

Title: Transforming Presence
Text: Exodus 34
Date: 20 January, 2013
Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron

Last week we introduced a theme that will inform and flavor our year together as a community. The theme was introduced in the form of a resolution that I have made personally. My one resolve – above all other goals and commitments that I make for 2013 is this:

In 2013 I resolve to live more fully in the presence of God.

More than my own personal New Year’s resolution, I believe this is a commitment God is leading us into collectively. I believe that over the coming year God is going to awaken in us a deeper hunger and thirst for him. Such desire for God is not natural – our natural desire, in our sinful state, is to do what Adam and Eve did – to run and hide from God. But God is gracious – Amen? By God’s grace we discover a desire for God that comes only from God. In the end, our appetite for God - our unshakeable hunger and thirst for meaning and purpose and transcendence - is a gift from God.

In introducing this theme we began exploring the story of Moses and Israel as God lead them from Egypt, through the wilderness and eventually into the Promised Land. Israel were constantly forgetting the God they barely knew, incessantly complaining and amazingly looking back to slavery in Egypt through rose-colored glasses. Their simmering discontent all comes to a head when Moses goes up on Mount Sinai for a forty day, earth shaking and awe inspiring encounter with God where he received the law from God written by the finger of God on stone tablets. While Moses is meeting with God on the mountain, Israel is forgetting God in the valley – building a golden calf to worship. Eventually Moses comes down and in his anger smashes the tablets of the law. God’s anger burns against Israel as well, and he commands them to break camp and to march again towards the Promised Land, but tells them his personal presence won’t go with them – but that he will send an angel. The people are devastated – even though they have constantly ignored God – they know he is their only hope and that they are doomed in the desert without him. So Moses pleads with God on their behalf – that God will not leave them and that God’s presence will continue to guide them. God, in his grace relents and offers this wonderful reassurance to Moses and the people. This is the key text for this whole series:

My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.
(Exodus 33:14)

The word ‘presence’ is the same word that is translated as ‘face’. God is saying that it will continue to be his personal, engaged, intimate, compassionate, loving, merciful and patient presence that will go before, behind and alongside them. God will not be some depersonalized force to them, but a personally engaged, up close and personal presence amongst them.

Let’s pick up the story from here:

Moses responds to God’s promise by putting a stake in the ground:

If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here...what else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth.
(Exodus 35:15-16)

God reassured Moses again, saying that he is pleased with him and that he knows Moses by name. But Moses is determined – he presses still further, as he makes the boldest of requests:

Moses said, “Now show me your glory.”
(Exodus 33:18)

Moses asks that God show him his glory. This is the same Moses that had encountered God in a burning bush, the miracles of the Exodus – the seven plagues, the Passover, the parting of the Red Sea, manna from heaven and water from a rock, a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night – and who met with God face to face as with a friend in the tent of meeting. I reckon Moses had see a fair bit of glory, don’t you? But as much as Moses had seen, he wanted to see more. As much as Moses had experienced, he want to

experience more. As much as he had discovered, he wanted to discover more. Here is the thing; every rich encounter with God awakens an even stronger desire for more of God. A growing appetite for God is a gift from God.

Now it gets a little confusing – God graciously says he will reveal even more of himself to Moses. God tells Moses that his goodness will pass before him and that God will speak his own name in the presence of Moses, but that Moses must first hide in a cleft in the rock where God will cover him as his glory passes by, saying:

(The Lord) said, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”
(Exodus 33:20)

But doesn't say the bible say this just nine verses earlier:

The LORD would speak with Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.
(Exodus 33:11)

At first glance, these two verses to contradict one another? Here we bump up against the limits of human language – whether ancient Hebrew or modern English.

When Moses met with God face to face with a friend – we are being told that Moses had close, personal, intimate fellowship with God. God revealed enough of himself that Moses could both directly speak to God and hear from God. But Moses knew there was more of God that he had not seen or encountered – otherwise he would never had asked, ‘Show me your glory’.

It is in the context of this request that God says that no human being can see his face and live. In this context, face refers to the absolute, divine essence at the heart of the character of a Holy God. Glory is God's identity. God is pure light, above, beyond and separate from his creation – holy and perfect. Moses is a great man, a great leader even – but he is also a sinful man, and as a sinful man he cannot see God's full, holy, glorious splendor and live – but he still has a hunger to see as much of God as God will graciously grant him.

Sometimes in our misguided attempts to make God more relevant, or palatable or manageable – we ignore the splendor, majesty, glory and otherness of God. We re-create god in our own image. God becomes our ultimate wish fulfillment – a projection of all of our hopes and expectations. The wonderful poet and essayist Annie Dillard is also a practicing Christian. She once wrote this:

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning.

It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.

We worship a holy God. We worship a majestic God. We worship and awesome God. This week it was announced that scientists have discovered a body so large that, according to current scientific theories of the universe, should not exist. It's called the Large Quasar Group, and is a cluster of young galaxies that stretch four billion light years across – four times bigger than was thought possible.

The same God that created the Large Quasar Group graciously allowed his goodness to pass Moses by.

The same God who created pulsars and black holes, stars and galaxies, electrons and neutrons and protons – this same God of who has created unimaginable beauty and complexity responds with gracious patience to Moses request, ‘Show me your glory’.

God shows Moses just has much of his glory that he can handle. In seeking to live more fully in the presence of God this year I will be praying with Moses, ‘Show me your glory, Lord.’ What is it that you are asking for from God in 2013? How big is your ask of God? What will you be bothering God for in prayer? In his sermon, The Weight of Glory, CS Lewis says this:

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered 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.

For your sake, for God's sake don't be too easily pleased in 2013! Just imagine if we turned up to worship each Sunday and the prayer on more and more of our lips was, 'Show me your glory, Lord'. We may well have to hand out crash helmets and live preservers at the door!

Don't settle with being familiar with God; in 2013 become friends with God.
Don't settle with being acquainted with God; in 2013 be awestruck by God.

Don't settle with knowing about God; in 2013 resolve to know God, as you can through Jesus his son.

Let's keep on going. In his anger with the Israelites Moses has smashed the stone tablets on which God has written his law. So for a seventh and final time Moses again goes up on to Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights and God writes the law on two new tablets. But this time when Moses comes down from the mountain, something is different from the previous times he has descended. This is what we read:

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him.
(Exodus 34:29-30)

Unlike every other time, when Moses came down from his encounter with God on the mountain his face was radiant – it shone. Moses did not have a bad case of sunburn – Aaron didn't hand him a jar of aloe vera. Literally translated, the face of Moses shot out rays or beams of light. It scared Aaron people away.

Moses face was shooting out rays of light because he had spoken with the LORD. He had been speaking with God ever since the burning bush, but now his relationship with God had gone to a place of pure intimacy, where he had been bold enough to ask, 'Show me your glory'. The light Moses shone was not his own, it was the reflected glory of God. Moses was like a walking disco ball, shooting off multiple rays of light from another source.

So bright was the light Moses shone, the people could barely stand it and Moses would cover his face whenever he could:

When Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. But whenever he entered the LORD's presence to speak with him, he removed the veil until he came out. And when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, they saw that his face was radiant.
(Exodus 34:33-35)

There had been a tipping point. Moses had enough time of enough quality in the personal Presence of the living God that he has been profoundly transformed by the experience. Moses literally shone with the reflected glory of God.

Last week we were reminded that one the most beautiful, profound and needed gifts we discover in the Presence of God is rest – soul-salving, heart-mending, mind-clearing rest.

This week we discover that in the Presence of God, like Moses, we can experience profound transformation. Let me go one step further by asking and then answering my own question. If my resolve for 2013 is to live more fully in the presence of God, how will I know I have succeeded? I will know that I have lived more fully in God's presence if my life has been transformed in some significant ways. By this I don't mean that I will be a walking disco ball like Moses shooting off rays of light so that when you come to church you have to wear sun glasses. I mean that by the end of this year more and more of my life – my words and actions – are shining with the light and love of Jesus. I will know I have lived more fully in the presence of Jesus this year if by the end of the year I am more like Jesus in December than I am right now in December. God does not offer us his Presence for our gratification, but our transformation. But then in our transformation, we discover profound gratification.

One of my favorite ways of wasting time with TV is to watch a show called Mythbusters. Ever seen it? The show's hosts Jamie and Adam test whether various common myths we encounter every day could possibly be true. One myth they tested was one you will all know:

You can't teach an old dog new tricks.

To test the myth Jamie and Adam found a pair of aging Alaskan malamutes who didn't know a single trick in the book. Malamutes are known for their stubbornness. As 7-year-old canines, siblings Bobo and Cece were equivalent to a couple of 50-year-olds in dog years, arguably qualifying them for the "old dog" category. After just four days of training, this is what happened:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAv7czgll0Q>

Myth busted; you can apparently teach old dog new tricks. Who wishes that was true for old dogs in their life, and not just the canine variety.

The reality is that change is hard. Bad habits are hard to break. Transformation is difficult. Even when we want to change, or desperately need to change, or know what the consequences are if we don't change – still many of us find it almost impossible to shift some behaviors in us that we desperately wish we could. Vast amounts of research as shown that information alone is not enough to bring about long-lasting change in most people's lives. David Brooks summarizes the research in his book, *The Social Animal*:

You can tell people not to eat the French fry. You can give pamphlets about the risks of obesity. You can deliver sermons urging them to exercise self-control and not eat the fry. And in their non-hungry state, most people will vow not to eat it. But when their hungry self arises, their well-intentioned self fades, and they eat the French fry. Most diets fail because the conscious forces of reason and will are simply not powerful enough to consistently subdue unconscious urges.

Who can relate to that: 'The unconscious forces of reason are simply not powerful to consistently subdue unconscious urges.'

In 2006 a monumental study of 600,000 heart bypass patients was conducted in the United States. After their operations, most of the patients would have been given a similar message – your operation is a temporary fix. You must change your lifestyle – eat less, quit smoking, exercise more, drink less. In short, they were told, 'Change or die.' But even though with their surgery every patient had confronted their mortality, even though they had been told they must change, even though many of them probably had wanted to change - after two years 90% of the 600,000 patients had not changed their lifestyle at all.

What is true in our physical lives – that change is hard if not impossible - is most certainly true in our spiritual lives. The Apostle Paul spoke of his own despair on wanting to change, but not being able to:

I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing...What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?
(Romans 7:18-19 and 24)

It would be easy to give in to despair. And certainly on our own, relying only on our willpower and strength – we will certainly give in to despair – shrug our shoulders and say it's all too hard. But here is the good news – in the Presence of God is transformation. In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul evokes the story of Moses when he says this :

Whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:16-18)

When Moses would go and speak to the God, they would meet in a Tent of Meeting, the bible says, outside the camp and some distance away. When Moses and God would meet the people would watch on from a distance. Their sin precluded them from spending time in God's personal presence. Only Moses could. Moses would veil his shining face when he was with the people, but when he was alone with God he would take the veil away.

Here is the good news of the gospel. Listen carefully to Paul's words. Not because of our goodness, but because of God's grace, through the death and resurrection of his Jesus, the veil is taken away. Like Moses, and unlike the people of Israel, we are able to meet with God face to face, as a man speaks with a friend. And like Moses when we meet with God with unveiled faces, we will never be the same again. Paul says that unlike Moses, our faces won't shine so much that our lives will. We will reflect the glory of Jesus as our lives are transformed by the Spirit into his likeness. Death dealing habits die and new life giving practices are formed when we spend time with Jesus. When we spend time in the Presence of Jesus we start to produce fruit we have either never seen, or seen in such quantities – more love, more joy, more peace, more patience, more kindness, more goodness, more faithfulness, more gentleness and more self-control. The more time we spend in the presence of Jesus, the more we will become like Jesus. In fact I will go so far as to say that if you spend more time in the Presence of Jesus this year, then when the year concludes you will be able to look in the mirror and see a different man or woman. You will be transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory.

In the end, I do not have the power to transform my life. The habits I want to break, I can't and the new behaviors I'd like to establish seem impossible. I can grit my teeth, I can try harder, be more determined but in my strength it's impossible. But in the strength, power and presence of God – all things are possible, including my transformation. Hallelujah!

In the Presence of God there is Rest. In the Presence of God there is transformation – radical, long-lasting, miraculous transformation.

Change – real soul deep change – is hard, painful, messy, difficult and takes a life time. But it's worth it!

Whether you are able to teach an old dog new tricks can probably be debated. What is certain is this; God can and does take an old life and make it new. God is in the transformation business.

Earlier this week Sue and I drove down to the beach for a swim before breakfast. For years we always park in the same spot just off Hedges avenue, right alongside a three story beachside mansion. But this week it was different. There was no mansion – just neat, but totally empty block. For a while we had noticed the mansion had been neglected and in disrepair, but this all seemed a bit drastic. Clearly someone had decided it wasn't worth the hassle of renovation; it was time to start over.

When we first enter God's presence we do so in a state of disrepair. Years of living life ignoring God has left its scars. The good news is that God does not say about us, 'They are too tough, too far gone, too messed up – I think it's a demolition job.' Rather, God always looks at us with the eyes of a renovator. In every human life he sees something of worth – something – someone - he can salvage.

For the next nine months or so we are going to have a living metaphor of the renovating power of the presence of God. When we explored how we would develop this site, we seriously considered demolishing our existing worship auditorium and starting again. Was it worth renovating into a larger space? In the end, thank God, we decided it was. Renovating an existing church will be in many ways harder, messier and more complicated and for some things – perhaps even more expensive. But it will be worth it. In nine months we will move back into a very different space, but a space that we will immediately recognize as the one we left last week.

People of God – hear the good news – God delights in renovating the human heart. God delights in taking our old, sin stained selves and through the light of his presence and power of his Spirit – transforming them into something new and beautiful and wonderful and that bears the likeness of his son, with ever increasing glory. We will still be us, but the 'us' we were created us – our true selves.

In the Presence of God there is transformation – soul-deep, spirit-enlivening, Jesus-forming transformation.