

BaptistWay: Seeing God

April 17, 2015

• *The BaptistWay lesson for May 3 focuses on Exodus 24.*

Seeing through the smoke

Where there's smoke, there's fire. Where there's fire and smoke ... billowing smoke, and thunder and lightning, and a thick cloud and a very loud trumpet blast, there is God (Exodus 19:16-18). Where God is, the people tremble.

God descended to the top of the mountain and called Moses up from the bottom of the mountain. The trembling people watched as Moses climbed up to the volcanic appearance of God. They waited until Moses came back and told them not to set foot on the mountain or they would suffer God's wrath.

When the people saw the mountain again, they trembled again at the site of God's presence at the top of the mountain—the thunder and lightning, the smoke and the trumpet. The *New International Version* says “the people saw the thunder.” In trembling fear, they asked Moses to be their go-between (Exodus 20:18-19). They were terrified of God.

Rabbi Marc Gellman, who I have cited in previous lessons, paints delightful accounts about other stories in Exodus, fun stories that make me laugh and wonder. But Gellman doesn't tell any stories about God's terrifying presence on the mountain. Indeed, we'd much rather see terror in movies and TV shows than be terrified by God.

Then, God told Moses to bring Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and 70 elders “up to the Lord” to worship (v. 1). What could these men have been thinking as they went with Moses “up to the Lord?”

They ‘saw the God of Israel’

The last time we read a description of God’s presence on the mountain, it is the stuff of Dante’s *Inferno*. Then ... well ... then when Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the 70 elders went up, and it simply reads, “(they) saw the God of Israel” (v. 10). Huh.

Oh, but that’s not all. “Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky” (v. 10). Lapis lazuli, an opaque blue stone, also is used to describe God’s presence in Ezekiel 1:26 and 10:1, Peter Enns points out in *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus*. I wasn’t even there, and I find this absolutely remarkable. What happened to the smoke, the fire, the thunder and lightning? What happened to the terror?

Oh, but that’s not all. “But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites” (v. 11). In case you missed it, these “leaders of the Israelites” were not to come near God (v. 2); yet, here they are, close enough God did not raise a hand against them, close enough they could see God without the smoke and fire.

That’s still not all. “(They) saw God, and they ate and drank” (v. 11). Somehow, these seventy-plus men overcame their terror of God and climbed up the mountain. They obeyed God’s call to come up the mountain and were rewarded with a sight to behold. Turns out, on the other side of all that smoke and fire and thunder and lightning was a majestic God who did not raise a hand in vengeance but in whose presence they found peace. “And they ate and drank.” I wonder what they ate and drank.

The eating and drinking in Exodus 24:11 does not refer to taking in dinner/supper. It is not a snack after a long hike. This “meal” was a customary way to seal a covenant between two parties.

The blood between

To this point, we have overlooked what took place between the smoking mountain of Exodus 19 and 20 and the majestic presence of God in Exodus 24. Between these two very different scenes, Moses built a stone altar at the foot of the mountain (v. 4). He sent “young Israelite men” to offer burnt offerings and to sacrifice “young bulls as fellowship offerings to the L” (v. 5). From the sacrifice, Moses splashed half the blood against the stone altar (v. 6) and sprinkled the other half on the people saying, “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words” (v. 8).

In a way seen most clearly through the lens of the New Testament, the sacrifice and the blood sprinkled on the people point forward to the sacrifice of Christ and his blood shed for the removal of sin (Matthew 26:28; Hebrews 9:11-28). In the same way the blood of the young bulls served to cover the sin of the men who went up to God, the blood of Christ serves to cover our sin, making it possible for us to go up to God.

Had the sacrifice and the blood not come between the two visions of God, I suppose we may not have the second vision, for to venture into God’s presence unclean is a dangerous proposition.

Yet, Robert Robinson in his hymn “Come Thou Fount” reminds us, “He, to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.”