

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
February 4, 2018

You've Got My Attention

Exodus 24:1-18

This past Wednesday morning, I gathered with the children in our day care ministry for their weekly worship time. The three-year-olds were the first group to arrive. Though instructed to walk, not run, into the sanctuary, some of them tried to push the pace. One of them broke from the line and headed down the right aisle instead of the left. By the time they all made it to the front pew, there was some jockeying for position, along with plenty of flopping, wiggling, and squirming. Once they were all in place, their patient and experienced teacher said, "Pastor Kevin is ready for you. I'm not so sure you're ready for him."

Experience has taught me that a worshipful song is often a good way to get everyone settled in and focused. So this time I gently brought up the volume on one of our favorites, "More About Jesus." "More about Jesus would I know, / More of His grace to others show; / More of his saving fullness see, / More of his love who died for me."

"More of his saving fullness see." In one sense, that's what every worship gathering is about, whether for the children who scamper into this space on Wednesday morning or for us who enter at a more leisurely pace on Sunday morning. We're here to gaze upon the Lord's glory. As the psalmist says in today's call to worship: "One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple" (Ps. 27: 4).

Of course the Lord isn't confined to a particular square footage, no matter how sacred the space may be. In today's text from Exodus, a mountain called Sinai becomes the place of meeting between the divine and the human. The Lord summons Moses, the priests, and the elders to come up closer. So close, in fact, that they're given a look at the Lord. The narrator doesn't spell it out in great detail. He simply says they "saw the God of Israel" (v. 10a). This statement, combined with the summary in the verse that follows, suggests that they gazed upon God in stunned, astonished silence. No bulletins rustling. No cell phones going off. No squirming in their pews. No whispering to one another about which restaurant they're going to once the service is over. In this case, they don't move or speak. They're mesmerized. Or as one rabbi puts it, "They fixed gloating eyes upon the Divine Presence."¹

It's hard to come up with words for what they saw. Any description would be inadequate. "Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself" (v. 10b). Note that the experience is reported very indirectly. It's not a "pavement made of sapphire," but it's like that. It's not the clearness of "the sky itself," but it's like that. It's an experience of something that's very real and tangible, and yet at the same time very unapproachable and holy. So holy, in fact, as to be risky. Ordinarily, it was believed that no one could see God and live. Not because of God's visibility but because God was dangerously holy. But in this case, the narrator says that the Lord didn't lay a hand on them. In fact, God was generous in disclosing himself to them, and they came back down

the mountain fully intact, but no doubt changed. Changed, in part, because God had their full attention.

One of the most important God-given resources you have is your attention. And each day, you make decisions about how to direct it, and where to focus it. The options seem endless, which is a big part of the problem. So many different things are competing for our attention that we regularly end up feeling fragmented and unfocused. This reality has only accelerated with our use of the internet and social media. As many others have pointed out, your attention is now a commodity. The objective is to get your eyeballs on the screen so that your attention can be sold to advertisers.

The irony is that while so many of us spend so much of our time staring at a screen, particularly our phone screen, hoping to be more focused and efficient, our devices can actually become the source of distraction and divided attention. As one pastor has written:

Numerous studies show that smartphones and screen time are changing the way we think, but even more concerning, they are hijacking our attention. Most of us have felt that persistent, mysterious draw to check email in the middle of a conversation, look at our Facebook feed at the dinner table, or read over messages as we wait at a stoplight. While it doesn't seem as if smart devices are any more distracting than sports, work, or hobbies, it isn't that surprising that shiny toys are a possible danger to the spiritual life.²

From a Christian perspective, the spiritual life is very much a life of attentiveness to God. Now that doesn't mean that every day is going to be a journey up Mount Sinai to be awed by the beauty and glory of the Lord. There may be experiences in our lives that are particularly intense and memorable, the kind that we would describe as mountaintop moments. But most of our experience of the presence and action of God will take place in the ordinary routines, events, activities, patterns, and disciplines of daily life. That's where we'll encounter the Lord as he reveals himself and his purposes to us. This applies particularly to areas of our spiritual life where attentiveness is required, such as praying, reading the Scriptures, worshiping (alone and with others), listening to the preaching of the Word, listening to others, offering ourselves in service to others. These are some of the key ways that we pay attention to the presence of God.

And notice that these are the kinds of activities and experiences that can't be, or at least shouldn't be, rushed, or done in a quick and shallow manner. Again, this is where technology can come into play. Author Nicholas Carr has explored how technology is shaping our minds and lives. He laments how the internet is, in his words, "chipping away at [his] capacity and contemplation." He adds, "My mind expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles." He also uses a memorable image when he says, "Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski."³

It's hard to know God as deeply and closely as God intends when we're zipping across the surface of life rather than slowing down and being more purposefully attentive to the Lord, and present to him, and present to others. Though he was known primarily for his book *Lonesome Dove*, Larry McMurtry wrote another book about roads. He reflected on the roads he had driven on and the miles he had explored across America. He describes returning to the place where he grew up in east Texas, and noted that his father rarely traveled further than the dirt roads near his farm. When he compared his own travels to his father's localized life, McMurtry admitted, "I have looked at many places quickly. My father looked at one place deeply."⁴

We inhabit a world where data moves rapidly and people live quickly. But that doesn't change our call to contemplate God carefully and to know him deeply. Doing that requires things like you're doing today, assembling in the presence of God to behold his glory revealed in Jesus. He we are again, coming near to a God who has come near to us in Christ. We don't have fellowship with God because we've managed to climb the mountain, ascending to where he is. We have fellowship with God because he has descended to us through Jesus Christ. The God who called to Moses from within the cloud, whose glory looked to the people like a consuming fire, and whose feet rested on what looked like a pavement of sapphire, this God rose to his feet and made his way to us in the form of a crucified Savior, whose body was broken and whose blood was poured out so that this God of holy love could bind himself to us and bind us to himself. That's the reality that we're called to live in, and to explore more deeply. And that requires lives focused on Jesus, lives attentive to God.

Irwin Braverman is a dermatologist and director of medical residents at a leading American university. In his interaction with students, he became more and more concerned about their power of attention. In particular, he noted how the high-tech, fast-paced practice of medicine seemed to be lessening the importance of doing careful physical exams and searching thoroughly through patient histories. Braverman worried that medical students were losing their power to observe and pay attention to obvious things about their patients.

So he came up with an idea. He brought the young doctors to a university museum to observe works of art. After all, a painting wasn't something that they could solve quickly and easily. As they learned to gaze at and contemplate a work of art, their observational skills improved, and their ability to describe patients developed dramatically. The idea led to a program that's now a required part of medical training. Students each examine a painting for fifteen minutes, and then discuss their observations with a guide and their peers. "Look at the normal, not just the eye-catching," the students are told. "Approach the work with an open mind, moving past first assumptions. Revisit the subject, again and again."⁵

God is the subject. Our lives are to be focused on him. In order to know him, and be in fellowship with him, the way that he intends, we need to behold the Lord, gaze upon the Lord, contemplate the Lord, observe the Lord, reflect upon the Lord. We need to be attentive to the Lord, day in and day out. We need to return to the subject, again and again.

Return with me to today's text. "They saw God, and they ate and drank" (v. 11b). Sounds like they went straight from the sanctuary to the fellowship hall. But in this case, their meal wasn't primarily a break from the intensity of their vision of God. It wasn't a mountaintop potluck where everyone could unwind after the formality and solemnity of worship. It was actually a continuation of worship, an act of fellowship with a holy God who was accessible to them, committed to them, and determined to have their commitment to him. In and through Jesus Christ, this same God sits down for a meal with the disciples, the people of God, to share the bread and the cup. And so today, here at the Lord's table, you have further time and opportunity to focus on Jesus, to gaze upon God, to return to the subject again.

¹ Rabbi Hoshoya, quoted in Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus." *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) n.p.

² Chad Meeks, "Screen Time Is Changing the Way We Think, Focus, and Memorize." Christianity Today website. November 3, 2017. Accessed February 1, 2018 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/november-web-only/how-screen-time-is-changing-way-we-think.html>>.

³ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is doing to our Brains* (New York: Norton & Company, 2011) 6-7.

⁴ Leighton Ford, *The Attentive Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008) 112.

⁵ Mark Bauerlein and Adam Bellow, *The State of the American Mind* (West Conshohocken: Templeton, 2015) 95-96.