

Lenten Devotional

2020

Wednesday, March 18, 2020

Day 19, [Exodus 19](#)

Near and Far

Moses said to the Lord, "The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, 'Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.'" (Exodus 19:23)

When you study Christian Theology, particularly regarding God, you learn the theological concepts of "immanent" and "transcendent." These terms can be summarized with the words "near" and "far." To say God is immanent is to say that he is near us. He enters into the picture and acts for us and speaks to us. This is God at the burning bush or on the mountain in smoke. But, he is also transcendent; he is far. God is not a part of the creation, he transcends it. He must choose to enter it as an act of grace. God is Other and this must never be forgotten.

Of course, in chapter 19 we have both happening. The Lord reviews his history with Israel as the beginning of forming a covenant with them and they agree. So, now he will come near them. They will see him not just hear about him from Moses. God will be immanent to his people. However, God does not lose his transcendent nature. So, they must consecrate themselves. Because God is Other, they must prepare themselves to encounter the Other. This is something that must be taken seriously. Israel has never encountered a God like YHWH before, so repetitive warning and instruction is necessary.

We Christians, often, like to think that the New Testament puts this picture of the Old Testament God away. In some ways it does, but in important ways it does not. Jesus, God with us, is Other even while being fully human. There is always something troubling about him. Think of mother Mary treasuring all these things in her heart, think of John the Baptist declaring this man the lamb who takes away the sin of the world, think of the crowds being amazed and his teaching and miracles, or think of Pilate washing his hands. And, in case there was any doubt, we have a scene very much like the Exodus scene. Jesus goes up on a mountain, taking a small contingent with him, and there he is transfigured before them. A cloud comes over the scene and the voice from heaven speaks. All this shows that even in Jesus God continues to be both immanent and transcendent; near to us and far from us.

Why is this important to know as we think about our discipleship? It is important because there are two dynamics to our relationship with God that must be held in balance. Jesus is God with us, so let's begin there. God has come to us in the flesh and he now calls us friend. We have been adopted as children of God, heirs of God, and co-heirs with Christ. This is an important identity piece. We do not do discipleship from a place of fear. Rather, we confidently declare who we are and through that identity we confidently walk in obedience. On the other hand, God is not our buddy. His grace of immanence properly leads to greater worship not lesser worship. To lose the sense of transcendence in our relationship with God is to risk taking him for granted and giving him less than his due.

So, we should enjoy the grace that has been given to us and allow that to spur us on to deeper relationship. But, we should ensure that God receives our worship, recognizing the immensity of his great grace.

Prayer

O God, who is near and far, thank you for coming down to us and making us your children. Help us to respond in worship and adoration. Do not let us take you for granted, fearing that we would take advantage of your grace. Help us to maintain these two aspects in balance. Amen.