

Revelation!

Exodus 33:7-11, John 1:10-18

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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Every now and then I'll go to a concert by a Christian musician. And almost every time I do, something happens that makes me wince. The earnest and sincere guitar player on stage says something like this: "I'd like to play a song for you now that the Lord just gave to me the other night..." As if he went to bed and was getting ready for his prayers and there on the pillow was the sheet music! Have you heard someone say that – "The Lord gave this to me" or "the Lord told me to..." or some such phrase? I know that I have used that sentence myself – although guardedly, because most of my experience has me wrestling with the Lord or having him beat me over the head with something until it sinks in. I rarely find messages from the Lord simply lying around.

But I digress. What I really want to consider this morning is a question that has haunted humans for all of history: Assuming that there is a God, is it possible to know that God? How do we know what we know about God? Does God share anything of himself with the creation?

Hindus would say yes – the means by which we understand God is through a series of writings called the Vedas. While these are summed up in the volume called *The Bhagavad Gita*, it takes a believer millions of years and many, many lifetimes before the spiritual truth can make sense.

Buddhists would say that we can learn about God from the teachings of the Buddha, but God himself is not involved in that revelation. And Jainists hold that while religion is a good thing, there is no supernatural force in the universe, and therefore there is no God to know.

But the so-called "Abrahamic" religions all agree that not only is there a God, but that God longs to make himself known. For the Muslims, that revelation comes through the Koran. Jews understand the First, or Old Testament to be a reliable witness to God's intentions, and Christians, of course, hold fast to the notion that God reveals himself through the Bible – the Old and New Testaments. We would say that the scripture is one form of the revelation that God uses – one way in which God chooses to reveal himself to the creation.

We find ourselves now in the time of Advent. The word can mean a number of things, including "coming" or "arrival" or "beginning". It is, and has been, for the church a time of waiting. Why do we wait? We wait because trust that God's self-revelation is not yet complete. What I mean to say is that while we remember and re-read the scriptures, we are so bold as to hope that God might open the scriptures to us, or us to the scriptures, in a new way so that we understand more about who God is and what God calls us to in the here and now. In that way, then, we say that we are waiting, always waiting, for God to reveal himself.

This Advent, we are comparing Jesus and Moses as we consider the ways in which the Old Testament points us towards the New. Our reading from

Exodus is one of dozens in that book indicating that time and time again, God spoke to his people through Moses. By and large, Moses is seen as the voice of God. He is shown to be an imperfect vessel, but a useful one nevertheless. Through Moses, God revealed a great deal about himself, didn't he? Can you think of anything that the Hebrews learned from God through Moses? The Ten Commandments...the desire for holiness...the call to act justly... the necessity of worship...

As we look at Jesus, we see that the kinds of self-revelation that God offered through Moses are much deeper. Whereas Moses often had a word from the Lord, John tells us that Jesus was the Word FOR God. Eugene Peterson translates verse 14 in this way: "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." You see what I mean, I think: that in Jesus of Nazareth, the revelation of God was more powerful, more insightful than ever before. What did God reveal in Jesus? Well, according to our reading for today, God in Christ unleashed the power for humans to become children of God. To know grace and truth. To see into the very heart of the Father.

So we can see, I think, that Moses and Jesus are both agents by which God chose to reveal himself. Both are instruments through which humans are invited to know more of God's eternal purposes. Moses, the fully human, flawed, imperfect vessel, and Jesus, who was not only human, but divine, perfect, and sinless representation of God in human form. Both point to this fundamental truth: that God allows himself to be known. It is possible for us to know.

Having said that, I'd like to make two brief observations about the nature of revelation. In both Jesus and Moses, God reveals himself with an expectation: this revelation is to be shared. I know that this may seem obvious, but I'm not sure that it is.

God speaks to Moses, and then what does Moses do? He reports God's words. Sometimes, God would give Moses a word for Pharaoh; other times, it would be for the people of Israel. The point is that it's not just a "God and Moses Club". God gives Moses a glimpse of himself and that glimpse has implications for the wider community.

In Christ, we see the same thing. This Son of God who is fully human and fully divine spends three years of his earthly life wandering around with a band of misfits like tax collectors, fishermen, loose women, and outcasts. Why? Because he needed them to get the Gospel. The Good News. The revelation from God. Jesus intended to change the world through that sorry band of twelve. And he did.

After Jesus died, was raised, and then ascended into heaven, did God stop revealing himself to the world? Obviously, the church has said "No!" to that. After all, the entire New Testament, which we claim to be the written Word of God, was written after these events. It would seem as though Jesus taught those twelve original followers that they were supposed to keep paying attention – to watch, to listen, to observe...and to carry the revelation of God into the world so that others might know God's truth and God's grace.

Does that make sense? My first observation, then, is that God reveals

himself to humanity with the expectation that we will share this glimpse of the Father's heart with others. The revelation is meant to be shared.

The second observation that I would like to make concerning revelation is that it is possible – and I might even say expected – for the pupil to become greater than the master. Now pay attention, because some of this might be heresy. I don't think so, but you might get me into hot water.

Look at Moses. What happened when the Israelites went to a new camp? Moses took his trusty old "Tent of Meeting" and set it up outside the camp. Then what? He would go in, talk with God. Great. Then what? He would go home. Moses would put in a shift at the Tent of Meeting and call it a day. But Moses was not the only one there. Who else was there? Moses' young apprentice, Joshua. And what were Joshua's hours? It seems as though he was there 24/7. Verse 11: "Joshua, son of Nun, would not leave the tent."

I wonder if Joshua had a greater capacity to know and understand the revelation of God than did Moses. After all, he was a much younger man when he started to learn the ways of the Lord. He had a great teacher – something that Moses himself didn't have. Joshua was formed differently than Moses, and that may have enlarged his ability to know God.

Here's an example. Our friend Tim Salinetto is quite the birdwatcher. When Tim was a kid, his dad took him on walks through the woods and gave him an appreciation for nature. His friend, Mary Kay Wilson gave him stacks of *National Geographic* Magazines. I bought him a set of binoculars. But my hunch is that Tim observes the world around him more keenly than Bob, or Mary Kay, or I do. He started younger than any of us. His curiosity was inflamed and encouraged. And now, he is a mentor to others. At the last Youth Retreat, for instance, Eddie Gargis came running over to me, out of breath: "Pastor Dave! Pastor Dave! Come quick! Tim found a white-breasted nuthatch to show us!" That never happened on any retreat I ever led...but Tim has gone deeper sooner than any of his teachers. Now, Tim, that collection of animal bones in your basement is kind of creepy, but I think you get my point.

Look at the same phenomenon in the New Testament. God spoke through Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was God in person – to those twelve disciples and a couple of thousand other folks who happened across his path in the course of the three years of Jesus' ministry. And in that three years, Jesus charged those twelve to use what they had learned of God to change the world. And they did. Do you want proof? Each of us is here because our lives were touched by someone who had been touched by someone else who had been touched by someone earlier...and so on...who had been formed by the twelve apostles, who had been formed by Jesus.

My first observation: revelation is meant to be shared in the context of a community. My second observation: there are times when the learner becomes more fruitful than the master.

Here is my challenge: can we nurture and train the next generation of disciples to have a greater hunger and capacity for God than we do?

I believe that I am known and loved by God. I am a follower of Jesus. Everything I am, I owe to Jesus. You could say that I'm a "good Christian", whatever that means. I'm learning to be a prayer. A giver. A preacher. A teacher. I hope that I'm getting better at each of those disciplines. But here is the truth: in this room there are people who will be better prayers, better givers, better preachers, better teachers than I ever will be. Why? Because this church is paying attention to the revealed Word of God in Jesus and is building the capacity for faith in its young members.

The truth this Advent is this: look around the room. Look at the people in front of, and next to, and behind you. If there were no other Christians in the entire world – if every believer in Jesus was in this room right now – this church would still possess more in terms of raw resources than the original twelve disciples could have dreamt about. There is more influence, power, money, literacy, ability to travel, and so on represented in this crowd than there was in the first followers of Jesus.

So here's the question: if all of the rest of the Christians in the world were to disappear this morning, would we be agents of God's revelation of grace and truth to the world? Could God choose to reveal himself to the creation – could God display his purposes and intentions through us?

Yes!

And we will see that, not as we trust in our influence, power, money, literacy, etc., but by trusting in God. By meeting him. By showing others the way that we ourselves have been shown. By trusting in the revelation we have received, and by leading others into it.

It's not just us who is waiting this Advent, you know. The world wants to know: can we know God? Is it possible to know grace and truth? Who will show them that God has moved into the neighborhood if you do not? Amen.