

03/06/11

Living Life Together in Celebration of the Mercy of God

- How much do you cherish the personal presence of God in your life?...
 - that may not be a question we contemplate all the time because we are so used to the blessing of knowing that God is always with us...
 - but my guess is that in practical terms, for many people here this morning...your lifestyle would indicate that you cherish His presence greatly...
 - for example, if you had an unexpected trial come up, or received bad news of some kind...what would you do next?...
 - I believe a significant percentage of the people here this am would say – I would pray...
 - **1 Peter 5:7 - casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.**
 - **Psalm 61:1-2 - Hear my cry, O God; Give heed to my prayer. From the end of the earth I call to You when my heart is faint; Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.**
 - that's just second nature, isn't it?...but do you realize that you're talking to someone you can't even see?...
 - and your response (if you don't mind me just representing both sides of this conversation) would be – I strongly believe in the personal presence of God, and I take great comfort in knowing that I can cry out to Him at any time from any place...
 - or this – if you had something unexpectedly good happen...some kind of blessing out of the blue – what would you do next in that case?...seriously...
 - I really believe the answer for many is – you'd stop and thank the Lord...you'd just call out to Him and praise His name...that's as natural as breathing...
 - **Psalm 68:19 - Blessed be the Lord, Who daily loads us with benefits, The God of our salvation! Selah**
 - **Psalm 103:2 - Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits:**
 - **Psalm 116:12 - What shall I render to the LORD For all His benefits toward me?**
 - why?...because deep down inside you're convinced of His personal presence...
 - here's another one...do you find yourself talking to the Lord in the car when you're driving by yourself?...
 - have you ever come up to a stop light and had people in the car next to you look at you funny because you were talking a mile a minute and you were the only person in the car?...
- The Scripture tells us that this is one of the aspects of our faith that be very attractive to those who don't yet know the Lord...like this prophecy from the book of Zechariah...
 - **Zechariah 8:23 - Thus says the LORD of hosts, "In those days ten men from all the nations will grasp the garment of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.' "**
 - there it is – being impacted by people who cherish the personal presence of God...
- now, let me ask you this?...do that have implications to the way we think about the dynamic of God's people coming together?...
- later in the message we'll mention several different ways the New Testament teaches that God's presence is especially apparent when His people meet together in the church...but we can probably think about many examples, can't we?...
- the longer we go, the fewer people who knew our former pastor. Pastor Goode...he served here faithfully for 22 years...

- then he led the church to make a leadership transition between the two of us on the supposition that we would continue to serve together along with the rest of our staff and church family for a long time to come...
- but in the plan of God he died of a heart attack 14 years ago...just 1 ½ after we had made the transition...
- that occurred on a Saturday, and we had very little time to prepare for the services here the next day...
- some of you were here that day...and it's interesting that I still have trouble talking about that event even 14 years later...but I think we would all say this – The Lord met with us that day in a way that was real and powerful and sustaining...
 - and I'm not speaking in some hyper-mystical way...but we believe in the powerful, personal presence of God...
- I remember the Friday night that I was in NH speaking at a counseling conference...
 - and my cell phone went off at about 2 am, telling me that Leah, Harrison, and Sophia Waggoner had just died in a tragic house fire and that Brian was badly burned...
 - I still had teaching responsibilities till noon on Saturday and there was no way to change my flight in such an obscure location...
 - so I went ahead and finished teaching and headed for the airport...
 - then I got in touch with Brian – of course other members of our staff had been ministering to he and his extended family as soon as the accident occurred...but we spoke on the phone and then I got on the plane and looked at the sermon I had prepared for the next day and thought....this just isn't going to work...
 - and what do you think I did next?...cried out to the Lord?...and then started scribbling on a legal pad like a wild man...
 - then I had a layover in Philadelphia...many of you have been there...that's the airport with the rocking chairs and for a while there wasn't even one available so I just sat on the floor and started typing away on my laptop...by God's grace I was able to get the new message to Heather so she could make a new power-point...
 - and then I remember telling the church family Sunday morning what had happened...some knew because they had received the news on our e-mail prayer request line...
 - but many did not know – I remember that palpable gasp that went up among our congregation that morning...and then the soft crying as we continued our time of worship...but many of us would say – God met us here...and He used His word, and great worship music, and the sweetness of personal relationships to begin to heal our brokenness...believing in the powerful personal presence of God is almost second nature to us as NT believers in Christ...
- and we could illustrate that in a lot of ways this morning – many of you have had a loved one's funeral in this very room...and God met you here in a profound moment of grief...
 - He was personally present...
- we could also think about it positively...you can think of weddings that took place in this space...and as you watched that young couple's love – or in some cases, older couple's love...you silently thanked the wedding guest who's unseen...
- tonight we'll celebrate the Lord's table as a church family and many of us would say that's a highlight of month...because of the presence of our God...
- so how much do you cherish the presence of God?...many of us would say...a lot...
 - certainly not as much as we should...or as often as we should....but still, a lot...

- with that in mind, I'd like to invite you to open your Bible this morning to Exodus chapter 32...page 65 of the front section of the Bible under the chair in front of you.
- this morning we're completing our study in the book of Exodus...this has been part of our annual theme entitled **Living Life Together**...what does it mean for a church to be a place where it is easy for men and women to feel/be connected?...
- the book of Exodus has fit into that because here we read about God calling out a group of people to be His visible representatives on His earth...we just read these key verses last week... Exodus 19:5-6 – “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.
- those exact words and concepts are repeated in the NT in places like I Peter 2 to help the church understand that we too are a called out group of individuals who are God's own possession among all the people....a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...
 - now this last study brings us to an event that is both hard and reassuring...
 - hard in that it points to a characteristic among the people of God that is humbling for sure...
 - but reassuring in that God has made a way for Him to be personally present with us anyway...
- let's get into our text....read selected portions of Exodus 32:1 – 34:9...
- we're talking this morning about **Living Life Together in Celebration of the Mercy of God**...
 - with the time we have remaining, let's look for **three principles to help us cherish the personal presence of our God.**

I. Doubting God's Presence is a Direct Path to Idolatry.

- it's important that we walk away from this study recognizing that one of the key emphases of this book and this point in the history of God's people is that for the first time ever, the possibility existed for God to be personally present with His people...
- it's something we take for granted --- at least if we're thinking carefully and biblically...for men and women at this point in history...it really was a brand new concept...
- the problem was – they were stumbling over the concept mightily...
- so Moses is called up by God to Mount Sinai with Joshua to receive the law of God...
- and if you were here last week...you remember that the Lord went out of His way to demonstrate the seriousness of all of this...
- Exodus 19:16-17 - So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who *were* in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.
- and if you were here last week, you may remember one of the reasons God gave for orchestrating this event in this fashion... **Exodus 19:9 - The LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe in you forever.”**
- now if thumb through your Bible from chapter 19-32, here's what you find...
 - God is giving Moses the 10 commandments...but He's also providing other clarifying laws and then the bulk of the material is a very specific description of the design of the tabernacle...

- the tent of meeting...where's God's personal presence among His people would be manifested...
 - and that's what was new...yes the law had been given, but there was also a sacrificial system being instituted where people could find forgiveness for their transgressions through faith in what God had revealed...
 - and what was beautiful was, forgiven people could enjoy the presence of God among them...typified in the ark of the covenant...
 - God said this about that central piece of furniture that was to be placed in the newly constructed tabernacle....
 - Exodus 25:21-22 - "You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony which I will give to you. There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel.
 - so the Lord is taking time to explain all of this to Moses so that he can in turn explain it to the people...
 - the details even include an explanation of how this will be funded...God is a God of details...so we read...
 - Exodus 25:1-4, 9 - Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Tell the sons of Israel to raise a contribution for Me; from every man whose heart moves him you shall raise My contribution. This is the contribution which you are to raise from them: gold, silver and bronze, blue, purple and scarlet *material*, fine linen, goat *hair*..."According to all that I am going to show you, as the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furniture, just so you shall construct *it*.
 - and what were the people doing during this very time God was explaining the details of how He was willing to personally dwell among His people?...
 - coming to the conclusion that God and his chief servant Moses were no longer present...
 - Exodus 32:1 - Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."
- now, what's the first lesson there?...
- A. Just because you don't see God working doesn't mean He's not working.**
- He may be doing all sorts of things right now that you may not yet see...and the question before the house is---are you willing to trust Him anyway?....
 - this material is set up in this fashion on purpose...what a sad irony that at the very moment God is laying out plans to dwell with His people in a fresh and marvelous way...His people are simultaneously doubting Him and quickly moving to plan B...
- that leads us to the second lesson...
- B. Impatience often leads to idolatrous solutions.**
- Exodus 32:2-6 - Aaron said to them, "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring *them* to me." Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought *them* to Aaron. He took *this* from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." Now when Aaron saw *this*, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow *shall be* a feast to the LORD." So the next

day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.

- now, why is that so sad?...
- this part of the story is dripping with the irony and disastrously sinful actions that come from doubting God's presence...
 - where did they get those gold rings to begin with?---it was when they plundered the Egyptians just like God had prophesied way back in Genesis 15...
 - and how had God revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush...Yahweh---I am who I am, the self existent...I'm not like the other nations who, if they want a god, they have to make one...
 - and what was the first and second commandments that God had just given them...thou shalt have no other gods before me, and thou shalt not make a graven image...
 - and we didn't take the time last week to study this – but chapter 25 tells how Moses explained this to the people and they agreed to obey...
 - already they were breaking the very commands God had just given them...
 - and while Moses was back on the mountain learning how the people were to bring their gold, and silver, and other possessions so that the tabernacle could be made...the people were following Aaron's leadership and using those very articles to make a golden calf, worshipping it, and rising up to play just like the heathen nations around them...
- that's one of the reasons we have proposed this to be a day of fasting and prayer to the Lord...
- we've been working for several years believing that God wanted us to build a student ministry center and biblical counseling center on the campus over at Purdue...
- we had one piece of land but the city believed it was too small and they very well may have been right...
- then we signed an agreement to purchase the Old Smitty's site...but some environmental concerns have been raised there...
 - so here we sit...and what we don't want to do is be like the children of Israel...
 - questioning the very presence of our God because His timetable seems to be different than ours...
 - we believe this is a time to humble ourselves...and thank the Lord for all the ways He has already blessed us...and let the reminder of hunger today lead us to a Savior who sustains us and provides for us bountifully every day...
- and we are in essence saying – Lord, we want to submit ourselves to you and your timing and your will...
- we believe in... **Proverbs 16:9 - The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps.**
- so we're trying to make a statement today...that we do not question the personal presence of our God...
- and we do not intend to question or complain about His timing...
- and while we stand ready to joyfully serve Him in whatever was we can and with whatever projects we believe will honor Him, even if they involve significant sacrifice on our part...
- our joy and satisfaction is not in our projects...it is in the finished work of our Savior...
 - physical hunger can solidify that message...
- now, let me just pause and ask you this...is there some other area of your life where God's timing is not matching your desires?...

- are you being tempted to try an alternative that really simply amounts to idolatry?...
 - studying hard hasn't produced the results I desire, maybe it's time for cheating?...
 - hard work hasn't produced the material goods I'd like, maybe it's time for foolish spending or unreasonable debt?...
 - being loving hasn't changed that person, maybe it's time for a good dose of sinful anger?...
 - trusting isn't serving me very well, perhaps worry and anxiety will serve me better?...

II. People Who Treasure the Presence of God Should Extend Mercy to Those who Don't.

- there is a clear contrast here between the leadership of Moses and the leadership of Aaron...
- they were each given a test – one passed, the other failed....miserably...
- and the passage even speaks about a very personal and forceful interchange between Moses and the Lord...
- and you understand that passages like this are put into terms that we human beings can understand...but this is how these events appeared from Moses' perspective...
- **Exodus 32:9-10 - The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation."**
 - and you might say – boy, the Lord was really angry with them...and you would be right...but the real point is...God was testing His servant...
 - Moses very easily could have said – that sounds like a really good idea...make of me a great nation...
- but what had God just been explaining to Moses?...inside the ark of the covenant was the law...but over the law was the seat of mercy...and Moses passed the test...

A. By interceding.

- **Exodus 32:11 - Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?"**

- there's a fascinating interchange here...what had God said in verse 7?... **Exodus 32:7 - Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.**
- have you ever come home and your wife said – would you like to know what your son did today?...a question like that is not generally followed by good news...
- but Moses interprets everything he is experiencing through the grid of truth he already knows...and then he makes his appeal on behalf of the character of God...
 - they are your people Lord [not that God needed to be reminded of that, but Moses did]...
 - and he repeats the great covenants that had been made with Abraham, Isaac...
 - he appeals to the testimony to the Egyptians who will mock God's glory if this expedition does not end successfully...
 - it is a fascinating conversation...
 - but here's the point – Moses understood the presence of God...he treasured it...and he was surrounded by people who didn't...
 - and his response wasn't self-righteousness...it was intercession...
- and in so doing, he became like the Person the entire sacrificial system was pointing to, the Lord Jesus Christ...

- **Hebrews 7:25 - Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.**

- can I ask you – how are doing on that point?...
- are you a parent whose children don't always treasure the presence of God the way you do?...
- do you work around people who don't?...
- do you have extended family members who live like the idolatrous children of Israel?...
- have you chosen to be like Moses by passionately and lovingly interceding for them?....

B. By taking a stand.

- Exodus 32:19-20 - It came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and *the* dancing; and Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf which they had made and burned *it* with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it over the surface of the water and made the sons of Israel drink *it*.
- do you see how Moses being convinced that God was personally present motivated him to take a stand against idolatry?...
 - and contrast this to Aaron...
 - he gave into the people's demands...
 - and then when he was confronted, gave one of the lamest excuses found in the pages of Scripture...
- **Exodus 32:24 - "I said to them, 'Whoever has any gold, let them tear it off.' So they gave *it* to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf."**
- do you see the relationship between that and our theme this morning....people who really believe in the personal presence of God would never try a lame excuse like that in front of a God who knows far better...
- and what was the price for Aaron's failure?... **Exodus 32:25 - Now when Moses saw that the people were out of control—for Aaron had let them get out of control to be a derision among their enemies—**
- see, they were supposed to be God's own possession among the nations...a kingdom of priests and a holy nation...
- Aaron's failure to believe in the presence of God and their subsequent idolatry canceled out that potentially powerful witness...
- and you might be uncomfortable with Moses' stand...but how did that part of the story end?...
- **Exodus 32:31-32 - Then Moses returned to the LORD, and said, "Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. "But now, if You will, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!"**
- do you see the Person of Christ in that...Moses in essence said – I will stand in their place...I will do whatever is necessary to see these people forgiven...
- it's a very short walk from words like that to the cross of Calvary...where Jesus was willing to leave the presence of the Father, and come down and tabernacle among us...
- well, thankfully, the people got the message....
- and they were greatly saddened that their behavior might result in God not going with them...
- and they came to a place where they...

III. Celebrate and Cherish God's Mercy

A. Be amazed that God has made a way to be personally present with/in people like us.

- Exodus 33:13-14 - "Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, let me know Your ways that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your sight. Consider too, that this nation is Your people." And He said, "My presence shall go *with you*, and I will give you rest."

- Colossians 1:27 - ...Christ in you, the hope of glory.

B. Be amazed at God's mercy.

Exodus 34:6-9 - Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." Moses made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship. He said, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go along in our midst, even though the people are so obstinate, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your own possession."

C. Choose to let God's mercy for you empower your mercy for others.

Matthew 5:7 - Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.