

Sermon: The Unbearable Glory of God

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, Feb 27, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It is an aged-old question: Why is the presence of God not obvious to humanity? I put this question forward, as the world is still grappling with the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, when close to 6 million people have perished worldwide, thus far. Just when we think things are looking slightly brighter, we are hit with this latest war of aggression against Ukraine, coming from that mad-man Putin and his nuclear-capable war-machine. Where is God in all these? Why is the presence of God so hard to perceive?

Some attribute it to the fallenness of humanity, that in our sinful state we have turned our back on God, so we are unable to perceive the presence of God all around us. Some would say that God manifests the God-self in gentle whispers, as the wind blows where it chooses. Who could really understand it? There is merit to that argument as work of the Holy Spirit truly is unpredictable and incomprehensible.

Yet, one cannot overlook a fundamental aspect of our faith, that from time to time, **God hides!**

We find this hiddenness of God in the Scriptural passage of Exodus 33, when Moses asked to see God, and that request was denied. The context of that passage harkens back to the first time that Moses climbed Mount Sinai to receive the commandments of the Lord. When he finally came down from the presence of God, he was shocked to see the Israelites bowing down to a man-made golden calf. In anger, Moses broke the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. In anger, God punished the Israelites most severely, to the point where God was about to abandon that idolatrous people altogether.

Then Moses interceded on behalf of the people of God. As part of that intercession, he asked in 33:18, "*Show me your glory, I pray*" Then God replied, in verse 20-23, "*you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.*" And the Lord continued, "*See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed*

by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

That passage inspires Frances J. Crosby in composing ‘He Hideth My Soul’, where the refrain goes,

“He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock,
that shadows a dry, thirsty land;
He hideth my life in the depths of His love,
And covers me there with His hand.”

It is a beautifully and poetically expressed sentiment, yet, strictly speaking, what is hidden in the original Scriptural passage is not Moses, rather it is God. God choose to reveal to Moses, not the full face of the God-self, but only the back.

Nonetheless, the back of God, was sufficiently glorious that it had somehow altered the face of Moses. In the following chapter, chapter 34, as Moses came down from Sinai the second time, carrying in his hand two new stone tablets, the skin of his face ‘shone’.

Actually, we don’t really know what had happened to Moses, nor are we sure what his face actually looked like. The Hebrew verb used here is ‘qaran’. Most English versions of the Bible translate it as ‘to shine’. However, a more literal translation should be ‘to horn’, taking from the Hebrew noun of ‘qeren’, that is ‘horn’. That is how the early Church Father Jerome translated ‘qaran’ in the Latin Vulgate, that is ‘to horn’. Which in term inspired the Renaissance artist Michelangelo to produce a marble sculpture of Moses with a pair of devil-like looking horns, on top of his head.

Whether the face of Moses ‘shone’ or somehow ‘grew horns’, the Israelites were sufficiently terrified that they won’t go near him, unless his face is veiled. Not only God hides, he who come in close contact with the unbearable glory of God must veil. Yet this hiddenness of God was there not for ill but for good.

17th century mathematician and theologian Blaise Pascal argues that it is both proper and necessary for God to be at least partly concealed. In a series of brief passages known as *Pensées* (or *Thoughts*), Pascal wrote, “We can understand nothing of the works of God unless we accept as a matter of principle that he wished to blind some and enlighten other... If there was no obscurity, humanity would not be aware of its own corruption. If there was no light, humanity could not hope for a cure. Thus it is not only

right for us that God should be partly concealed and partly revealed; it is also useful...What can be seen on earth points to neither the total absence nor the obvious presence of divinity, but to the presence of a hidden God. Everything bears this mark.”

Pascal’s basic argument is that the existence of God is not obvious to human reason. Therefore, if God is to be truly found and really known, it must first come in the form of divine self-revelation. God’s hiddenness is thus seen as a divine strategy to impress upon humanity of their need for faith. For faith is, as Hebrews 11:1 states, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”.

Yet, faith is hard. Hard when life throws lemons at us, and expect us to make lemonade. Faith is hard when we are not able to see God. Harder still when God hides.

19th century poet and hymn writer Walter Chalmers Smith has this to say about God,

“Immortal, invisible God only wise.
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.
Most gracious, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.”

What Smith had done was taking two contradicting aspects of God—the hiddenness and the glorious—and place them together in a song of praise. This invisible and inaccessible God is also the gracious, glorious, and victorious Ancient of Days, using a title of God found in the Book of Daniel. Hallelujah, this God is worthy of our praise, for when terrible things happen, and they inevitable will. We trust and sing that the immortal and almighty God still reigns, still rules, and shall be victorious.

It is worth noting though the glory of God was veiled in Moses, the same glory is seen clearly in Jesus, by his disciples. The passage in the Gospel of Luke 9 tells us that Peter and John and James, the three closest disciples went up on a mountain with Jesus, supposedly to pray. And while Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Not only that, the disciples also saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to Jesus. Here the Scripture is quite specific in verse 31—they appeared in glory. Though the three disciples were weighed down with sleep, they nevertheless witnessed the glory of Jesus, and the two men with him, in an event which we understand as the Transfiguration of Christ.

The disciples did not fully understand what was before them, Peter even suggested some silly scheme to set up tents, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah, kind of like going on a camping trip with his personal heroes. Perhaps I am being too harsh on Peter, for no one could fully comprehend that glory, unless it is seen in light of the cross.

At a disputation taken place in Heidelberg in 1518, German reformer Martin Luther outlined his understanding of the 'theology of the cross'. In one particular section, Luther explains that theology, or the study of God, involves a response to the 'posteriora Dei', or the 'rearward parts of God'.

Here is what Luther said, "The person who looks on the invisible things of God, as they are seen in visible things, does not deserve to be called a theologian. But the person who look on the visible rearward parts of God, as seen in suffering and the cross does deserve to be called a theologian."

What Luther reminds us is that, the best humanity can hope for is to get a glimpse of the back of God as God passes by. No one can see the full and frontal glory of God for it is unbearable to us. Yet, that same glory is revealed in Jesus Christ, most fully in and through, not Transfiguration but the cross.

That centrality of the cross, is explained also by Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:2, "*I decide to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*" At that crucifixion on the cross, as Jesus uttered in his dying breath, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" He experienced at once, that absence, that hiddenness of God, for all of us.

As we now know, God was not absent at the cross, God was and still is in control, still rules, still reigns. To us, God may be invisible and inaccessible, but we nevertheless still trust and praise God.

In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.