

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious Loving God, we come to worship you this day because of who you are. We know there is truth we can bank on. Wherever we go, you never depart from us. In the North, in the South, in the East, in the West, no matter where we go, you are there and you promised to be with us through all trials. We can never find a place where you are absent. There is the God that we know, and there is the God that we don't know. No matter how hard we seek, there will always be things that we don't know, beyond our discovery. We never fully see you or know you. We never get to see your face, hear your responses, or be close enough to touch you. This leaves us seeking, striving, and never fully finding.

O God, we want to see your Glory. We want to be close to you, to know by our sight that you walk with us, you celebrate with us, you mourn with us. We want to more fully know the love that you bring. God, we want to see your face and know your loving smile and tender care. What we want all the time can never come to be, and for good reason. You are with us, but we can never fully see you. But it drives us to be attentive, to be mindful, to be endlessly searching. God, you present yourself where you choose to, not where we want to see you. Sometimes we catch just a glimpse, but that glimpse is enough. Attune our hearts to see you in the right time and right place, for you promised never to depart from us. We pray all these things in the name of the fullest revelation of God, Jesus the Christ, as we pray the prayer he taught us, saying...

## SERMON

This last winter, my wife and I got into the new BBC show "Sherlock." It's a retelling of Sherlock Holmes for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The retelling of the classic stories is spectacular, with new twists of technology and modern events. At their heart is classic mystery. It's the

same mystery that made Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories iconic and timeless. The greatest of these mysteries comes from Doyle's stories with a new twist. At the end of the second season, you watch as Sherlock Holmes jumps off a building, seemingly committing suicide in front of his companion Watson, in order to keep his friends safe. You later watch Watson visiting his grave in the cemetery, but the camera pans to an alive and unscathed Sherlock Holmes. The third season sees the return of Sherlock Holmes from the grave, and everyone and their dog has a theory on how Sherlock Holmes committed suicide in broad daylight but survived. All of them are flawed. Even Holmes gives an account of how it happened, but as other characters pick it apart, you know that he was lying. He doesn't want to tell, and you never have it figured out. The greatest of mysteries are those that still aren't solved, that you have to keep piecing together and may never be solved. Some of the greatest scenes in cinema are those where you can hear what is happening, but you can't see everything that's happening. As much as answers seem satisfying to us, we want more. We need to have the next question, the next puzzle, the next dilemma. The greatest journey is the next unsolved mystery.

Our story from Exodus is one of them. God tells Moses to prepare as God's glory goes by, but Moses is not allowed to see God's face. The explanation is that "No one can see God's face and live." It seemingly means that one will die when they see God, but I think there may be more. God hides because we need some mystery in our lives; all the questions cannot be solved. Let's dig deeper into this passage to see how Moses catches a glimpse of God, understand the human need for mystery, and live most faithfully.

In our story from Exodus, a lot has happened. Moses has led the people out of Egypt. The people rebelled in the wilderness while Moses stood on Mount Sinai, creating the idol

of a Golden Calf. The original tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written were broken. What we have here is Moses seeking to know God more. Moses speaks to God and tries to buddy up with God by talking about how special the Israelites are: "For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth." He's a teacher's pet, so to speak, but he has the standing to do it. God agrees and tells Moses that God will do as Moses asks, and Moses' response is a simple request: "Show me your glory, I pray." This seems like an easy request for a people so favored and for the one who acts as the go-between for the people and God. But there is one boundary Moses or anyone on this green earth cannot cross, and Moses has stepped on it.

This is one thing that God cannot completely honor: "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD,' and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy, but you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live." But Moses gets the instructions to stand on a rock while God passes by; God hides Moses while God passes by but allows Moses to see God's backside. Moses doesn't get to see God, but he catches just a glimpse of the Glory of God. And that is all the most that Moses, one of the most favored of God in all of scripture, can see.

There is a name for seeing more of God and the truth those visions provide. It is called "revelation." The Book of Revelation is a vision of God and more of what God has in store. But here's the thing about revelation of all kinds: it's always incomplete. This story from Exodus tells of one of the more direct revelations, but even this revelation doesn't show everything. We never get the full picture, but we catch a little more all the time. Let's

think of some examples. We talk about the revelation of nature. We come to understand just a little bit about God in the glory and fearfulness of nature, from the freshness of a spring morning to the awesome power of a Wyoming tornado. There is the revelation that comes from a true and loving relationship. We grow when we are in relationships that are mutually loving and caring, and we see just the beginning of what God's love looks like. I always remember that line from the musical *Les Miserables*: "To love another person is to see the face of God." Poetic, but it just scrapes the surface. We catch a glimpse of God, but we never see God's face. Throughout it all, through the miraculous, the simple, the profound, the terrible, the majestic, all parts of our lives and creation, we see a little more about God and God's nature. Nevertheless, we don't get the whole ensemble. No matter what we say or do, we never get to truly see God. But come on, let's be honest: God intended it that way. "No one shall see me and live," God says.

When God is saying that no one can see God and live, are we talking about life and death? Or are we talking about something else? Perhaps we may be talking about living well. This is very important to consider. God is drawing a boundary between God's self and human beings. This is not just any boundary; it holds an important distinction. We are creatures that love to know as much as we can and control all that we can. But our God is a God of mystery. What do we think of that mystery?

The podcast *Sermon Brainwave* brings up a great point. Why do we want to fully see God, and what do we expect? I don't know if those questions are easily answered. What I do know is that, as human beings, we are built with a special desire to consistently learn and understand. Those of us who love to search the Internet often have trouble when you come to a site like Wikipedia, which is known as the Internet's encyclopedia. If you're

like me, you get to the website looking for one thing, read about it, find a link to another topic or concept, read about it, find another link, and another, and another, and another, and an hour later, you find that you have lost sermon preparation time in your curiosity. We are naturally creative and inquisitive creatures.

I think that part of what makes life worth living is the next surprise, the next mystery. As much as it bothers and trifles us, we need mystery. If there's one thing that my grandmother loves, it is garage sales. Well, beyond that, she also loves a good mystery novel. There is something about putting all the pieces together that she just thrives on. She has her special chair, and, guaranteed, right beside that chair is at least two or so mystery novels with bookmarks in them. I've learned that Catherine's dad is the same way: he loves a great mystery novel. The mysteries we face can be the complex mysteries of a crime drama to the simple of living each day. Everyday, we have the same possibilities before us; every day is a mystery, no matter how much we plan or try to control. What's going to happen tomorrow? We don't quite know. But the mysteries in life just keep piling up, once you really think about it. We just discovered another new planet a few light years away...what does it look like? Could it support life? Can the Chicago Bears keep winning? Who will win the Super Bowl this year? What will the world look like a hundred years down the road? There are tons and tons of questions, and, well, we love them. We love to seek them out and solve them. Do you know what my grandmother does when she finishes a mystery novel? She reaches for the next one! She doesn't just sit back, satisfied and thinking that all is well. There's something about it that makes her go for the next mystery. It's living the question that is the most satisfying, but there's a part of us that hates the

question, thinking the answer is the ultimate. We want to know everything; we want to know how or when something will happen. In other words, we want to be in control.

Control is neither a good nor bad thing; it only becomes good or bad in how we use it. The greatest issue is that it can be addicting in the worst way possible. Too much control or too little control is a very bad thing. We often have trouble figuring out how much is too much because, in the final analysis, whether or not we realize it, we want to be God. Think about it. What would it be like to know exactly what would happen tomorrow? What would it be like to know all things, direct all things, do anything you want. It sounds delightful, but, when you really think about it, you understand that the goodness of life would be gone. Life wouldn't be worth the living. I think, in this passage, God is establishing a boundary, a very important boundary. God is telling us that control only exists to a point. Once we get beyond that point, the more we try to control, the more that we find futility. We find ourselves chasing after something that doesn't exist. So, we can control to a point, and then we have to let go. No matter who you are, there is so much you cannot control. You can drive your car and you can be attentive as possible. Those are good forms of control. But you cannot control how other people will drive. There are limits to control. No matter how faithful we are, we won't see the face of God. There are many things we cannot and will not accomplish in this lifetime. Moses was just like the rest of us; there was no one in scripture that actually saw the face of God. No one has final say; no one is all-powerful.

God has put us in the sweet spot, so we have to do our best living in that sweet spot. We have a God-given brain and ability to reason. We are supposed to consistently work at learning and understanding the blessed creation around us. If we weren't, why did God

give us this ability to reason and think for ourselves? The work is never done. If we are in these walls, we don't have it figured out. The work of the Gospel is never done; you are not a complete project, by our learning or our coming to be the best Christians we can be. It's never true that we are saved and done. That's lazy theology because God created us against that fact. We know just enough to make us consistently thinking and seeking and not enough to think we got it figured out. We can control how we conduct ourselves and live faithfully, but that's the limit of our control. We best see what this looks like in the key example of the sweet spot between knowing and not knowing. There is one place where we catch the greatest glimpse, and that glimpse outweighs anything else. The greatest glimpse of God we will ever get this side of paradise is the person of Jesus Christ. Everything else becomes a shadow compared to Jesus Christ. The words of all other scripture come secondary to Jesus Christ and his example. We have a good starting place with how to live, but we never got all the answers we need. We never will have all the answers, but that's where we are supposed to be in faithfully reasoning them out together.

In this life, we'll catch just a glimpse, and that's OK. Just a glimpse of God is all we need because maybe we cannot handle any more than that. We need to be searching, we need to be striving, we need the mystery because the mystery drives us. We know what we need to know, and what we don't, we are consistently looking, seeking, striving. It is because we cannot control all things; that is where we are supposed to be. We know just enough about God and God's direction for us to live faithfully, but we don't know everything. So, we'll keep striving for the answers, striving for what we can and cannot do, as long as we have breath, and we'll know that's what God intended all along: to become. Thanks be to God for the joyfulness of mystery and the growth it gives us! Amen and Amen.