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

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forgive sins (Mt 9:6). Jesus has the authority to cast out demons and heal the sick (Mk 3:15). All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him (Mt 28:18). (Cf., 1 Cor 15:24, Eph 1:21, Col 2:10).

Jesus is our Lord and Savior. By grace, he has redeemed us and adopted us into his family. As Peter says, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pt 2:9, emphasis added).

Since we have been called from darkness to light, we are Jesus’s servants. As Luther says, “we have our own master, Christ, and he has set before us what we are to know, observe, do, and leave undone.”

So, what does this text have to do with us? Well, Jesus, in his own teaching, makes use of this text from Leviticus. A lawyer asked him, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” and he said to them, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and Prophets” (Mt 22:35–40).

The text is interesting to us because our Lord uses it to teach us how we are to live as his children in this world. Verses 9–18, especially, help us think through what it looks like to “love your neighbor like yourself.” It is important to remember that while both the OT text and Jesus’s words can function as the second use of the law—condemning us for not “being holy” and not loving as God asks—primarily, they are both given to people whom God has redeemed and brought into his kingdom by grace, people who have a relationship with Yahweh and to whom Yahweh has made his promises. Therefore, the words are meant to help us understand what kind of people we are to be, now that we belong to Christ. What are our lives to look like and how can they best reflect Christ? It is from this perspective that Leviticus 1–2, 9–18 have something to teach us.

Tim Saleska

Endnote

1 Luther also makes the point that texts like Leviticus 19:9–18, are relevant to us, not because Moses gave the law but because its content, like the Ten Commandments, has been written into the hearts of all men.

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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”: “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
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

Lent 1 • Genesis 3:1–21 • March 9, 2014

The Search Begins

An initial caution must be sounded about beginning a sermon with Genesis 3. By divine design, Genesis 3 is an inseparable part of a unit (Gn 1–3), and neither Genesis 1–2 nor Genesis 3 should be discussed without the other. Genesis 1–2 provides an almost rhapsodic celebration of the Lord’s creation, punctuated at each stage by the Lord’s hymnic “good,” whether sung gently or exuberantly. That “good” describes every corner and every speck of this world, because it reflects the good in the heart of God. Our hearts to this day quicken instinctively at the spectacular beauty of a sunset or at the enthralling opening of a flower or at the heart-melting goo-gooing of a baby just beginning to explore the joy of sound. To start with Genesis 3 runs the danger of trivializing both 1) the gift of a world crafted by God and given to us as home, and 2) the horrid disjuncture between the world given us as home over against what we have made of that home. Genesis 3, in other words, appends the irrefutable reality that the world gifted us by God has become for us a Genesis 3 world. This is not to deny God’s creation touch, nor to besmirch those echoes of “good” that warm our hearts, nor yet to consign us to a hopeless, joyless life. We need to hold Genesis 1–2 and Genesis 3 together, but in tension, conveying neither a world unrecognizably idealistic nor a world bereft of God’s touch, promise, and presence.

The irony of Genesis 3 is that the quintessential good flowing from the heart of God to every part of the world (Gn 1–2) is turned back against God. The crafty one befuddles Adam and Eve with the unthinkable thought of looking objectively at God, setting aside their trust that God knows what is good and opting for their own choices. That breach of trust, that intrusion of self-driven will is what sets a Genesis 3 world apart from the good of Genesis 1–2.

How is God going to deal with this Genesis 3 world? Understandably, there is judgment, quick and serious, ranging from pain and suffering in life, to difficulties between spouses, to drudging labor, and to inevitable movement toward expulsion from the garden and finally death. God does reach out with an undeserved love; how-