

Communion

The Scene is Sinai. The people of Israel huddle in their encampment at the foot of the mountain as Moses their leader starts up the winding trail to meet with God. They've already come through the waters of the Sea; and now the time has come to *seal* the covenant made between them, the children of Abraham, and God. And the covenant must be sealed with *blood*. So at the foot of the mountain they raise an altar, slay a sacrifice. Moses splashed half of the blood on the altar, reads the "Book of the Covenant", then he splashes the *rest of the blood* on the people. And the blood *seals* the covenant: it's a done deal. And Moses says to them: "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you. . ."

Where else do we hear that? These are the very words of Jesus Christ which we repeat at every Communion service: "This is the blood of the *new* covenant . . ." You see, what has not changed since the day of the Exodus is that we live in a covenant with God. And in this covenant relationship, God promises to take care of us and forgive us, and we respond to God as they did at Sinai saying, "We will *do everything* the LORD has said . . ." The Lord's Table is a Sacrament, which is essentially an act of obedience. Jesus told us to do this.

In the New Testament, in the Book of Hebrews chapter nine, this scene at Sinai (found in Exodus 24) is used to make a connection between the work of Christ in the *new* covenant and the *Old* Testament scheme of worship. AT THE CROSS, Jesus *transformed* the Old ceremony of blood, repeated over and over by Israel into the *New reality* of forgiveness of sin *once and for all*. It's a done deal.

The gospel writers and apostles frequently use Old Testament symbols of blood, sacrifice and covenant to explain the new life we have by faith in Christ. For the Apostles, in their time and in that ancient culture, blood language was a very natural way to speak. But for those of us who have not grown up familiar with animal sacrifice, we find it hard to relate to this unusual language. Yet it is language of the Holy Spirit; and as we come to this Table, like Israel of old, *renew* our covenant with God we *need* this language of *blood* and *sacrifice* to speak to us at the deepest level: Ours is covenant sealed in blood.

And so with this in mind, the experience of Moses and these people so long ago becomes, for us, a way into a personal encounter with God. For the Christian, Mount Sinai speaks of *proof* that we have indeed sealed the deal with God – that we do indeed live *in a true covenant* with our God and with one another and that is the essence of the experience we call COMMUNION.

In Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai we find all the essential elements that must go into *communion* and the first element is . . .

Retreat

"The LORD said to Moses, "*Come up to me* on the mountain and *stay here* . . ."

Communion begins with an invitation from God to come up and stay – to *centre ourselves* in God. To do this we must retreat from the regular places and routines and respond to this invitation. For Moses it meant time on a desolate mountain – the highest point of land in all of biblical Israel. It was a journey. It would take 40 years. So there's no rush. To commune with God, Moses needed to take off his coat and *stay* awhile. Why? Well . . .

Mountaintops are where we can *see* the furthest into the distance. Where we can see in every *direction* at the same time. Where nothing *blocks* our view. He can see all Israel encamped below. They are *his* people. He is their leader. He's the one responsible for taking them out into

this hostile environment with nothing but the clothes on their back. And this is an overwhelming burden. Will the pressure ever cease?

He needs a time of *retreat* because while he is down among his people day after day he loses sight of the goal – the big picture. But on the *mountain*, he sees them all at once, like ants. They see so vulnerable and at times so perplexing – even infuriating. But it is *good* to be on the mountain. To see this people and his work among them from this different perspective. It is a good place to see them through God's eyes. Each tiny little creature far below, youngest to oldest, loved by God, known by God, chosen by God. The mountain is the perfect place to *retreat* in search for God and vision for his people. But before he leaves this mountain retreat, he must bring home something more than just a personal experience: For communion to be real, there must be . . .

Revelation

“I will give you the tablets of stone . . .”

The legendary tablets of Moses, symbolize the totality of God's Word in the Bible. And this Word is absolutely essential to communion. Revelation is not simply words on a page or even words written in stone. For many's the one who has read the bible from cover to cover – skeptic and atheist, and the like – but for all their reading have yet to receive a *revelation*.

But if such a person should become a genuine seeker and begin to ask “what is a revelation? What is it like?” We might say to them it like waking from a deep sleep. It's an amazing process. At one moment your body and mind are disconnected – you're in dreamland. Then you hear the alarm. And in one moment, your all senses turn on. Sometimes its hard to wake up; your *mind* is ready to get out of bed, but your *body* still calls you back into sleep. Such is a revelation. Other times, you don't have the option of laying around and must scramble blurry-eyed into the day. The revelation comes, you may not be ready for it, but it's there. Deal with it.

Sometimes in waking up, your left for a moment holding on to a feeling you've taken with you out of your dream, like a the take- out box from the restaurant that you leave on the roof of your car, and you drive away and it's carried off by the wind and you don't even know where it's gone, and you don't even remember you had it – *until later*. And then you wish you had held on to it, but it's long gone. So it is with a revelation: you can have it but then lose it.

A revelation, can happen quickly or sometimes very slowly over time. Sometimes the *real* and the unreal become blurred and you need some objective way to evaluate it. So just to make sure Moses can *hold on* to what God has revealed to him on the Mountain, he is given tablets of stone. The tablets themselves are not the revelation, but are there to remind him that communion involves a revelation that can only be found through . . .

Relationship

“. . . Moses set out with *Joshua* his aide . . .”

This was an important relationship. One day, when Moses died, this young man Joshua would shoulder the responsibility that Moses now bears, and it is essential for Joshua to be with Moses as he communes with God as a *witness*. So that when the time came Joshua would know the way into the Presence for he watched Moses. Communion is not simply a vertical relationship (that is to say with God). Communion is horizontal with *others*. Communion is a way of mentoring the next generation.

But on the other hand, human community can become entangling and distracting. So in communion, there's got to be a point where Moses will must bid farewell to every companion and climb that mountain *alone*. The nature of communion involves . . .

Risk

He said to the elders, "Wait here for us until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur are with you, and anyone involved in a dispute can go to them."

It may seem like, "Isn't that wonderful: Moses has his back-up team in place, Aaron and Hur to give him a break from his heavy responsibilities so that he can go up the mountain and meet with God." But if you know this story, you will know that Moses is taking a big risk. Remember what Aaron and Hur will be doing while Moses is gone. It won't be long before they start passing the hat collecting gold earrings and by the time he gets back, they will be dancing around the Golden Calf. That wouldn't have happened if *Moses* was on the scene. But he has to take the risk.

To maintain a vital connection to God, there must be in our lives seasons when we are released by the Spirit from our daily burdens and problems, *even though* while we're gone, things *will* go from bad to worse. But we *can* be released from our burdens because God *invites* us to commune with him, we so *must* trust that he will *take care* for us and will send us back into those same circumstances, however difficult, better prepared to meet the demands. So we must never neglect our communion. Never be tricked into the treadmill of busyness or the sense that we are the only ones who can do certain things or they won't get done. Because no matter how badly the situation may become, we have a . . .

Redeemer

One of the great symbolic lessons in the Sinai story is that the church, like Israel, when Moses was on the mountain, must function on earth without the *physical presence* of Christ. We long for his coming. We yearn to be with Jesus. But until that day, we are much like Aaron and Hur: our role is limited. And we sometimes mess up. Badly. We have a latent tendency towards "golden calves." And we need the *Redeemer*. We come to communion *needing* a fuller revelation of God in Jesus Christ. For apart from him, we can do nothing. We can't change our own hearts. We can't change other people. We can't forgive others. We can't forgive ourselves. But we *have* a Redeemer. We have a *mediator* between us and God – the man Christ Jesus. Jesus is our man on the mountain who can bring us to God.

So if we interpret this Old Testament story through the lens of Jesus Christ, we are a bit like Aaron and Hur. We are the ones left down below to do our Saviour's bidding. But nothing *we* can say or do can ultimately bring men and women to a saving knowledge of God. For this, *Jesus Christ* alone must go before the Father's throne in heaven. *He is the redeemer*. And through this *communion table* he will bring us to the Father. But we must enter that presence with . . .

Reverence

"When Moses went up on the mountain, the *cloud covered it*, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For *six days* the cloud covered the mountain . . .

When the presence of God came to the mountain, for *six long days* all Moses could do was sit in the cloud. He dare not proceed one step further up the mountain. The cloud obscured

his vision. One false step and he would plunge to his death. I wonder what that was like? Can you imagine six days fogged in on the side of a mountain!

An essential part of our communion with God is passing through the “cloud of unknowing”. Further up the mountain Moses knows there is clarity and light and brilliance. He knows it is up there. But for six days in the cloud all he can do is trust where he cannot see. He’s blind. And hidden. No one knows his fate. And never has he felt more totally exposed. His soul is *naked*.

In the 14th century an anonymous English monk wrote a practical spiritual guidebook called The Cloud of Unknowing in which he counsels a young student to seek God not through gaining more and more intellectual knowledge but through what he describes as a "naked intent" and a "blind love." To find God, we must enter into the “Cloud of Unknowing.” He wrote:

*"Our intense need to **understand** will always be a powerful stumbling block to our attempts to reach God in simple **love** [...] and must always be **overcome**. For if you do not overcome this need to **understand**, it will undermine your quest. It will replace the **darkness** which you have pierced to reach God with clear images of **something** which, however **good**, however **beautiful**, however **Godlike**, is not God."*

Even in the Cloud, the golden calf is waiting to lure us. But “in the Cloud” it’s is not about what we can *know* about God, but what we *can’t* know about him. It’s not about what we feel or see or hear our touch or taste or smell. That is what the Golden Calf was all about. It’s a coming to *rest* in a naked blind being with God and God being with us *in the cloud*.

"And so I urge you, go after experience rather than knowledge. On account of pride, knowledge may often deceive you, but this gentle, loving affection will not deceive you. Knowledge tends to breed conceit, but love builds. Knowledge is full of labor, but love, full of rest."

And so Moses spends six days in the cloud, centring himself in God. Being induced by the cloud to let go of the *labour* of trying to know God and *trying* to work his way towards God. And now Moses, is ready. He gets himself fully centred in the **LOVE** of God and thus can enter the . . .

Rest

and on *the seventh day* the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud.

Faith is essence of communion. Faith that God *loves* us. There is nothing we can do to earn that love or even understand that love. In faith we *rest* our entire beings completely on the unconditional love of God. And maybe it take us six days to get there. (Or six years or six decades). Maybe we can live most of our lives, most of the time, confessing with our lips that we are “saved by faith,” but practically speaking, we still seek to be justified by our works. And in our lives there is no rest. We can’t rest . . until we come to point of *communion*.

Communion is all about getting to that point where God can *call to us out* of our spiritual bankruptcy and into his glorious grace. What we recognize here at this Table, and experience here in this loaf and this cup is *grace*. God did the work *for us* in Christ, restored the broken covenant. This is the place of rest.

To those on the outside looking in, it must seem strange. Doesn’t really stand up to

reason. It isn't logical. How can sinful people like you and me actually commune with a holy God? But once we step out of the cloud, once we come to the Table by faith and receive the grace, we realize that we are not the ones who are deceived. We have stepped out the darkness and into the light. Out of the oppression of the Devil and into . . .

Reality

“To the *Israelites* the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming *fire* on top of the mountain.” Looking on from below they all said, “Well, so much for Moses. Man, he's toast now. He's been consumed by the fire. He's totally fried! What else could they think? That's what it *looked* like. But the *reality* was something different. Moses was *not* destroyed by the presence of God, he *transformed* by it.

This story is about the way we perceive and understand God. Moses was on mountain receiving God's law. But from below, all the people could see was fire.

And the day goes by and he's not coming back. And another day, and another day. . . And after forty days, they said, “Look folks, it's time to move on. Let's just forget about *Moses*. Let's just forget about *that* God. Give me a Golden Calf any day. Now *that's* reality. Now, let's get the earrings in the pot and get show on the road, because I really need a god I can touch and see. That's a *real* god.

But guess what: forty days and Moses returns. And he's a changed man. Changed by his communion with God. So he couldn't just say, “O, so you want to do a Golden Calf? That's cool. If it works for you, go for it. There are many ways to relate to God, you do the Golden Calf, I'll stick with the stone tablets, and we'll just find a way to all get along together. . .”

That would be absurd, wouldn't it? No Moses can fake it. He can't portray God to the *Israelites* in a form that the people might have wanted. Because their *vision* of God did not correspond with the *reality* of God. And what made the difference was communion.

If you and I can leave here this morning honestly saying we have truly communed with God, we will be *changed*. And that change in us will demand from the rest of the world a . . .

Response

When Moses returned from the mountain, they say his face was radiant. And people were afraid to even come near him because he was so radically changed. And so, too, the apostles were *changed* by their communion with Jesus. The apostle would not, could not go into the world and allow people to go on worshiping various forms of the Golden Calf.

The story of Moses on Mount Sinai has such an obvious connection to the time when Peter and James and John went up on the mountain with Jesus. And he was transfigured. And they were eyewitness to his majesty and glory. In fact Moses himself with Elijah showed up to commune with them and the voice of God from heaven confirmed the divinity of Jesus. And it changed them.

[Light Candle] This candle is bright. In fact in a dark room, it would its brilliance would hurt your eyes. . . .

Listen to this. This is our challenge to the world:

2 Peter 1:16-18