

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today we conclude our sermon series we've been doing for a few weeks on the Book of Exodus, and it closes with this powerful story of Moses' very personal encounter with God following that incident with the golden calf we read last week, and in our story today, Moses seems to be seeking a deeper relationship with God. He asked God for the most astonishing thing. He asked not just for God's presence to be with him and the people, but to see God's glory. Then he learns, we learn, that no one can see God's glory and live. It would be too much. It's simply impossible, God says, for human beings to see God directly in all of God's glory. But God offers Moses something else. God will show Moses his back. Now, people don't always realize, this is not a literal back, like God's backside. This word, this concept, is that which is behind God, in other words, God's back is simply the place where God has just been.

Now, this is in a complete layman's idea, but I've come to think of this a little bit like the electron. An electron, as we learn, is a charge, a negatively charged subatomic particle inside an atom that the human eye cannot observe directly, even with amazing microscopes. Doesn't matter. There's no way for us to see the actual electron. We can't look at it. It's not observable to the human eye, so how do we know it exists? My understanding, again, I could be messing this up, but my understanding is that we know because we see the effects it leaves behind essentially. We can see the bubbles, the paths that the electron is leaving in its wake and how it's reacting, so we can see where the electron has just been, but not where it was just prior to that. So it is with God apparently. Maybe as you look at your own life, you think back upon your life, you begin to agree with this idea. Maybe you see that relating to you, that we cannot see God directly perhaps, but we can see where God has just been.

I think this is how we begin to learn to recognize God's work and handiwork. We usually only recognize it in hindsight. We cannot look directly at God, God's face, God's glory, but like Moses, God invites us and if we watch, we'll see. We can see where God's glory has just passed by. The backside of God's presence's after effects. I don't know. Maybe it's a little bit like that saying, "hindsight is 20-20." I think this is especially true when we look at the issue of tragedy. In the middle of a tragedy, and we've had quite a lot of tragedies in our world the last couple of weeks, we just cannot see God. You can't see God. It's dark. It's terrible. For those of us trained in compassionate counseling, we know that trying to urge people to see the hand of God at work

while they're in the deep throws of grief is not the right time. You can't see it then. Right then, the only thing to see is the pain and the loss, and that's work of grief, and so the compassionate counseling's job is simply to acknowledge it. Only later do we start to point someone's attention to look beyond it to the bigger question of God's word and presence in it.

Then, you've experienced this, I know. As time passes and there is some distance, the perspective begins to shift. Your perspective shifts, and at some point, I think often, you start to look back, and then you see God's presence even in the midst of something that's been nothing but terrible at the time. I think this is where faith fills in that gap when everything falls apart in our lives. We may feel abandoned by God or that God couldn't possibly be in our midst in that, but then faith calls us to trust that somehow, some way, God's there. Notice how important it is to Moses to be assured that God would truly be present with him. God responds to this need that Moses has by saying, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." This is what our faith, our hope is about, that God is indeed present in our midst. That's Emmanuel. This story is actually foreshadowing the Christmas story when the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Think back on your life. Remember those moments when you recognized God's presence in retrospect. I have a lot of those moments, but I'm usually clueless when it's happening. One of those moments that came to mind as I was thinking about this was a time following my third year of college. I was in desperate need of money to finish paying for college and all my expenses for school, and so I made the decision to earn money in perhaps would seem now the dumbest way possible. It was by flying to Seattle and signing up to work in a fish cannery. There was this fish cannery in Naknek, Alaska. I did this for the summer. It's a very isolated spot on the Alaskan coast overlooking the Bering Strait. You might wonder how this could be a big money maker for a college student, and the reason lies in the amount of work and hours that you do while the salmon are running. When the salmon are running, cannery workers work seven days a week for shifts that last about 14 to 16 hours at a time if any of you have ever done it. Even though it just pays minimum wage, the overtime pay starts to add up pretty quickly. But the hours are so terrible that as workers, we had to sign documents giving up all our rights to all those laws that would normally protect workers.

It's a bit like you've just traveled back in time to the Industrial Revolution. The whistle would blow at 5:00

AM in the morning, and the first crew and then the crews after that would be called upon every half hour, so the whole factory was going at full speed everyday. While you're in the cannery, we all had to wear ear plugs, the hairnets, the hats, gloves, your feet, you'd be on your feet the entire time. Your feet would be hurting, and you couldn't really talk or interact with anybody while you're on the line. It was very isolating as well as monotonous to an extreme. My job, I actually had a pretty good job. My job was spotting cans for defects, and they came down the assembly line at six per second. It was so fast that I actually got motion sick for the first several days until my brain, something shifted and I adapted to it. But after about ten hours of this kind of work on any particular day, you started to desperately hope that the quit whistle would blow soon. But you never knew how long the shift was going to be because it depended entirely on how much fish was caught.

You would be wondering after ten hours. Like, am I going to be doing this for two more hours or four more hours or six more hours? One shift, the longest of that season was well over 18 hours long, and yet we still had to be back in the line to start again less than six hours later. It was hard not to become a little bit nuts. Even a bit paranoid. The season I worked was a particularly long season. They ran for a long time, and in part it was because you never knew what was going to happen, and many people were miserable. People were faking injuries and illnesses to escape. The interesting part was watching the way people handled what often felt like torture. During our brief 15 minutes in the coffee break room, people usually divided up into two groups: those that tried to fill their desperate need for human contact with almost manic social interactions, and those that were shutting down and isolating even more. We usually had a few people sitting against the wall, heads in laps rocking themselves in attempt to self-soothe. Tears at that time were very common. When the whistle blew to return back to the line after your break, you could hear the collective groan of unified misery.

So could God's glory be present in even the misery of that fish cannery? Was God's presence with us even in that place? It's hard to believe, but as I looked back, I would say, yes. Yes, God was there and was even up to some really amazing things. A group of young women and I, who were way in over our head, bonded together, and we talked about everything during the time between shifts, no matter how brief. So I got to know the worst and best of these women very quickly, because in those conditions, everything and every emotion rose to the surface. One young woman was

struggling with bulimia and couldn't control it. Another was struggling to rise above the abuse and abandonment she'd suffered from her father. Another was struggling with desperate loneliness that she tried to fill with boyfriends. Organically, we felt led to begin a Bible study and prayer group. Most of the members of this little group had no church background, but it seemed like everyone that was hurting was drawn to it. We just started praying for each other, talking about the struggles and then praying about the struggles, praying for strength to get through the next shift, praying for strength to get through the day, praying for healing from all that ailed us.

We all had those nights when we cried ourselves to sleep, but still we prayed. I prayed. I know I prayed without ceasing that summer, probably the only time I ever did that. I still felt like I was always barely keeping my head above water. After the salmon run was over, we went our separate ways, but we kept in touch. It was only then that I started to see just how much God's presence had been with us. The woman suffering from bulimia experienced healing from it. She was eating healthfully and it never returned. The woman who'd been abused discovered healing in her relationship with her dad by beginning a relationship with God, who she told me later would never leave her or stop loving her, and that gave her the strength to forgive her dad. The woman struggling with loneliness discovered the value of church and a faith community. She joined a church back home that nurtured and helped her, and so it was like all these little miracles were happening that summer, even in the midst of so much collective misery. While we were at the cannery, we felt like we all made a terrible mistake by signing up to be there.

God's glory was not evident to us in that moment, but like Moses, I believe God was there with us. We didn't see God's face then, but later we saw where God had been. The effects of God's presence were evident in our lives in the weeks and months that followed that pretty horrendous experience. No matter what you're going through in life, no matter what you're going through even maybe right now, no matter how hard or lonely or dark or abandoned you might feel, God is with you. Emmanuel. God's presence is there even if you can't feel it or see it. Our God is a God that is with us, is with you in the most difficult of times. God is busy working out your salvation, your healing, your redemption, and your freedom from whatever grips you. You are loved. God's glory will be revealed in you, and in your situation in time. Wait. Wait for it in faith, and you will see the back of God. Amen.