

God with Us: On the Mountain

Exodus 33:1-6, 17- 34:9

Rev. John Pennylegion
December 7, 2025

Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here, and friends, it is great to be with you. I'm glad that you would join us, especially if you are a guest or a visitor. Welcome. And this morning, we are continuing in our Advent series. This is the second Sunday of the season of Advent, and Advent simply means coming or arrival. That's all that that word means. And so often during this season, churches will focus our attention on maybe passages that speak about the coming of Jesus or New Testament passages that talk about the arrival of Jesus, and that's perfectly appropriate and right to do so. We've done that in the past, but this year we're doing something a little bit different. And we're talking, we're looking at passages not just about Jesus's arrival or Jesus's coming, but those passages also that include the presence of God amongst his people. So looking at various passages where God is with his people.

And so last week, we started by looking at God with Adam and Eve in the garden. And next week, we'll look at God with us in the temple, and then God with us in the manger. And this morning, what we're going to look at is God with us on the mountain. So if you have a Bible, you can turn to Exodus 33. Exodus is the second book of the Bible. It'll be very easy to find. And if you don't have a Bible, there are Bibles in the chairs, and we also project the passage you can follow along. But we'll look at Exodus 33 and part of 34 this morning. And since we're kind of jumping around, it's important for us to get a little bit of background to be reminded of where we are in this book. So again, if you were with us last week, then you might remember that we talked about how Adam and Eve had this beautiful relationship with the Father. That Adam and Eve were created for a relationship with God. And so God dwelled with his people in the garden. He walked with them amongst his creation. It was this beautiful relationship that they had. But Adam and Eve, instead of clinging to that beautiful relationship, they replaced it with sin and shame. They rebelled against God, and they turned away from him.

And so in doing this, God sent them out of his presence, right? He sent them out of the garden, away from him. And really, we could say that since Genesis 3, the story of the Bible is the story of God reestablishing that relationship, returning his people into his presence. That's actually what we see in Genesis, right? God sets apart Noah, and he calls Abraham, and he has a relationship with Isaac and Jacob. He constitutes the people of Israel, and he raises up Joseph. He is calling people back to himself. And that continues in the book of Exodus, right? Exodus is the story of God's people being delivered from slavery. For hundreds of years, God's people were enslaved. They were under the authority of Pharaoh and Egypt. And God's people cried out to him, and he heard their cries, and he rescued them and delivered them from slavery. It's a beautiful story of God redeeming his people. Now, I want you to think, if you're Israel, you've been in bondage for hundreds of years, and God has delivered you, he's rescued you, that that slavery which had become your family and your nation's story was no more. I mean, you would respond with celebration, right? And joy, and thanksgiving, and devotion to the one who has saved you, who has delivered you.

That would be the right response. And for Israel, that was their response for a time. Right? Because if you know the story of Exodus, you know that they're celebrating their songs turned into grumbling, and complaining, and disobeying.

And the pinnacle of their disobedience is described in Exodus 32, because in Exodus 32, Moses is up on the mountain, and he's been up meeting with God, but he's been meeting for too long, at least as far as the people are concerned. The people are wanting Moses to come on down, and let's keep on moving through the wilderness, but he's taken too long, he's delayed, and so what do they do? They take their gold, they melt it down, and they make for themselves a golden calf, and they bow down to it, and they worship it, and they say, "this is the God who saved you from Egypt." They turned away from the Lord, discarded Him for something made in their, with their own hands. They made an idol, and they rejected the presence of the Lord. So, how would God respond to that? Well, that's where we pick up our reading in Exodus 33. We're going to read a portion of chapter 33, and a portion of 34. Beginning in verse 1 of Exodus 33:

"The LORD said to Moses, "Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your offspring I will give it.' I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people." When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, 'You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.'" Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.

Now let's skip to verse 17.

"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."

"The LORD said to Moses, "Cut for yourself two tablets of stone like the first, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Be ready by the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself there to me on the top of the mountain. No one shall come up with you, and let no one be seen throughout all the mountain. Let no flocks or herds graze opposite that mountain." So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first. And he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone. The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands,

forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. And he said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance." (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that we can come to your word, and we ask that you would help us, help us to see your glory, to behold it, and to cling to you, to know your grace and forgiveness, and to know what it means to dwell in your presence. And so we pray, meet with us now, and we pray this in Christ's name, amen.

Presence Removed

So, how does God respond to their sin, to their rebellion? Well, we heard it. He's going to remove his presence, right? That's what he declared. He's going to send them to the land, but he's not going. That's what the first few verses of Exodus 33 said. "The Lord said to Moses, depart, go up from here. You and the people whom you have brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to your offspring I will give it. And I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go among among you. I will not go with you." So, think about that.

The land that God had promised, the land that so much of their identity had been tied to, right? That way back in Genesis, God had promised to Abraham, I will give you a land, a land flowing with milk and honey. It will be yours, your possession, and from that beach head my glory will go out into all the world. He's still going to give it to them, right? That's what he says. "I'll give it to you. Go up from this mountain and go on your way. I'll even send an angel before you to do battle against your enemies, and you will take possession of the land, but I won't go."

You see, Israel's going to get the blessing, but not the blesser. They're going to get the gift, but not the giver. I mean, what do you think of that? Like, if that's what God presented us with, would that be enough? Would we be content? Like, if he were to give us all that we wanted in this world, if he were to give us everything that we wanted, right? Don't think of land or place. Instead, replace that with wealth or health, with homes or ease or comfort, with influence or power and control. If he was to give us all of those things, but not himself, would we be content? I don't think we would ever say it, but do we want the blessing more than the blesser? Do we want the gifts more than the giver? I mean, how would we respond to that? How does Israel? You know, for all of Israel's problems, all of their failings, Moses and Israel get it right. They get it right here, because they realize that what they need more than land, more than victory, more than blessing, what they need is the Lord.

Presence Requested

God has said he will remove his presence, but Moses asked for that presence to remain, because he recognizes their need. And so, what do the people do? Well, they strip themselves of their ornaments and they mourn. That's what this is getting at. So, we're told they mourned,

but then they stripped themselves of the ornament. So, they're getting rid of all the gifts that they have been given, and they're not going to wear them from Mount Horeb onward. They realize that what they need isn't those things that they're wearing. What they need is something so much more. They need the giver of every good gift. You see, Moses is embodying. Moses says this in chapter 33, verse 15: "if your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here." In other words, "God, where you are, that's where we need to be. More than the land, more than a place with milk," and Jesus would later say in Matthew 16, "for what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" C.S. Lewis, once writing in his wonderful little book, *The Weight of Glory*, he said, "he who has God and everything else has no more than he who has God only." And that's true, and I like to amend that every time I read it, to say that "he who has only God has more than he who has everything but not God."

And we need to come to terms with that. We need to come to terms with this question, what do we really want? What do we ultimately need? In another place in *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis said that "we are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea, we are far too easily pleased." Is he right? I mean, is that what we're like? We're like the child just making mud pies in the slum when we could be at holiday at the sea? Or are we like the child who whose mom and dad offers him a hot dog and filet mignon and we take the hot dog? Right? Like kids, listen to Pastor Penny for a moment, okay? This week, if mom and dad say "you can have a hot dog or a ribeye," I know the hot dog is delicious, I love them, chili, cheese, onions, mustard, all, it is glorious. However, take the ribeye. Please. You will thank me, I promise you, children. But the reason why the child picks the hot dog or the mud pie is because they can't comprehend the greatness of what is really being offered. And I wonder if that's what we're really like.

See, Moses understood this. He said to God, "if your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here." He's saying I need you, Lord, and if that means that we will never leave this mountain, if it means that we will never go to the land, if it means that we will not continue to cross through the wilderness, if it means that we won't see angelic warriors battle on our behalf, but if we have you, that is all we need. That's what Moses is saying. So, what about us? If we had God but we lost everything else, if we lost our money, our careers, our health, our reputations, our rights, if we lost everything but God was still with us, would that be enough? Y'all, that is actually an incredibly important question for us to wrestle with. And it's one that we need to consider before we ever lose anything. Because the truth is, we're not promised any of those things. We're not promised ease or comfort. We're not promised wealth or possessions. We're not promised careers. All of those things can be taken. But if we still had the Lord, would that be enough?

The Apostle Paul in Philippians 4 says that after he has experienced need and plenty, as he has been brought low and has abounded, as he has felt hunger as well as been fed, he says, "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content." And why? Do you remember in Philippians 4, he says, because of him who strengthens me. Y'all know that passage, right? At the end of Philippians 4, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me," right? Baseball players write in the bill of their caps, and I've seen people put in their briefcases, right? And we put in our books, right? I can do all things through him who strengthens me. But is that what Paul's talking about? Athletic achievement, right? Doing well in that presentation, being successful. Is that? No, of course not. What Paul is talking about is that I

can be content. That is the context. I can be content with whatever comes my way because whatever comes my way, I have the Lord.

Paul learned what we're seeing Moses ask for and demonstrate that what we need more than anything else in this world is God himself. And so what does Moses ask? He says, don't send us away, but be with us. And God responds in chapter 33, verse 17, "this very thing that you have spoken, I will do." God's not going to leave his people. He's not going to forsake them. Instead, he will be present with them. He's going to go with them in their midst. Moses's worries, his concerns about being abandoned, they've been addressed. God isn't going to send them away. Instead, he's going to go with them. And I imagine Moses is now taking a giant sigh of relief, right? Because God will be with them.

Glory Revealed

But he has one more request he's going to make. He says, "God, please show me your glory." Now, I have to tell you, there's a couple interesting things about this that Moses asked that I found interesting. The first thought I had was if I was with Moses then, I would have probably been like, dude, do not press your luck, right? Like God said he was going to leave us, and now he's not. He's coming with us. Like, take the win, right? But that's not what Moses wants. He wants more of God. That's the other thing that's interesting to me, because think about this. Think about how Moses had actually had glimpses of God's glory. Moses was there when God sent the plagues, right? When the river Nile was turned to blood, when day was replaced with night, when it rained frogs. Moses saw that. Glimpses of God's power and glory. Moses saw God part the Red Sea and he walked through on dry ground. He saw God defeat the armies of Pharaoh. He tasted manna from heaven. Moses had seen God's glory again and again and again, but he wants more. He wants more of it. He wants God's unfiltered glory.

Moses is asking for something that humanity hadn't experienced since the garden. He's asking for his glory to be revealed, and God grants that request, in part, because what God says in verse 19 of chapter 33 is this, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I 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." See, what God is saying is that his glory is so great, so immense, so beautiful and overwhelming, that to behold it would destroy a person. When I read that, it made me think of that scene at the end of the *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. You know, I know I'm dating myself kids, like, you know, when you get older, your parents will do you the favor of watching *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, but there's this scene at the end, y'all remember, where Indiana Jones and his buddies, they're all tied up, and his enemies, right, they're Nazis and people working with the Nazis, they have the Ark, and they've tied up Indiana and his buddies, and they're gonna open up the Ark. And Indiana says to his friends, like, when it opens, close your eyes and look away, don't look at it. And so they turn away, and the Ark opens, right, and like light pours forth, and spirits, and all kinds of stuff, and what happened to the people who looked into the Ark? Their skin melts, right, and their blood boils, and they disintegrate, right, poof, they're gone. I mean, the special effects back then were really cool, but now it's kind of laughable, right, like, we've come a long way.

But that's what I think about, that if they would have beheld God's glory, if God would have let Moses look into his face, poof, he'd be gone. His glory is that great, that powerful. And so

God says to Moses, he uses this anthropomorphic language, “I will block you with my hand, you will see my back, I’ll pass by you, you stay in the rock, you cannot see my face.”

I can't help but wonder if Moses was maybe tempted to try to catch a glimpse, you know, kind of like Lot's wife, when she looked back at Sodom and Gomorrah, right, she turned into a pillar, and maybe that's why God actually said to him, not just stay in the cleft of the rock, but I will cover your face with my hand. Maybe, you know, we don't know, but if it were me, I'd be a little tempted. But God doesn't let him look. He won't let him see. He won't show him his full glory. Instead, what he does is he proclaims his glory. He passes by and says in chapter 34, verse 6, “the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation.” What an amazing statement. I mean, we've read this so many times, right? The people of God would have heard this again and again because this is the amazing, incredible self-disclosure of God, right? This is God declaring, not just showing, but declaring his glory, speaking all of his goodness. He is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He doesn't ignore or go blindness and no, he is just and he forgives. This is who he is.

This is the God who would go with his people into the land. I mean, there's so much here, right? We could do an entire sermon series on the qualities of God that are described here. Maybe that'll be next Advent. I don't know. I haven't planned that far, but it's incredible. And instead of looking at every single one of these, I want to focus on one of them, which I really think is kind of the one word that encapsulates all of it. And that's when we come to this place where he says forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. You see that word forgive? There are a few different Hebrew words that can be translated forgive, and some of those words have the implication of pardon, okay, pardoning the guilty. But this particular Hebrew word, it has the implication of to lift, to carry, or to take away.

See, that's the picture that God's giving us, that he takes our sin away and he lifts the burden of our transgressions. And the load of our iniquity, he carries off. That's what Israel and Moses needed. They needed that more than safe passage through the wilderness. They needed that more than possession of the land. What they needed was God's grace, his mercy, his steadfast love and forgiveness. That's what they were in need of. And friends, that's what we need. And the good news is that's what God gives. And he gives this not on the mountaintop, but he gives it at Calvary. You see, Moses asked for God's glory, and God said that he would show all his goodness. And that's what God has shown on the cross. Because on the cross, we see God's perfect justice for our sin. And we see God's forgiveness. And we see how they meet in the person of Christ. Because when Jesus went to the cross, he took our sin on himself, and the burden of our iniquity he bore in his body. And he removed our sin, and he took our iniquity away, and he replaced it with grace and love. Friends, that is the glory of God.

It is most clearly seen not in blessings, not in gifts, but in the Son who gave his life. And he did so, so that we would be forgiven, and so that we would dwell with him, that he would make his presence with us. Moses beheld God's glory and asked in chapter 34, verse 9, “if now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us. For it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and sin, and take us for your inheritance.” And that's what God did. Moses and Israel, that's what they needed. And what we are all desperate for is the glory of God in our midst, the presence of God that comes through his

grace. And by his grace, that's what he gives. By his grace, he is God with us, the one who has taken our sin from us, who has borne our iniquity, who has shown us our glory. He's given forgiveness and steadfast love and grace. He is God with us, and friends, that is what we need. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have sent your Son, who is the reflection of your glory, who is the one in your likeness, who has shown us the Father's glory. And so we pray, Father, that we would fix our eyes on Christ, that you would not cover our faces, but that we would behold his glory, shown in all glory on the cross, and that we would turn to you and cling to Jesus, knowing that it is by him and him alone that our sins are forgiven. And that, Father, we would be filled with thanksgiving, knowing that you are with us, that you come to us forgiving, being gracious, full of steadfast love. And so we pray, Father, that we would walk with you, we would know you, and that we would cling to you, knowing that having you is greater than anything else. And we pray all this in Christ's name, and God's people said together, Amen.