

Approaching the Thick Darkness

Exodus 20:18-21

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Before this passage begins we learn that Moses has been called to meet God on Mount Sinai. On the mountain, God reminds Moses that the people cannot approach their meeting place or they will die. Moses confirms that the mountain has been consecrated and the people are going to keep their distance. Then God gives Moses the law and Moses descends the mountain and speaks as God to deliver the Ten Commandments.

The people were fearful during this experience. But Moses urges them not to be afraid because God just wants them to be...afraid. This oddly worded consolation is neither clear nor particularly consoling.

A lot of Christians in our era have really struggled with passages like this from the Old Testament that tell us that to be faithful to God is to be fearful of God. We would like to use a different word here. We live in one of the most fearful cultures in the world. Huge numbers of people in this culture are living with clinical levels of anxiety. Lots of folks have been wounded by churches who simply stir the pot of fears that this culture has put on to boil. We may even argue that the people who wrote this particular text just had a limited vocabulary and if they had had all the words and scholarship we have, they would have chosen a different word. But I want to stick up for the word fear in this context. I think an experience I had this summer will help me make my case.

In June, I went to the Christian Scholar's conference. This conference is held at Lipscomb University in Nashville so I learned a lot of interesting things about the doctrine of Church of Christ. But in addition to folks speaking on issues within the denomination, there were people speaking on particular issues in the world of biblical scholarship. Two of those speakers were Ellen Davis and Walter Brueggemann. They were on a panel together called "Reading the Old Testament as Scripture". They talked about the reasons they felt called to write about the Old Testament, who they had learned the most from, and where they had studied. Sitting in on this panel was a bible nerd's dream. When the moderator ran out of questions, there was a question and answer period with the audience. A man stood up and said "I have noticed more people in the church reading these passages from the Old Testament and replacing or translating the word fear as reverence. Do you feel that's appropriate?" Ellen Davis answered first and said emphatically "No. Because reverence is an action that begins in the mind and when you stand before the Lord it must be about gut...fear happens in the gut."

We all know this because fear is all-consuming, it blocks everything else out. Fear takes over your mind while also taking over your body. That is why in this Exodus passage no other emotion or word will do. The fear that the people are feeling is constructive though, not destructive. It is turning their attention to the only thing that matters. This faithful fear is blocking out the fears that result from their difficult predicament in the world.

And this fear of God comes from their proximity to God. God is very immediate in this story. They can see that God is on the mountain, God has a dramatic entrance for a reason. And they watch Moses go back and forth into this thick darkness. He is the only one mediating this interaction. The space between the people and God is very small. The law that Moses has handed them directly from the Lord's mouth is an invitation to maintain this very small separation from their God. By following the law, these people are attempting to stay close; knowing that staying close will be frightening.

I love this portion of the text because this situation is perfect. Everybody is doing the right thing here. God is speaking to Moses. Moses is faithfully communicating the message to the people. The people are receptive and obedient. Perfect. We need perfect situations like this as a model when we are in very imperfect situations.

The Jews have based their lives around this perfect story, the receiving of the law. All of their rituals are formed around laws and this intimate interaction with God. Scholars say that Christians have a parallel story in the New Testament...the resurrection. During the resurrection the space between the people and God was very small and the people were afraid. The early church created rituals around resurrection in the same way Jews created rituals around the law being handed down.

There's your scholarship for Sunday. Now here's the issue these models address. If we have become comfortable replacing the word fear with reverence, the space is too big. When we sit together in church the space between us and God should feel smaller because we are coming together, like the early church, to be reminded of God's fearful closeness to us through Jesus Christ.

But I can feel the expanse of the space. We know from these biblical stories that the space God creates is small...so small that people like Moses are invited to just step right through it and talk to God directly. If the space is expansive we have made it so, not God. We can't cry out "God don't hide your face from me!" when we are the ones so able to turn away.

I have never actually been to a church where the resurrection was talked about weekly. Think about it. How many times have you thought about, struggled with, read about the resurrection in church outside of Easter? If we want God to feel immediate to us we have to do this stuff. Nobody can do it for us. The Jewish people have rabbis but the people still have to practice the law themselves to maintain their connection with God. Nancy, Ken, Joyce and Missy can get up here and preach great sermons but they cannot practice resurrection for us. Sure, they can practice with us but not for us.

We have come to a place in the history of the church, this church and the big "C" Church, when major changes are happening. Mahan explained this to me at the beginning of my apprenticeship by saying that the Church I am walking into is very different than the Church he

was walking into. This new Church will not be about growing numbers and capital campaigns. It literally can't be. The Church does not have the sway and resources it once did. The Church I am inheriting will keep getting smaller and more marginal.

Mahan is usually right, and I definitely think he was right about the current state of the American church. The churches we have become accustomed to in this country where anybody can just drop by one Sunday every other month to hear a motivational sermon, those churches are on their way out. Their death will be hard. But we're Christians. We know about death and we are organized around resurrection.

We will need to focus on educating one another about the resurrection and the way we can still say no to the culture of death. Maybe we will do these things through mission groups about mass incarceration or death row or the plight of undocumented folks. Maybe it will be done through in-depth, ongoing adult and youth religious education. Surely, we will have to re-evaluate everything we have done and make way for practices we forgot or never imagined.

We can walk towards the thick darkness that Moses entered. On our way, we will experience what Elaine Heath calls "the mercy of great loss". But in the end, what we will lose will be the processes, institutions and empty practices that made the space between us and God so big. That loss, those deaths will be sad and our growing nearness will be scary. But we are created to be close. We are called to be faithfully fearful of God despite our predicament.