

“Transfigured by Love” based on Exo. 34:29-35, David Jahnke, 2/14/10

After speaking with the Lord on Mt. Sinai, Moses came down with the ten commandments in his arms. This covenant would govern life among the Israelites and potentially lead to peace and joy, if they obeyed.

Before I go into the meaning of God’s covenant, I want to step back and address the question of mountain-top experiences—experiences which are usually between an individual and the Lord. One common argument is that religious people claim special encounters with God in order to manipulate or proselytize others.

My ethics professor at seminary told us of a congregational meeting about which a controversial matter was being voted upon. One charismatic member stood up and shouted, “God spoke to me last night and told me that he did not want us to pass this measure.” My professor happened to be in favor of the measure and stood up and shouted back, “Well God told me that he did want us to pass this!” Now this woman may have thought that God had given her a clear answer about this. But my professor believed he had discerned God’s will as well! In this case, her claim to a direct line to God was inappropriate.

We *do* need to show care in speaking about encounters with God. I think the veil worn by Moses as he spoke to the Israelites may represent this care. Jesus also commanded Peter, James and John to not speak about their experience until after the resurrection. In one of his letters Paul was hesitant to speak of his being taken up into the seventh heaven. And yet he did. As did Moses...As eventually did the disciples.

We have swung too far to the other pole. Fearful of either seeming coercive or crazy, people do not hardly speak at all about God’s work in their lives. We practice deism—a belief in a God who got things started in the beginning and has been hands-off ever since—we practice this in our daily lives more than the vibrant spirituality of Jesus Christ.

I started watching a brilliantly written t.v. series about Madison Ave. ad-men this week. It is called *Mad Men*. Executive Don Draper is Mr. Cool...He meets a beautiful Jewish department store owner- Rachel Mencken-- a potential client. And the first episode ends with them at

smoke-filled dinner club. He asks her why she isn't married. She says that it is only because she is a woman that he even asks that question.

"Only a woman has to choose between having a family and the thrill of running her father's department store the way it should be run."

And then she adds, "The other reason is I have never been in love." Draper chuckles, "She isn't married because she has never been in love. I think I wrote that once to sell nylons." She replies, "For a lot of people, love isn't just a slogan."

Don Draper, "Oh you mean Love! Big lightning bolt to the heart where you can't eat and you can't work and you just run off and get married and make babies? The reason you haven't felt it is because it doesn't exist. What you call love was invented by guys like me to sell nylons."

"Is that right?" she says.

Don-- "You are born alone and you die alone and this world just drops a bunch of rules on you to make you forget those facts. But I never forget. I am living like there's no tomorrow because there isn't one."

Rachel- "I don't think I realized it until this moment. But it must be very hard being a man too."

Draper-- "Excuse me?"

Rachel- I don't know what it is that you believe in, but I do know what it feels like to be out of place; to be disconnected; to see the whole world laid out in front of you the way *other* people live it. There is something about you that tells me you know about this too.

Draper nervously drags on his cigarette. "I don't know if that's true." And suddenly at a loss for words, he spits out, "Want another drink?"

Draper presents the modern rational man for whom the self has replaced God. To him, religion is a construct invented for the purpose of helping people to forget that they are born alone, die alone and therefore ought to live for the self alone. Moses would be an example of an ancient ad-man who had rules to sell to the Israelites. So he made up a mountain-top experience in order to bring people under his control.

It's an old claim. But where do such claims lead? For Don Draper, into a place of disconnect. His intellect and creativity had brought him career success. His personality and good looks drew women to him. He even had the trophy wife, one boy and one girl. And yet Rachel Mencken saw right through his cool façade and pierced his soul in speaking of his disconnect—the isolation that his self-centered living had brought him.

Now humanists try to transcend the prison of self through a commitment to the ideal of humanity and moral law. The effort is commendable but it lacks depth because it does not give sufficient consideration to the power and pervasiveness of sin. One cannot will things to be right even within oneself, much less have hope for humanity as a whole in this regard. One is bound to swing between: 1. disappointment with the lack of progress within one's self and the world and 2. self-righteousness and a lack of mercy. Because after all, everything would be all right if people could just get their act together so why don't they? With disappointment and the absence of true hope, selfish drives regularly tempt and one does not have the power of God or hope to defeat them. So while it is a step up from hedonism, humanism finally leads to the same place of disconnect and despair.

This, in fact, is where God's covenant with Moses can be misconstrued. It is true that obedience to moral law— doing what is right-- would make things right. But again and again, we fail to do is right—and cannot seem to keep ourselves from doing what is wrong. And if the demand is perfection either from God, self or others, where do you turn?

The song-writer Warren Zevon was dying when he wrote the following on his last album.

One day I came to a fork in the road
Folks, I just couldn't go where I was told
Now they'll hunt me down and hang me for my crimes
If I tell about my dirty life and times
Who'll lay me out and ease my worried mind
while I'm winding down my dirty life and times?

Because Warren had taken many the wrong path at many forks in his life, he was in great need of mercy. I hope that he knew that he had nothing to hide from God who would never hang him for his crimes.

Let's look again to Moses. The astonishing thing about his mountain-top experience is that he took off the veil over his face whenever he entered into the presence of the Lord. Must he not cover his eyes, his face, his whole dirty self in the presence of a perfectly righteous God? No. When he entered the presence of the Lord, the light he found there radiated unconditional love. Love which alone cleanses and can ease our worried minds.

This surprising element in Moses' encounter with God heralds the hope of the new covenant in Christ. The veil of the temple which separated the presence of the Lord from the Israelites was torn when Jesus died. So the new covenant begins not with what we have to do, but with what God has done, is doing and will complete.

The implications are tremendous. God's love does not depend on our righteousness. So our love for others does not depend on theirs. God's amazing grace keeps us in fellowship with him. So our grace toward one another keeps us connected. Disconnect is not possible in Christ because we are bound to each other and the world in a covenant of love. Despair is not possible in Christ because we trust in what God has done on the cross and because hope sprung up eternal from the ground with the resurrection.

When we see that it is God who makes things right, our approach to life should shift dramatically. This brings us back to mountain-top experiences. Moses and Jesus and the three disciples were away from a busy world when they experienced the glory of God.

When we know that God alone sustains us and makes things right and full for us, we are freed to step away from it all. And I mean it all! Detachment or sanctification— being set apart in order to receive love, and grace and truth is the primary response to God's covenant. We do not have to do, do, do in order to be loved and cared for. God has taken care of that for all eternity. And so just as Moses kept going back up the mountain with his veil off to speak with and hear from the Lord; so can we. The light which made him shine can fill us up in ways we can hardly imagine.

But we are so attached...Attached to work, to activities, to t.v., to games, to alcohol, to consumption; even when we are alone with our thoughts, we are usually attached to the past or to the future. We are so attached that we can

hardly even imagine a life where attention and open-ness to an invisible transcendent presence comes first.

A member testified recently about how her husband had an opportunity to serve in Russia. She exclaimed with great enthusiasm, “Russia, in fact, was about the last place in the world I wanted to go. So a couple weeks later, our bags were packed and off we went.”

They only had room in their few bags for necessities so all she had to read was her Bible and a book called “Knowing God.”]There was no t.v. in the apartment and the owner had someone coming in to clean and cook every day. And this maid wanted this member to do nothing...

She got away from everything for a fairly short period...and through the forced solitude of this trip; through an absence of work and diversions; through an intense period of time spent thinking about God and praying, she came home much closer to God than ever in her life.

The great blessing of detaching from the world is we end up rightly and more deeply connected to it upon our return. We find there is so much clutter we can do without. And we also find so much good that we can do with what we have. The nagging sense of disconnect from self and others is replaced by personal contentment and a joy in fellowship and serving.

I do not think it a coincidence that the two people primarily responsible for our new mission to Elizabeth have set apart time for fellowship with God. And this has led to a deeper fellowship with God’s people out there. There are dozens of other examples of this in our community; especially, it must be said, by our women. So I am convinced that as we set apart 10, 20, 30—occasionally 60 minutes a day for a class; if we set apart one day a week and a couple of weeks a year not just for self but for God-- everything will be transfigured by love.

To the God of all grace who calls us to eternal union with Christ be all the glory and the power now and forevermore. And God’s people say...Amen

Moses going back up the mountain to God...

Attachment and detachment—ads want us to cling to the world and attach our selves to things...God wants us to cling to his son and recognize ...

When it is God who makes things right...God who alone can ease our worried minds...then detachment from things for themselves is made possible...Mountain-top experiences

This surprising

This is where the new covenant with Jesus shifts the perspective from what we can or should do to what God has done and is doing.

The third episode ends with Draper going out to get his daughter's birthday cake after a few beers and mixed drinks. And the disconnect with his nagging wife— as he sees it— combined with his self-medicating-- lead him to skip out on the party, park by the train tracks, wait for the train and ponder the ultimate disconnect.

The answer to that question is found in Jesus' teaching, "Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars." There are plenty of charlatans out there. But there was something real and true— even awe-inspiring in the face of Moses as he came down off the mountain. So whether one's own or the mountain-top experiences of others and the stories which have shaped or accompany them

are true depends largely on whether they result in greater light in one's self and the world. Do they lead to greater love, joy, grace and peace for you and your loved ones? Do they help break you out of the prison of the self and free you for meaningful fellowship with others and service in the world? By the way, give serious thought to these questions as you are bombarded with advertisements.

Now Draper and many modern men like him are making equally strong claims about transcendent experience as well. (It's delusional, manipulative, a crutch for the weak etc.)

A covenant of love...rather than rule-keeping...which can also lead to despair.

A covenant of love leading to a renewed life rooted in the Spirit of God (and leading to transformation...) Setting ourselves apart from the world...through prayer and retreat.

Calling people near and gently letting them know that God's love is real. And that life begins and ends with this eternal truth! Rather than life beginning and ending with the following of rules which will determine whether or not we are good or worthy.

We do not use scare tactics

Now it may be that
The next question

Covenant shift...

Nobody else went up on the mountaintop with him! If we have never experienced such things, should we let ourselves be drawn in by those who say they have?

Love as a priestly construct written to sell God and God's rules? Clear signs of disconnect which leads to despair...Draper is disconnected from God and love; from his wife and kids...and this leads to the selfish pursuit of pleasure. Use the rules and the slogans when they benefit this pursuit...but never forget who is in charge. The self...

He had been basking in the glory of the Lord and this caused his face to shine.