Exodus 33 *Christmas Presence: If God Does Not Go With Us*

The theme for our Advent Series this year is a play on words. At Christmas, we get Christmas presents. Gifts under the tree. But also, at Christmas, we celebrate the Christmas presence. The arrival of God on earth.

We might say it like this: **The greatest Christmas present is the presence of God.**

That’s what Christmas is, right? That’s what we celebrate: The pre-existent Son of God, the Word who was there at the beginning, took on human flesh and made His dwelling among human beings. The Creator joined ranks with the created. Immanuel. God with us.

And so, as we were planning the sermons leading up to Christmas, we decided to ask this question: What happens in the Bible when God’s presence shows up?

What we are going to do for the month of December is look at passages of the Bible that talk about God’s presence. We’re going to see why Christmas matters as we see what a difference it makes to be in the presence of God.

Now, before we get started, I should make this clarification: we believe in God’s omni-presence. That is to say, we believe that one of the attributes of God is that He is always present everywhere. There is not a corner of the globe that you can go to—or, for that matter, any piece of the universe you could travel to—that God would not be present (Psalm 139:7-10). Moreover, we believe that His sustaining presence is in all places at all times holding all things together (Col. 1:17). I believe that if God were to remove His presence, the very electrons and protons that hold this world together would fly apart.

But, at the same time, the Bible has many passages that talk about being in the presence of God that, in a way, imply something beyond the omni-presence of God. In the Old Testament, the word for “presence” is the same as the word for “face.” So passages that talk about being in the presence of God are talking about being before the face of God. I believe it is a metaphor of sorts, that has less to do with physical proximity to God, and more to do with a heightened awareness of His reality in our lives. When we feel God’s presence, or when God makes His presence more fully known, that implies a fuller, more intense, more certain, more satisfying experience of the reality of God.

When we talk about God’s presence then, we’re not denying that He is always with us, always watching over us, always holding on to us. But we are talking about God making Himself more fully known; and us becoming more fully aware that He is there.

The first passage we are going to look at, then, is Exodus 33. This is a story—really, it’s a dialogue between Moses and God—that is all about God’s presence. We’ll go through the story a few verses at a time, pausing along the way to note the things we can learn about God’s presence.

***The Dangerous Presence of God***Let me set the stage.

Exodus 33 picks up the story of Moses and the Israelites right after the Golden Calf incident.

Maybe you know the story: God rescues the Israelites from Egypt and leads them to Mt. Sinai. There, He gives them the 10 Commandments and makes a covenant with them to be their God, and they will be His people. But while Moses is up on the mountain, receiving instruction from God, the people down below get antsy.

The mountain is covered with smoke and lightning, and they grow uncomfortable with the idea of a God they can neither see nor control. So Moses’ brother Aaron leads them in fashioning a Golden Calf—which is meant to be a physical representation of the God who parted the Red Sea. Soon they are casting aside all restraint and engaging in revelry and sin. They have just received the 10 Commandments, and now they are breaking nearly every one of them.

When Moses comes down the mountain, he carries with him the righteous wrath of God. He breaks the God-engraved tablets of the law and destroys the Golden Calf. He grinds the gold into dust and throws it on the water, and then he forces the Israelites to drink it. He rallies the Levites to himself and then goes through the camp killing 3000 of the ringleaders. It’s a violent scene.

But God spares the majority of the Israelites. His first inclination—as He told Moses when He first called Moses’ attention to the calf—was to destroy all the people and start over with Moses alone. God relents from this righteous judgement, but still, as Exodus 33 begins there is an uneasy tension between God and the people. **Here’s verses 1-3:**

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’**2**I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. **3**Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey.

At first glance, these verses seem like good news. The people are still going to go into the land that God promised to their forefathers. He’s still going to send an angel before them to drive out their enemies. They are still going to get the land of milk and honey they left Egypt for. The Golden Calf incident was bad, but God is still going to make good no his promises.

But if we look a little closer, we’ll see some hints that things are not all great. Notice, in verse 1, God refers to the Israelites as “the people.” Before this in Exodus, He has always referred to them as “my people.” But now they are “the people”, “the people you {Moses} brought up out of Egypt.” He almost sounds like one parent, saying to the other parent: “Look what your child is up to now.”

Likewise, in verse 2, He says that He will send “an angel” before them. Previously, He has talked about sending “my angel” (Exodus 23:23; 32:34) which would imply the angel represented His very presence. Now, it seems, God is distancing Himself from the people. This becomes clear when we read the rest of **verse 3:**

**3**Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.”

Here’s the problem: the Israelites are still going to the Promised Land, but God has decided not to make the trip. God’s presence was no longer going to travel with them.

And the reason for this is because they are a stiff-necked people. Like stubborn animals that refuse to shoulder the plow, the Israelites would not wear the yoke of obedience to God. They are sin-soaked. Wired for rebellion. Prone to wander.

God, meanwhile, is a God of justice. A holy God, who is completely separated from sin. And so, His declaration that He will not go with them here is actually for their own good. Because as long as He is with them, He may at any moment have to judge them for their sin, and then they would perish. In this sense, it would be better for them if He didn’t go at all.

So, here’s the first thing we can say about the presence of God: **God’s presence is dangerous.** Being in the presence of God is a severe health risk to sinful people.

Here’s an analogy I often use: putting sinful people together with a holy God is sort of like mixing gasoline and fire. We are gasoline. God is fire. And when you bring gasoline and fire together, the end result is bad for the gasoline.

As we talk about God’s presence, and even as we talk about wanting to experience more of God’s presence, we need to recognize the inherent challenge in that arrangement. God’s presence does not mix well with our sin. And the more we feel God’s presence the more we are going to be aware of our sinfulness. We will be convicted of our sin. We will be uncomfortable with our sin. We will be more aware of the punishment our sin deserves.

As we seek the presence of God, we need to keep this in mind. Inviting God into our lives is not always going to be self-affirming. It is going to force us to take a hard look at ourselves, and maybe begin to make some long overdue changes. C.S. Lewis writes about this in *Mere Christianity*. He compares us to a fixer-upper sort of house that God is coming in to renovate. He says:

"Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but **He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.**" C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

We can all see that we need a little work. A bad habit to be changed here, some relationship hang-ups to be repaired over there. But we aren’t always so quick to admit to the major renovations that will be necessary to make us a fit home for the King. Being in the presence of God is going to change us, and not always in ways that we are immediately comfortable with.

In fact, there are quite of few people who would like the arrangement God describes in **verses 1 through 3**. They would be very happy if God would help them overcome obstacles and deliver them to the Promised Land; but they would be equally happy if God otherwise left them alone.

Have you ever felt that way? It would be great to have the benefits of God’s blessings without the bother of a personal relationship with Him? It would be great if God would bring us to the milk and honey, but I’d rather He didn’t start poking around in the details of my life?

I think there are a lot of people who think that would be an ideal arrangement, but to the credit of the Israelites, they see how empty a deal that would be. **Verses 4 through 6:**

**4**When the people heard these distressing words, they began to mourn and no one put on any ornaments. **5**For the Lord had said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites, ‘You are a stiff-necked people. If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you. Now take off your ornaments and I will decide what to do with you.’” **6**So the Israelites stripped off their ornaments at Mount Horeb.

The people are distressed. They mourn. If God does not go with them, there is really no point in going anywhere. Even if He promises they’ll still take the land, possessing the promises without the presence of God will be meaningless.

***The Distinguishing Presence of God***Verse 6 is actually a bit of a cliff-hanger. In the next section of verses, the narrator appears to change the topic. Some scholars think this is evidence of a later editor inserting new material into the text. But I actually think it is a rather clever storytelling technique.

In verse 7 through 11 there is a description of the Tent of Meeting that sat outside of the camp where Moses would go and have conversations with God. It’s an important bit of information, helping us to understand a little bit how Moses and God interacted and where these dialogues took place. But it also serves to heighten the tension, because at the end of verse 6, we still don’t know what is going to happen. Is God going to go with the people, or not?

We return to that **question in verse 12**:

**12**Moses said to the Lord, “You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, ‘I know you by name and you have found favor with me.’ **13**If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people.”

Moses gets what is at stake. This entire experiment: the people leaving Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the covenant made at Mt. Sinai, has been about demonstrating what happens when the God of the Universe enters into a special relationship with specific group of people. It is about this nation living in the presence of God.

But now God is suggesting that He is dropping out; and Moses is not having it. He says, “Let’s talk about this angel. You say that you are sending an angel before us, but you haven’t told me who that is.” He essentially says: “If it’s not you, God, that’s not good enough.”

Moses shows incredible boldness here. You could even say that he is arguing with God. But it isn’t selfish. Really, Moses is bringing God’s own promises back to God. As he says: “Remember that this nation is your people.”

**In verse 14**, God appears to agree with Moses:

**14**The Lord replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

It looks like what Moses was asking for. But there is something hidden in the English translation that is clearer in the original Hebrew. In English, our word “you” works both as a singular and plural pronoun. If we want to talk to one person, or a group of persons, we use the same word: “You.” Unless we live in the South, then we’d call a group of persons “Y’all”. In Hebrew, however, there is a different word for the singular “you” than there is for the plural “you.” And here in verse 14, the LORD uses the singular “you.”

In other words, He’s saying: “I’ll go with you—Moses. I’ll give you—Moses—rest.” But He does not say: “I’ll go with ‘y’all.”

That’s an important distinction, because it explains why Moses says what he says in **verses 15-16:**

**15**Then Moses said to him, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. **16**How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”

God going with Moses alone is not enough. Moses says: “Your Presence needs to go with us. If your presence doesn’t go with us, then we might as well not even go.” Moses says: “Your Presence is the only thing that makes your people distinct. If we don’t have it, there is no point.”

And here’s the next thing we can learn about the presence of God: **God’s presence distinguishes.** Being in the presence of God sets God’s people apart from all the other people on the face of the earth.

Moses knew that the rest of the world was watching Israel very carefully. The Exodus had not taken place in a vacuum. Egypt and other nations were watching to see what would become of these people who had no home, they were ready to laugh and mock this God who had led His people into a wilderness. Moses knew that the history of this people was going to go a long way in determining the world's opinion of the LORD God.

And so He prays that God's presence will be with Israel, because he knows that it is only God's presence which can verify that what Israel is all about is not of men, but of God. He knows that only the authenticating stamp of God's involvement will be enough to distinguish the nation of Israel from all the other nations of the world.

The same is true for Christians in the world today. The opinions most people have about God are formed according to observations they make about us. People don't make decisions about God by looking at the Bible or at some tract or book. They make their decisions about God by looking at the Church--and people who call themselves Christians. They make their decisions about God by looking at God's body here on earth.

Do we want people reaching those decisions if God is not present among us? Oh sure, we might have nice active congregations and lots of busy programs and such--but if people can't see God among us, what is going to get their attention? What is going to separate us from the Lions' Club or Rotary or Kiwanis? I’m not picking on those groups, I belong to one of them, but they are not trying to demonstrate God’s love to the world. We are. And so, we need God's presence among us--and we need to demonstrate God's presence--if we want people to see that we are actually the Church of the Living God.

God's presence is vital to authenticate our endeavors as God’s people. When God is present in the Church, preaching is more than the opinion of just one person, it is the life giving message of the gospel. When God is present in the Church our acts of service are more than just an attempt to help out our fellow human beings, they are an extension of the mercy of Christ. When God is present in the Church our fellowship is more than just the bond between friends, it is the connection of the Holy Spirit.

If God isn't present, then we are just a bunch of people getting together from time to time to sing and interact and talk about changing the world--and it isn't going to happen. But if God is present, then so is His power, and the things He's called us to will most certainly be accomplished.

***The Delivering Presence of God***God is pleased by Moses’ request, and in **verse 17** He gives His answer:

**17**And the Lord said to Moses, “I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.”

God’s presence is going to stay with the people. Not just with Moses, but with the nation of Israel. He’s going to go up with them. It’s exactly what Moses asked for.

You would think that would be the end of the story, and that Moses would be satisfied to leave well enough alone. Arrangements with God are back to what they were before the Golden Calf. But Moses isn’t done. **Verse 18:**

18Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.”

Moses is not content with the status quo. He knows better than to think that he's seen everything God is capable of. He knows that he and the people have not yet arrived. And so, he prays for more. He prays that he might have a taste of God's character, that he might see something additional--he prays for God Himself. "Show me your glory."

In the original language, the word for glory comes from the same root as the word for “heavy.” It has something to do with weightiness, the heaviness of God’s splendor and radiance and person. Moses wants to see God’s full weight. His glory.

Moses is not satisfied with God fulfilling His promises; he’s not even satisfied with God’s presence among the people; He wants the LORD Himself. He wants the full weight of God’s glory.

I wonder if we have the same longing Moses had. While we thank God--as Moses did--for that which we have already received, do we still yearn for something more, something above and beyond the normal activities of life and church? Are we aware of a desire for God Himself? Do we crave a knowledge of the glory of the Lord?

Maybe we could call it God’s Presence Plus. An overwhelming sense of who God is and what He means to us. It’s a longing that can only be satisfied by God Himself. And God answers this request as well. **Verse 19:**

**19**And the Lord said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

Here is how God chooses to express His glory: He talks about His sovereign choice in showing mercy and companion. He expresses Himself as the one who has “mercy on whom I will have mercy.” Who has “compassion on whom I will have compassion.” Or, to use a word we’ve been celebrating for the last month here at Hope: God’s glory is in His grace.

This is how God will be able to travel with these stiff-necked people without destroying them. This is how His presence can set them apart even though they are sinful. In His grace. In His free and independent choice to have mercy upon them.

Here’s the third thing we can say about the presence of God: **God’s presence delivers.** It is in God’s presence that we find mercy and compassion.

More than anything else, we need God’s presence among us because it is the hope and promise of salvation. If God is not in our midst, then we are stuck in our sins and doomed forever.

But, for Moses, there is a problem. **Verse 20:**

**20**But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”

Remember, the Hebrew word for “face” and the Hebrew word for “presence” are the same. We’re back to the danger. Moses cannot see God’s face and expect to survive. Fire and gasoline. There is going to be an explosion.

But God works it out for Moses. **Verses 21-23:**

**21**Then the Lord said, “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. **22**When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. **23**Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”

God works it out for Moses. He will stand in the cleft rock and it will protect him. God will hold Moses, as it were, in the palm of His hand. He does not get a direct look at God, but He will get a glimpse of God’s glory--unveiled, undiminished, unadulterated. He will get more of the Lord.

And, in fact, if you would keep reading in chapter 34, you would see that it happens. Moses goes back up in the mountain and God passes in front of him declaring His name. Moses sees the glory of God's compassion and love and grace and faithfulness. He sees also His glorious justice and holiness. God puts him in the rock and he survives. He sees the glory of the Lord and lives!

And the fantastic thing is that God has done the very same thing for us—only better! Just as He did with Moses, He has worked out a way for us to behold his glory and live. He has bridged the divide between His own surpassing holiness and our woeful sinfulness. He has mediated a way for us to know more of the LORD.

It’s what Christmas is about. The presence of God coming to earth as the Holy Child Jesus. The **gospel of John says this about Jesus:**

We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth… **18**No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (John 1:14, 18)

Jesus Christ was born to bring the presence of God to earth. To show God’s glory. And in Him we are brought before the face of God.

God’s presence can be dangerous to sinners like you and me. But Jesus is the Rock of Ages in whom we can hide ourselves and find deliverance.