

2014

Transfiguration Sunday • Exodus 24:8–18 • March 2, 2014

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Recommended Citation

Gibbs, Jeffery (2014) "Transfiguration Sunday • Exodus 24:8–18 • March 2, 2014," *Concordia Journal*: Vol. 40: No. 1, Article 10.
Available at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol40/iss1/10>

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This Old Testament reading for Transfiguration stands as the complement and climax of the covenant ceremony that begins in Exodus 19. In broadest strokes, the text illustrates what it means for the God of Israel, after bringing his people out from bondage to the Egyptians and to their gods, to say, “I will be their God, and they will be my people.” In particular, however, this powerful and frightening depiction of an ascent up into God’s glory and presence reminds us of two things. First, how gracious God is to establish a covenant with a people at all! Second, then, how necessary it is to have a mediator who stands

between the utterly strange and all-powerful Creator and a flawed and broken people.

The first verse of the appointed text (v. 8) functions as a hook back into the first part of the chapter. Moses has already thrown the blood of the covenant against the altar that he had erected. Now, this single verse highlights that the covenant is established between two parties: God, and the people he has chosen. In verses 9–18, then, God’s command for Moses to come up to him on the mountain (v. 1) is narrated. It is narrated in such a way, however, that makes it clear that approaching God is no small thing, nor is it possible for just anyone to approach. A group of seventy-plus men begins the journey up the mountain. By the end, only the one whom God has appointed and designated may enter the cloud.

On the one hand, Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu (with Joshua, who is not named until v. 13) are accompanied by seventy elders of Israel as they go part of the way up the mountain. There they experience a remarkable fellowship with God, and the text is “remarkable in its bluntness”¹: “And they saw the God of Israel.” One might think, “This is as good as it gets.”

To the contrary, the ascent does not stop here. What does come to a halt are the people who are allowed to go no further up toward Yahweh’s glory. At first accompanied by Joshua, in the end, only Moses entered *the cloud which is, at the same time, a consuming fire*—the glory of Yahweh. Moses dwells there (literally, “lives,” v. 12) near the glory for seven days. Only after God specifically calls him into the cloud does Moses enter into God’s glory on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. The narrative is slow-paced, deliberate, and emphatic. Finally, only Moses whom God has chosen is able to enter the cloud.

As the narrative of Exodus continues, the next large section (chs. 25–31) offers the teaching about the tabernacle: its structure, its services, the ark of the covenant, etc. Chapter 32 offers up the account of Israel’s apostasy with the golden calf. It could hardly be more forcefully expressed—Israel’s need for mediation in her relationship with God is an ongoing need! There can be no thought of direct access to God, who is almighty, wild, and unthinkably holy. God must provide the way, and he did, and he does—in Christ, ever and always our mediator who is greater than Moses in the same way that the builder of a house is greater than the house itself, or as a son is greater than the servant in the house (Heb 3:1–6).

I have heard Hebrews 12:18–29 preached in a blundering “law then gospel” way as follows: Under the old covenant, the people were afraid to approach Mount Sinai, and God was terrible and terrifying, while under the new covenant, everything is different and gracious because of Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant (12:24). This reading violates all manner of truth, including the immediate context in Hebrews itself. The thought in Hebrews 12 moves from the lesser to the greater: if things were that awesome and terrifying under the old covenant, how much more awesome and terrifying—and terrible—it is under the new? So do not refuse him who is now speaking to you (12:25).

This lesson from Exodus 24 can afford a chance to regain a sense of the holy fear of God. God is not casual. He is not nice. He feeds the sparrows; he brings the rain; earthquakes and tsunamis, too, are in his hand. To echo the memorable expression found in one of the Narnia books, God is not safe, but he is good. If OT Israel

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needed a mediator, the one named and appointed to approach the presence of God on behalf of the people, how much greater is our mediator, the Son of God. Fundamental notions like these: the fear of the Lord, the reality of sin and impurity, the necessity of mediation, the unique ministry of Moses and of the great mediator, Jesus—all of these foundational truths can be preached based on Exodus 24:8–18.

Jeff Gibbs

Endnote

¹ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 506.

Published by Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary, 2014