sinai. I would like to briefly share those three things with you this evening.

First, we learn that in himself the God of Israel is terrifying. He is frightening. He is indescribably powerful. He is one whom you and I do not want to have dealings with. Yes he is loving and merciful. But it should be surprising to us that he loves us. His strangeness is what is normal. There are even times when Jesus is very strange and even terrifying. A good example is his clearing of the temple with a whip of cords (John 2: 13-22).

I can recall a time as a child when I forgot who I was dealing with. I worked up the courage to talk back to my father from what I thought was a safe distance. I had forgotten who I was dealing with. I had badly miscalculated. So also we should never lose sight of God’s terrifying, frightening, and powerful character.

¹ The three points developed in this sermon are taken from a sermon on Exodus 24:8-18 given in the chapel of St. Timothy and Titus on the campus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis by Dr. Jeffery Gibbs.

We might think that the elders were glad to see God and spend time with him on the mountain. We don't know for sure. But they knew the powerful, terrifying, strange, and frightening character of God. Perhaps they only went because they were summoned.

Yes, the God of Israel is a frightening God. Ask Isaiah. Ask Ezekiel. This is what we learn at the foot of the mountain. So let us revere him. Let us honor him. Let us even fear his wrath.

The second thing we learn from the foot of the mountain is that in Israel God wants to have for himself a people about whom he can say, "they are my people and I am their God." This is his world. He is in the business of reclaiming it. He is in the business of reclaiming the people he created. This is good news. He will have a people. And anyone can belong to his Israel. If I can and you can then anyone can belong to his Israel. What a blessing. What good news. He makes it happen.

The third thing we learn from the foot of the mountain is that God himself chooses a mediator, a go-between that stands between himself and his people. He never asks that we come to him directly. That is not the way God does it. God spoke with Moses as a man speaks with his friend. The God of Israel is Moses' God but he chose Moses. God saved Israel through Moses and his mediation.

You and I do not go to God directly either. God has chosen a mediator. Not his friend. His Son. This Son is the mediator between God and us. We do not try to approach the holy God apart from the mediation of Jesus. But we do approach with fear and wonder and praise. We approach this Holy, strange God through Jesus. My father in law reminded me recently of this truth that we approach God only through Jesus. He shared with me and Talitha a quote that he came across in a book that we gave him as a gift a while back. It is a quote from Martin Luther: "He who does not find or receive God in Christ shall never have or find him anywhere outside of Christ, even though he ascend above heaven, descend below Hell, or go beyond the world."

When things happen around us that seem strange and confusing and cause fear, we go to this God still through Jesus. We hear his Word. We partake of his body and blood as he instituted a Holy Supper on the night he was betrayed—the first Maundy Thursday—for this very purpose. And we rejoice that because of his mediating sacrifice that began on a Holy Thursday so long ago, you and I can behold God, eat and drink and live this day and forevermore. Here at the foot of the mountain all God's people say, "Amen."