

My question is, where is our life with God heading? Where does it go, what is its direction? What does all our weekly worship, our Bible reading, our theological study, and our personal devotion time work towards? We try to live with virtue, with goodness, with love; social justice, public integrity, and psychological health are all important aspects of our Christian walk. But does it culminate in something, in some spiritual experience, or some ultimate arrival point, perhaps in this life or perhaps beyond it? Is justice achieved, or virtue laid hold of? Is love made complete? Is God ever made alive in and through us? Where are we headed in this life, with our desire for the Holy Spirit of Christ to emerge amidst all the complexities, imperfections, and difficulties of this life? In other words: what is the fullness of life towards and with God all about?

Perhaps these seem like big questions, and in fact they are. I am far from admitting to full competence in addressing them. But even though the answer to them lies beyond me and ultimately beyond even the most brilliant theologian or spiritual writer they are still questions worth embracing and wrestling with. And finally I do not think that we come to some polished answer or definitive statement on the meaning of life, but instead we are drawn to our knees in worship of an infinite God made known in Jesus. 'God is insistent that blessedness consists not so much in knowing God as in having God within'.

This last sentence I just said comes from a sermon written by St. Gregory of Nyssa, a 4th century bishop who lived in what we now know as modern day Turkey. It is to Gregory's interpretation of Exodus 33 and 34 that we turn for some light and insight to the question regarding the direction and aim of the Christian life with God. Our summer series entitled "Cloud Sourcing: The Spirit Through the Ages" invites us to examine and learn from the multitude of different ways the Holy Spirit has led Christians in interpreting the scriptures through the ages. Creative interpretations abound. Gregory, certainly, was not constrained by any "proper" or prescribed method of reading the Bible in order to arrive at the one complete and exhaustive interpretation. He was not overly concerned with questions of factuality or fiction; I do not think that we need to be either. So the following sermon is my creative interpretation of Gregory's creative interpretation; so if you have any questions or disagreements about what is said, please come speak to me after the service, and then maybe we can take it up with Gregory himself.

What Gregory helps us to see with his interpretation of Moses' encounter with God that we read from Exodus today is that the Christian life as a journey into God is a journey into infinity. God is identical with God's attributes: God is not simply loving, God *is* love. God is not simply beautiful but God *is* beauty. God is not simply just but God *is* justice. And so any of our finite and particular encounters with love, beauty, or justice, experiences which *we do have* are real expressions of God. Love within marriage and friendship, the beauty of music and visual art, or the justice of feeding and clothing the poor are little windows into infinity, a doorway which opens to an intimate encounter with our infinite God.

Moving through the whole of the book of Exodus, by the time we arrive at 33:12 where we began reading today, Moses has already encounter God in numerous ways: he avenged the unjust death of a Hebrew slave, he ran to the desert and found friendship and marriage in the tribe of Median, he heard God speak to him from the burning bush, and he acted as the channel for God's power as 10 plagues devastated the oppressing nation of Egypt, as the Red Sea split for Israel to cross in safety, as water flowed from a rock, and as sacred bread appeared to feed the Israelites in the desert. Moses is a

partner with God; in Exodus 33:11 we read that “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.” Moses, a friend of God.

Now, this is not to idealize this friendship. As in any relationship, there is tension: Moses resists God at points: he is often afraid to follow through on God’s commands, and even remarkably changes God’s mind through an argumentative plea for mercy and forgiveness when God is about to destroy the Israelites after their idolatrous worship of the golden calf. But regardless of imperfections and rough spots in this peculiar friendship, it is still an intimate relationship. Moses, a friend of God. Moses, who has talked with and acted for God on so many occasions, arriving at a point where God speaks to him, face to face.

And yet, immediately after this passage of 33:11 where the friendship of Moses and God is so clearly demonstrated as they meet together, face to face, Moses complains to God in 33:12: “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.”

And even after God says he will grant Moses’ request for guidance and for God’s presence with the Israelites, Moses *still* demands something further, and he demands it bluntly and shortly: “Now show me your glory”, he simply states in verse 18.

Why does Moses demand this? Hasn’t he *seen* God’s glory? The burning bush, the plagues in Egypt, the cross of the Red Sea, the manna from Egypt. And not only that, but a personal friendship with God, as one friend speaks to another!

But although he had truly encountered God through such experiences, he was still unsatisfied in his desire for more. “For once he had set foot on the ladder which God has set up he continually climbed to the step above and never ceased to rise higher, because he always found a step higher than the one he had attained” (Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* 114).

Perhaps this longing for more of God was indication that Moses *had indeed* already seen and experienced the truth of God. As St. Gregory is insistent upon, God is infinite, always larger than human minds, human bodies, or human experience can fully contain. And so, when we *do* experience God we are not satisfied, but are drawn in deeper. Our imaginations, our emotions, our bodies, our intellect, and our whole *being* is excited, inspired, and ignited with a desire for more of God, more of that which always lies beyond us.

Gregory writes the following: “This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what one can see, rekindle the desire to see more. No limit can interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied” (116).

The person who thinks that God is primarily something to be *known* or *experienced* does not have the life of God, because that person has turned from the infinity of God as love, beauty, and goodness, and has tried contained the divine nature within an immediate experience or a conceptual formulation. But the truth of God cannot be contained in such a way; the way of knowledge and experience of God is the desire of our whole being for more of God: more love, beauty, and justice. It is desire for more, never fully arrived at, but always pushing us from behind and drawing us from ahead.

So Moses has this desire and he expresses it to God: "Now show me your glory".

And God responds that he will pass before Moses with all of the presence of goodness and glory; but Moses cannot look upon the face of God, for, as God says, "no one can see me and live".

Now, this of course seems odd because in chapter 33:11 it was just described how God and Moses spoke *face to face*; and the Hebrew word for face is the same in both instances. But Moses as a friend of God is engaged in a deep and mobile relationship, a relationship which opens into the infinite depths of God. So when Moses demands to see God's *full* presence in and of itself, he seems to be demanding a final solution, a closing down of God's opening possibilities. And so the face of God in a dynamic relationship with a friend and partner gives life and opens up possibilities for the future, but the face of God as a static and immobile arrival point would end the journey into God; and then, as Gregory reminds us, we would not be journeying into God but instead our own constricted idea or concept of God of our own making; we would be content with an idol.

So God says that no one can see God's face and live: "Gregory interprets this very ingeniously and unexpectedly by denying that the sight of God can *itself* be fatal and suggests that the meaning is that God's 'face,' that which can be seen of God, is, on its own, less than life-giving. To be content with the 'face' of God is to be content with less than God' (Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* 70).

Moses, then, does not see the face of God. But he is granted a look at *some*, shall we say, "body part" of God (though Gregory adamantly denies that this talk of God's body can be literal in any way); while God denies Moses a look at his face, God does say that Moses will see the *back* of God.

Moses sees the back of God, though, not because he simply catches a quick glimpse of the divine nature as God sort of slips around a boulder or rock on Mt. Sinai. Perhaps now we can guess where Gregory might go with his interpretation. It is *better* to see the back of God than the face of God. When any of us is trusting someone to guide us on a walk through the forest or on a drive to an unknown location in the city, we do not *face* our guide or the car we are following. And so too with God; we are not content with facing God. To face God would simply be to face our own idea of God, to face an idol. Gregory writes that "Good does not look good in the face, but follows it" (120).

Our individual and communal journeys into God never come to an end; we are always striving after what is to come, to a God who leads us to what is always beyond us. God has given us, as God's image bearers, the ability to self-transcend, to move beyond simply the particularities of our own lives and to see that God as infinite goodness, beauty, and love is revealing the depths of that infinity *through* those very particularities. Our own lives and our own experience is never locked into itself; it opens onto the dimension of depth and infinity which we describe as God.

All this talk of infinity sometimes unnerves or scares me. If God is infinite, is God "small" enough, as it were, to talk to? Is God small enough to be in relationship with, to be a source of comfort and encouragement? How can we pray to a God as vast as infinity, even if it is infinite love and goodness? Talking about God in this way can make God seem impersonal, so far beyond our own limited sphere of joy, suffering, and all the little things of our own lives.

Maybe the infinite nature of God and the finite or particular nature of our own lives are in a complete and complex relationship with each other. God yearns to call us friends and to live with us through our concrete daily struggles and joys, because every experience we have contains some

element of goodness, love, and beauty, if we trust enough to look and pray for eyes to see. And, whenever we encounter goodness, love, or beauty in a particular situation we also encounter a way to deepen our relationship with an infinite God whose infinite love is so great that he seeks to make himself known to us through the infinitely *finite*, concrete, and particular life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And it is with Jesus that we finish this morning. Jesus Christ is both the rock that Moses is placed within for protection and the infinite beauty which the Apostle Paul never ceases to strain towards. Jesus is simultaneously our greatest comfort, the rock of ages we hide ourselves within, and our greatest challenge. Paul says in Philippians “I want to know Christ!” but then continues to pen one of St. Gregory’s favorite passages of scripture, which will become evident: “¹²Not that I have already obtained all this (knowledge of Christ), or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

Our relationship with Christ Jesus and our relationship with every person, every situation, every possible thing in our lives is an invitation to stretch towards and deeper into God, encountering the depth of heaven in each circumstance. Our relationships with each other can always continue to grow, our relationship with ourselves can always mature, and so our relationship with God is *hopefully* infinite; nothing is hopeless because it all opens up to the growth and goodness of God and the friendship which we are called to with God.

May we all increasingly discover and enjoy the infinite love found in friendship with God.

Amen.