



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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All Saints' Day

November 4, 2018

“Face-to-Face with God”

Rev. David K. Groth

“See what kind of love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. . . Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn. 3:1-2).

“Now we see in a mirror dimly, then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall fully know, even as I have been fully known.” (1 Cor. 13:12).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, You knit together Your faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us so to follow Your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys You have prepared for those who love You; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

As you know, Pastor and Karen Schempf are moving to Uganda to serve as missionaries. I really admire them both; both are very much family oriented, thinking about their parents and children and grandchildren all the time. Yet, in order to serve God's people, they are moving away from family. It's hard to have a relationship with someone you don't see. Not impossible, but challenging. One thing that will make it a little less challenging is the technology. They will be able to Facetime with their family members. That is, using their laptops, they'll be able to talk with family members while also seeing their faces on the screen.

When it works, it works great. A couple of years ago, my daughter Stephanie made muffins with her good friend Sara Fernandez. Steph was in Watertown; Sara in Madrid. They used the same recipe, synchronized the making of it, and chatted the whole time.

In order to have a relationship, it's important to see one another. We cannot Facetime God, however. We cannot see his face, either with our own eyes or with a laptop. So how can there be a meaningful relationship with God if we cannot see him?

The ultimate goal for us is to be face to face with God in all his glory. The ultimate goal is to stand in his immediate presence in heaven and know him fully, even as he knows us fully. But that cannot happen on earth, not in our sinful condition. Scripture says his glory is like a consuming fire. No man can see his glory and survive it. In Isaiah's vision, he cries out, "Woe is me. I am ruined! For . . . my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Is. 6).

Similarly, we don't look directly into the sun. It would blind us. We can only endure the sun's reflected light. Still, it

remains our ultimate goal to see God face to face, in all his glory. In the meantime, God has graciously made other arrangements so we can know him. He's put a veil over his glory in the incarnation of Jesus and also with his Word and Baptism and Lord's Supper. He meets with us personally through these means of grace. But of course, it's not the same as being in his immediate presence.

Remember how Moses asked for a peak at his glory? Moses was feeling inadequate to the task of leading God's people, and he wanted the Lord's assurance that He would always accompany them. As a sign of this, Moses asked, "Please show me your glory" (Ex.33:18). The Lord replied, "I *will* cause all my goodness to pass in front of you. But", he said, 'you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.' . . . So when my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then, I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen" (Ex. 33).

Afterwards, when Moses came down from Sinai, Scripture says his face was radiant from the experience. The Israelites were afraid to come near him and could not look at Moses' face (2 Cor. 3:7). He had to cover his face with a veil. Still, Moses only got a toned down glimpse and not the full dose of the Lord's glory.

Our ultimate goal, (whether we recognize it or not), is to be with the Lord face to face in heaven. That's his goal for us too. In John 17, Jesus prays, "Father I desire that those whom you have given me may be with me where I am, to see my glory" (v. 24). He wants us in his glorious presence. Paul also points to this as our ultimate goal. He writes, "For now we see in a mirror dimly; then face to face."

Mirrors back then were made of polished brass. They were reflective enough to give a decent image, but nothing like our mirrors today. "Now we see in a mirror dimly. Then, face to face. Now I know in part. Then I will fully know." So Word and Sacrament is sufficient; we can know God through the mirror of Word and Sacrament. But

still, we long for the day when that mirror is no longer necessary because we are standing in God's immediate presence in heaven. Until then, Scripture says repeatedly, "Seek his face always" (Ps. 105:4).

Of course, heaven is about much more than communion with God. I'm thinking of the singing and dancing, the feasting and the joy of the communion of saints. Much more than that I cannot say because Scripture doesn't talk about it. I don't think it can. We have no experience of anything as fantastic as the new heavens and new earth. Neither our puny brains nor our puny words can bear the freight of what *will* be in heaven. As Paul wrote, "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man [even] imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9). So, Scripture has more to say about what heaven won't be like. John writes, "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat . . ."

I'm thinking now about those saints of God in heaven, particularly those we've known and loved. A 7th century English monk named Bede wrote this: "What can be happier than that life, where there is no fear of poverty – no weakness of disease; where none can be hurt, none can be angry; where none can envy, none can be impure; where none can be tormented with the desire of honor, or the ambition of power? No fear there of the Devil; no snares there of evil spirits; no terror there of hell; no death there, either of soul or body, but a life blessed in the gift of immortality. No discord there forever, but all things in harmony—all things in agreement: because there will be one concord of all saints – one peace, and one joy. . . Perpetual is the splendor there: not such as the sunlight which now is, but both more glorious and happy" (FSEP, pp. 3-4).

Who's responsible for this? John tells us in our text: "For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

I love that. Normally we wipe away our own tears,

right? Young children have the privilege of a mom or dad wiping away their tears and comforting them. But as adults, especially in public, we try to regain composure as best we can. Some on earth have the gift of being very poor comforters. “Put yourself together for Pete’s sake!” But in heaven, none other than almighty God, will reach out with his hand and wipe away your tears. Picture a bawling baby, and the mother trying for all her worth to quiet it with love and singing and wiping away the tears. Makes me think of Zephaniah 3, “The Lord will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you with His love; He will rejoice over you with singing” (v. 17). Can you imagine? Normally we sing to God. But this text turns things inside out: he will rejoice over you with singing; he will quiet you with his love.

Sometimes when I reach out to bless children at the communion rail, they flinch, because they’re not accustomed to being touched by a stranger, particularly a big one dressed in white. No flinching in heaven. I think, rather, we’ll just soak it up.

“And God will wipe every tear from their eyes.”

That never happens from a distance, but is always up close and personal. As our text says, “We shall see him as he is.” Face to face. Unmasked glory, no longer dimmed for our sake by Word and Sacrament, and yet, no flinching.

In Rev. 1, John writes of his vision of Christ. “His face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, ‘Fear not.’” Luther muses that once in heaven, “We shall spit on ourselves and say: Shame on you for not having been bolder to believe Christ, since the glory is so great!” (*What Luther Said*, p. 622)

Of course, there’s no seeing God face to face in heaven without Jesus on the cross on earth. For us and our salvation, Jesus masked his glory. Psalm 51 says, “Hide your face from my sin, and blot out all my iniquity” (v. 9). But the Lord chose not to hide his face from our sin. Instead he exposed himself to our sin and its curse. Isaiah 50 anticipates this: “I offered my back to those who beat me,

my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting” (Is. 50:6ff). Face to face with God in his humiliation! Imagine, the face we dare not look at in glory, men spit at. So great the humiliation that men actually turn their faces away from him in disgust!

The Romans always crucified people next to a major road, because crucifixion wasn't just a punishment. It was a deterrent. “This is what we'll do to you too if you don't behave yourself.” It was a gruesome sight, with flesh already shredded by the requisite flogging, eyes already swollen shut by the beating, dislocated joints, nails driven through the limbs.

Now picture now those pilgrims streaming into Jerusalem for the happy celebration of Passover, singing pilgrimage songs. As they approached the great city, rounding one last curve in the road and there it is: Golgotha . . . three guys dying tortuous deaths. The pilgrims stop singing at once. There's shock and horror in their eyes. Can you see them hastening their steps and averting their eyes so the horrific images won't be burned onto their memories? Can you see them shielding their children's eyes as well so they aren't exposed at so tender an age to man's inhumanity to man? Again from Isaiah: “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (53:3).

On this broken earth, we dare not look at his face in glory, but we also don't want to look at his face in his humiliation. But that's the only way. The only way we get to see God face to face in heaven is through God's total humiliation on earth. That's what God's justice required. And that's the promise we've held on to for the millennia.

Remember Job's friends? They weren't very helpful. They thought he must have done something to deserve his suffering. They had the gift of being poor comforters. And yet, do you also remember how Job insisted, “I know my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the

earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will God; I myself will see him, with my own eyes . . . [Face to face.] How my heart years within me!” (Job 19:25ff)

In the last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22, we finally get it: “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.”

“They will see His face.” That’s the climactic statement of John’s revelation: Finally face to face with God in his glory. No dim mirrors. No veils. No masks. Perfect communion with almighty God. Everything else: the perfect communion with the Saints of God, the eating and the drinking and singing and dancing and exploring of the new heavens and new earth . . . everything else flows from this. But first comes this: “They will see his face.”

After that, said Luther, ““We’ll have enough to keep us occupied” (*What Luther Says*, p. 621). Amen.

