

**December 24, 2006 – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent**

**“The Touch of Christmas”** *(Based on ideas from Dr. Steve Estep)*

**Ex 24:1-11 and John 1:14**

Ex 24:1-11 NLT

Then the LORD instructed Moses: "Come up here to me, and bring along Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of Israel's leaders. All of them must worship at a distance. 2 You alone, Moses, are allowed to come near to the LORD. The others must not come too close. And remember, none of the other people are allowed to climb on the mountain at all."

3 When Moses had announced to the people all the teachings and regulations the LORD had given him, they answered in unison, "We will do everything the LORD has told us to do."

4 Then Moses carefully wrote down all the LORD's instructions. Early the next morning he built an altar at the foot of the mountain. He also set up twelve pillars around the altar, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. 5 Then he sent some of the young men to sacrifice young bulls as burnt offerings and peace offerings to the LORD. 6 Moses took half the blood from these animals and drew it off into basins. The other half he splashed against the altar.

7 Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They all responded again, "We will do everything the LORD has commanded. We will obey."

8 Then Moses sprinkled the blood from the basins over the people and said, "This blood confirms the covenant the LORD has made with you in giving you these laws."

9 Then Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the leaders of Israel went up the mountain. 10 There they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there seemed to be a pavement of brilliant sapphire, as clear as the heavens. 11 And though Israel's leaders saw God, he did not destroy them. In fact, they shared a meal together in God's presence!

**John 1:14 NLT**

So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father.

For ten years I attended the Valley Stream Church of the Nazarene. The last five years as an Assistant Pastor. The Senior Pastor is Rev. Art Alexander. He is now the Superintendent of the Metro New York District. He oversees about 120 churches. Pastor Alexander was originally from Gaylord, Michigan, where he grew up on a farm. When Pastor Alexander first took the Church in Valley Stream he and his wife had just two little girls and they also had a young lady who lived with them. She had needed a place to live and they had taken her in. Her name was Susan. Sue was told by the Alexander's that they would be moving, but she was welcome to come along with them if she wanted to. She said she wanted to move with them and asked where they were moving. When

they told her they would be moving to Long Island she protested. “Oh no, not there! If we go there we may never make it back alive.” Sue had never been to Long Island but she had some preconceived ideas about what Long Island was like. She had become certain, totally convinced it was a dangerous place. She had heard stories in the news about crime on Long Island. She pictured gangs all over Long Island and people fighting or being murdered in the streets. She heard of crazy, weird people living on Long Island acting bizarre. Everything she’d seen, heard, or read convinced her Long Island was dangerous and she was terrified to come here.

The Israelites had a similar idea of what it would be like if they ever went into the presence of God. They felt about seeing God like Sue felt about seeing Long Island. You don’t want to go there. It’s too dangerous. Everything they’d ever read said, “You can’t see Him and live.” No one could survive seeing God. The presence of God is a dangerous place. You don’t want to go there because if you do, you may never come back. And that was what they thought about seeing God. Touching Him was totally out of the question.

I think some people today have the same idea that going where God is can be scary. It’s dangerous. He knows all about me. I can’t hide anything from Him. I’ve heard the fear in some people who mask it with jokes like, “The roof might fall in if I show up there” (I remember my cousin’s husband saying that to me one time when I invited him to come to church with me. I told him, “If the roof doesn’t fall in on me when I show up, it wouldn’t fall in on you either!”). But behind all that is an expectation about what it’s like when you get in the presence of God. You don’t want to go there. You might come out with a sour face or a long list of things you’re not allowed to do anymore. If you go into the presence of God you might see a bunch of people acting crazy or be asked to be or do something you don’t want to be or do. It’s dangerous to go into the presence of God. You don’t want to go there because you might not ever make it back.

Pastor Art had his work cut out for him to convince Sue, and his wife as well, to go to Long Island, but they finally gave in. They made the drive over one of the bridges and onto the island. Sue told me she was afraid someone might shoot at their car. They arrived late at night and went to bed. That night she heard sirens going off and Fire trucks, and police cars. She didn’t sleep very well and not much at all. Sue had told me all this when they had already been living in Valley Stream for three years. By that time she had come to love Long Island, especially Valley Stream (although she wondered where all the valleys and streams were). She laughed at herself when she told me how fearful she had felt. She said even after being on Long Island a short time, “I can’t believe it. This is not what I expected at all. It’s really pretty nice.” And this woman who had been terrified of going there ended up enjoying her life on Long Island.

In Exodus 24, Moses, Aaron, Abihu, Nadab, and 70 other Israelites followed obediently when God sent them up Mt. Sinai. Moses had just returned, having received the Ten Commandments and the other guidelines God had given for how the Israelites were to live if they were going to be the people of God. When Moses came down from the mountain and told the people what God had said to him, everybody said, “We’ll do it. We’ll live the way God wants us to” (v. 3 - “We will do everything the LORD has told us

to do." ). Then God Himself wrote down the covenant code of conduct and Moses didn't recite it, but read it all to the Israelites so they heard it all a second time. Their response was the same: "We will do everything the LORD has commanded. We will obey." (v. 7). After God said, "This is what I expect from you, and here's what you can expect from me," the people said, "Count us in," and a covenant relationship was established between God and Israel.

It might appear to be a little bizarre how it was solidified, but we see how it happened in verses 3-8. Animals were sacrificed in an act of worship. (The narrator makes sure we know the young people were involved, included, and given major roles to play in this ritual of worship—see v. 5: "Then he sent some of the young men to sacrifice young bulls as burnt offerings and peace offerings to the LORD.") But Moses did something else. He took all the blood, put half of it into bowls, and poured the other half on the altar. The blood Moses put into bowls he then sprinkled on the people in a ceremonial act of ratifying the covenant between God and Israel.

That's when Moses, Aaron, Abihu, Nadab and the 70 were told to go back up the mountain. When they did, the unthinkable happened. God showed up and they were in His presence—they were also able to see Him. The first thing they thought was, "We're dead! We can't see God and live. No one sees God and lives to tell about it." But then again, I don't think they saw a whole lot of God. They described seeing what was under His feet. It seems to me that a glimpse of the glory is often what we see of God today. We see His feet, or His hand at work. I can say I've seen God this week. I heard His voice while in prayer. I saw His handwriting in a Christmas card I received with an encouraging message in it. Sometimes all we need is a glimpse of God's hands or feet as all the evidence we need that God really is here.

When this group of Israelites who had ascended Mt. Sinai saw God, they didn't get what they expected. Not only did they live to tell about it, they got an invitation to sit down with God for a meal on the mountain. It was a Supper on Sinai where they got to fellowship with this God who had just invited them into a covenant relationship and sealed it with blood. We can see their fearful expectation in verse 11, "And though Israel's leaders saw God, he did not destroy them." The roof did not fall in, God didn't do them in like they thought He would. The verse goes on to say, "In fact, they shared a meal together in God's presence!"

Can you imagine what they must have felt when they saw God and instead of being struck down they were invited to sit down and have something to eat? (Probably a lot more surprised than Sue when she saw that Long Island wasn't full of gang members and murderers.) I think God wanted them to know this covenant, though it was full of expectations for Israel's behavior, wasn't only about keeping commandments and obeying rules. It was also about times like this where they would eat and drink, and discover the God who had given the tablets was also a God who invited them to a table. Apparently the covenant they had just entered into wasn't only about tablets inscribed with Commandments. It was also about tables filled with fellowship. It was about a God who was accessible.

One of the reasons I think there's really something to this whole eating and drinking on the mountain is because in the very next chapter, after Moses returns from another 40 days on the mountain, he comes down with a blueprint for a worship space and all the furnishings. It's called a tabernacle, and among other things, this tabernacle (dwelling place) was furnished with a table. With specific instructions God told Moses, "Build a table and put 12 loaves of bread on it." The bread is called the Bread of the Presence and it was among the items God said to put in the Tabernacle, along with the Ark of the Covenant that housed the stone tablets upon which were written the Ten Commandments. A table in the Tabernacle? Fresh bread on the table? Why? I think God wanted His people to remember the covenant was more than rules on stone tablets. It was about relationships established and grown, born and raised at tables.

Sue met a man here on Long Island, they married and moved away, but I can almost hear Sue now, wanting to go back again. "Long Island? It's not like that at all! It's not a dangerous place. You've got to go there yourself. You'll see. Let me tell you all about it."

I can almost hear the 70 leading the way to worship when the Tabernacle was completed, directing others to the table. "You've got to go to the Tabernacle where God dwells; I'm telling you, you can experience God's presence in ways you never imagined or expected, and when you do you'll want to go back again and again. Believe me. I've experienced a God who not only writes commands on tablets, He invites people to tables."

The Israelites didn't expect to see God and live to tell about it. They certainly didn't expect to encounter God at a table on Mt. Sinai, but they did. Maybe today you didn't expect to encounter God at a table, but you could. On the night He was betrayed Jesus gathered His closest followers around a table and told them about a new covenant He was establishing. A covenant about to be ratified not by the blood of an animal poured on an altar and sprinkled on the people, but by His blood, which would be poured out on a cross and sprinkled on the hearts of those who would believe in Him. That's what the writer to the Hebrews was talking about (see 10:19-25). Come near to God, have your hearts sprinkled. God has commands to obey and invitation. Rules to follow and a relationship to enjoy. Tablets and tables.

God is always broadening our understanding of who He is. That's what He did to Moses and the 70. It's what God did most dramatically in the Incarnation. (John 1:14) "So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us...." The God above and beyond became the God who moved in next door. He became human. Dwelt among us. Not far away but up close and personal. Approachable. Relational. Accessible. Touchable. Christmas is about a God who didn't love us from a distance. He came to us desiring intimacy and fellowship. And He still comes to us like that today. In a world where so-called valuable things are often labeled, "Do Not Touch," the most valuable, eternal, and meaningful One there is invites us to touch and be touched by Him.

What do you say we follow Moses up Mt. Sinai? Head to the Tabernacle. Check out the table where God-made-flesh joins us. Once we've met God there, I'm pretty sure we'll find ourselves wanting to go back again and again.

Benediction: 2 Corinthians 13:14, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”