

Pastor Ulrich Noetzel – Sermon on January 16th 2009 (Epiphany 2)

Readings: Exodus 33.17-23 and John 2.1-11

The Reverend Augustus Montague Toplady was travelling home after his service in Blagdon. As he was walking in the Mendip Hills he was caught in a violent thunderstorm. Fearing for his life he took refuge in a cleft of a rock by the roadside in Burrington Combe. There came to him the first verses of his most famous hymn:

*Rock of ages, cleft for me
let me hide myself in thee;*

Legend has it that he wrote down these first lines there and then during the thunderstorm. The only writing material he could find in the cleft was a playing card – horror of horrors! A sinful thing for a clergyman of his age and his persuasion. It was a six of diamonds we are informed, on which he wrote down the first lines of his hymn.

Let us now leave 18th century England in order to go to another rock in another age.

We join Moses on Mount Sinai, the mountain of God. Moses had been through a lot. He has seen it all. God had spoken to him at great length. Now he wants to have an Epiphany.

Moses was very confident that he could see God.

He boldly asks, nay demands of God: “Now show me your glory!”

The ancient Greek translation says more clearly what Moses wants: “Let me see yourself!” Not only does Moses think he could see God.

He also thinks that he should see God.

It is our quest. It is the theme of the season of Epiphany. Along with Moses, we expect answers, results.

It could be our cry: “Now show us your glory and let us see who you are!”

Moses wants to be 100% sure that God is with him on the long way to the Promised Land.

He wants to know that he is in good hands on the way.

(It is a recurring theme in Moses’ leadership.)

But it would help us, too. On our journey through life and on our journey of faith.

We haven’t seen anywhere near as much of God at work as Moses has.

God hasn’t spoken to us like he spoke to Moses.

We haven’t seen a burning bush, we haven’t parted the sea in God’s name, or the rock.

We have read about all this and been wondering about it.

But we haven’t seen it like Moses.

Wouldn’t it be really good and helpful to see God personally at work? Because we are used to seeing things as we are living in such a visual world with Television, Youtube and Skype. (And even the Frankfurter Allgemeine now has a picture on its frontpage.) “Seeing is believing”. We haven’t seen a fraction of what Moses has seen. But wouldn’t it be good, if we could also see some of his glory?

Maybe it wouldn’t help. Moses had seen so much, but he still wanted to see even more:

“Now show me your glory! Let me see yourself!”.

Seeing God. It’s an irresistible idea. It is also an understandable but problematic wish.

We want to see Him in action.

That's why I like the story of the water and the wine so much.

This idea that God gatecrashes our lives, turns our water into his wine.

So that in effect God throws a big party for us.

And everybody can see: what a God!

Wanting to see His glory – It is a very understandable but a problematic wish.

Because God doesn't throw parties at our command.

He doesn't appear because we want him to.

Mary experienced this when she approached Jesus at the wedding.

When she came to him with an idea what he should do, he rebuked her:

“Woman, what have I to do with thee?”

God is autonomous. We cannot dictate him, what we think he should be doing.

It can be found in God's name: “I am who I am” – This name was first given to

Moses at the burning bush. God now spells it out to Moses on top of the

mountain. “I am who I am” means “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy”

and “I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion”.

And for Moses it means at this moment that God will not show his face just

because he wants him to.

I have heard you – says God to Moses – but I shall decide what I shall do.

I heard your request, but, sorry, you cannot see my face.

It is impossible. No-one can see me and live.

Looking back, you can see me. But not looking forward.

God takes care of Moses. Just this mild rebuke. Then God takes him and gives

him as much as he thinks is good or safe or both. He puts him in a cleft in the

rock and places his hand over him to keep him safe, while His glory passes by. Carefully and lovingly God makes sure that Moses will be alright.

God is present and yet he is withdrawn.

He is close yet does not want to be seen.

I am impressed how carefully God provides a shelter for Moses. I am reminded of a mother bird who builds a nest for her little birds.

But I am also sad that there cannot be another answer. I would have wished for a jubilant “YES” from God “Yes, I am so glad that you want to see my glory.”

But this is not the case.

At the beginning of our journey, Epiphany seems to be far away.

And yet we hear about people who saw God, and even Moses was amongst them.

They saw God even though God says it is impossible:

Ex 24.9: Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.

... And I add: they did not die.

We continue our pilgrimage, our quest to see God. We follow the children of Israel through the desert for many years and hard times. We follow them into the promised land. We arrive with them at Jerusalem.

We see how Solomon builds the temple on Mount Zion. Another Mountain of God, another holy rock. A new place where God lives, where people expect him to be.

Where they pin their hopes and prayers.

Zion – The place where everybody looks to for help. A place of pilgrimage because God lives there.

But also another place where God cannot be seen. Only the high priest must enter the Holy of Holies once a year. But even he won't see God. He will be protected by the smoke from his thurible. It is impossible to see God and live – says God.

Yet – in the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. (Isaiah 6.1).

Isaiah saw God in the temple, and he lived. Was it just a dream? I don't know. At least Isaiah's commission was real!

The people don't seem to mind about this contradiction. They pray to God and feel assured that he is with them. They call him their "rock".

The rock – Moses' place of safekeeping – the place that kept him away from God, at a safe distance has become God himself: *And they remembered that God was their rock, and the high God their redeemer. (Ps 78.35).* The rock – a safe place.

And the people use that name in their prayers. They say: *In God is my salvation and my glory: the rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God. (Ps 62.7)*

And still today people sing the hymn of the Reverend Toplady: *Rock of Ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.*

And so the pilgrimage goes on through the ages.

The quest for God continues. People still want to see him and to experience his glory.

For a while it became true: “*we have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the father.*” (John 1.14) And this is the reason we celebrate the season of Epiphany.

At that time God made himself available and visible when he appeared in Jesus. The wedding feast at Cana was the start and one could see the glory of God – absolutely without hiding.

But even then God’s showing wasn’t unambiguous: *the world did not recognise him (John 1.10).*

So our pilgrimage continues. It has not come to an end. Because we are still searching for signs of God in our world. We desperately want to see him. We want him to take action. To make sure that things will be alright. In our lives. In our world. In Brazil. In Tunisia. God – there is so much out there where some of your glory is urgently needed.

We are still on the mountain with Moses, demanding to see God’s glory. Our mountain top today is called St Petri church in Kleefeld.

But we are here, because we hope, we expect, even demand – like Moses – that we can see and experience something of God’s glory.

Our quest is not yet at an end. Sometimes we can’t see very much – if any – of God’s glory. But even then it is not all dark. We get glimpses from strange angles. Like Moses from his cave: With hindsight we can see God at work.

In small sights and sounds we are lifted up to Heaven. Maybe through a song or a picture that show us something about God’s reality.

The hymn “Rock of Ages” is one example which countless people found helpful in life and in death.

It is not all dark, because Jesus pointed us to the fact that we can encounter God in a stranger, or a neighbour. And vice versa: People may see God through us.

It is not all dark, because we follow the light of the world. It is not dark because we know of people who have seen God, like Isaiah or the wedding couple at Cana. They are our inspiration and our hope: God is active in this world and he makes himself known.

It is the season of Epiphany. Time to look out for this light.

Time to look out for signs of God's appearance.

Time to continue our pilgrimage towards the glory of God.

Amen.