

“WE SEE GOD!” EXODUS 24:9-11 & MARK 14:22-24 MAUNDY THURSDAY

“We see God” says the caption on tonight’s bulletin. “We see God” is the theme of this service tonight. “We see God”...a dangerous thing to do...at least that had always been the case before now. Very early in Moses’ career as a spokesman for God, the Lord had informed that great prophet in no uncertain terms, “Human beings shall not see God...and live.” Now that would surely cause one to think twice before trying to arrange an encounter with the Lord!

Scripture also refers to God as a “consuming fire”—a phrase that conjures up images in our minds of films we have seen of the deadly power of hungry flames sweeping through a warehouse or burning the tender shoots and mighty trees of a tinder-dry forest or fueling the white hot stream of lava that slides down the sides of a volcano...not a pleasant picture as we come here tonight with confession of our sins rolling off our tongues. Under such circumstances it would seem risky indeed for us to see God!

But, as we heard in our First Lesson from Exodus tonight, there is another face of God that has been seen by his people from time to time and that is the face we may behold. For, far from being a vision that will destroy us, this other face of God will welcome us and bring his hope and direction into our lives. Moses and the elders of Israel went up on the mountain at God’s invitation, and there, in the presence of that Consuming Fire, they ate and drank in his presence. And, wonder of wonders, in spite of what God had earlier told Moses, because God had this time chosen to be their forgiving Host, they saw God...and they lived!

Others in Scripture were given the opportunity to see the face of God—in one form or another—and live—Abraham as he entertained three visitors who reminded him of God’s promise to send at last a son to him and his wife, Sarah...Jacob, in a fierce wrestling match that would dislocate his hip and give him and his descendants a new name, Israel...Moses, himself, in the burning bush, calling him to lead his people out of slavery...Elijah not in earthquake wind or fire, but in a still, small voice...Mary through the message of an angel...the disciples and those privileged to see him in the Son incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth...Paul, as he was knocked from his horse by a blinding light and set on a journey that would lead many to Christ. All of them saw God face to face, and not only did not die, but became part of God’s story.

Tonight *we* see God. The God we see is one who came among us not to *be* the Consuming Fire who would destroy us because of the sin on our lips and in our hearts, but who would *endure* that consuming fire of the Father...to suffer and die before tomorrow is fully past, enduring on his cross the full force of the consuming wrath of God. From that cross he looked straight into the face of the Almighty as sinful human beings dare not. He looked at the Father as *the* Sinner (the one who gathered into himself all of the sins of all of the people of the world for all time). In place of all of us he looked into the face of God and he did die!

And by that dying Jesus makes it possible for us to look at God and, even though we die, to *LIVE!*

So, we see God, and what do we see? *We see God in the form of a servant*, laying aside his robe, and assuming the role of a lowly household slave, he knelt in servitude before his disciples, and gently washed their tired and dusty feet before their meal. Whenever I think about this story, I can’t get out of my mind an artist’s depiction of the scene where Peter is hiding his face in shame as Jesus washes his feet, fully aware that their roles should be reversed. But as Jesus would remind them it had to be this way, because “*he came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.*”

Before this night is over Jesus will be kneeling once again—this time in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane—the Obedient Servant, taking the place of all of us who have confessed again this very night how often we have failed to be the servants our God calls us to be. There, dripping bloody beads of sweat, he will wrestle with the horrific way God has set before *him*, forced to endure that way because of all of the times we have failed to even struggle before choosing our way over God’s way.

Indeed we see God tonight and what do we see? *We see God as the forgiving Lord.* In many churches the Maundy Thursday Confession of Sins that is used repeats the same words as the Confession used in that place forty days earlier on Ash Wednesday, but with one significant difference. On Ash Wednesday the emphasis had been on the condemnation we bring on ourselves through our sin—“dust you are and to dust you shall return.” Tonight, in no uncertain terms, forgiveness is pronounced through Word and Meal.

Tonight we look into that Consuming Fire that is our God, and we don’t see the angry face of a God who we have ignored and disobeyed. Now we see the One who is in the process of sending his Son into the jaws of Satan and hell, a place where his execution will take our sins away *“as far as the east is from the west.”* We look and we see God in the form of the one who comes to make it possible for us to be reconciled to God.

So, yes, we see God and what do we see? *We see God as the host.* God is the one who has set the table for us and now invited us in to eat and drink this heavenly feast in his presence... and live! We see the broken Body of the Son of God in bread that is broken before us...we see the precious Blood of the Son of God in the uplifted cup and the taste of the wine as it rolls over our tongues. And like Moses and the elders before us, we are not consumed. Instead this time we are invited *to* consume—the bread of *life* and the cup of *life*.

And yes, there is one more way we may see God as well. It is a way tied to the very name we give to this day—*Maundy Thursday*. That name “Maundy” comes from the Latin word “*mandatum*” which means “command” or mandate”...the word the Savior used this night with his disciples when he told them, “*a new mandate I give you, that you love one another in the same way I have loved you.*”

What that means is that Jesus is telling us we may also see God when we are following his example and this command to love as he has loved. We may see God when we take the posture of servants, literally or figuratively kneeling and “washing feet” as we perform actions of love and mercy that reach out to the hungry and homeless, the suffering and grieving, the sick and dying, the lonely and the depressed.

From that posture of kneeling, *we see God* in the faces of those who still hunger and thirst, in the faces of the lost and confused, in the faces of those who are still burning and dying. There too—in loving as we have been loved, in serving as we have been served, in forgiving as we have been forgiven, in reconciling as we have been reconciled, in healing as we have been healed—there too, by God’s great grace made known to us this night in Word and Supper—there too, in all of these faces, we *may see God!*