

**"Holy Mystery"**  
**(Exodus 34:29-35)**  
**February 27, 2022**

Mount Sinai was the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments. We know it was also called Mount Horeb (1 Kings 8:9; 2 Chronicles 5:10), but where was it? Based on the biblical description of what happened up that mountain, some scholars and explorers suspected it was a volcano. However, after confirming that there was no volcano in the Sinai Peninsula, they all gave up the volcano theory. So, was that mountain the same as the traditionally called Mount Moses located (Jabal Musa) on the Sinai Peninsula? It remains a big question that no one can answer.

However, people still believed the mountain was somewhere in the wilderness where the Israelites met God and made a covenant. On that occasion, many representatives from the Israelites were alongside Moses. And "God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank." (Exodus 24: 11)

Wait a minute. Except for a few exceptions, are all human beings supposed to stay away from God? And Moses was one of them, not the elders. Well, you heard it. "They saw God, and they ate and drank." These leaders were many, including Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel. (Exodus 24: 9) They "saw the God of Israel ... standing on a pavement of something like sapphires – pure, clear sky-blue." (Exodus 24: 10)

The scripture today said, "Moses came down from Mount Sinai." It was not the first time he came down from there, no matter where the mountain was. God asked him to go up the mountain before and gave him the stone tablets with

teachings and commandments on them. (Exodus 24: 12) Maybe he stayed up there for too long. Forty days and nights, think about it, it's more than a month. The Israelites started to worry. "Where is Moses?" "Where is our great leader?" "From now on, whom shall we follow?" That was why they proposed to make the golden calf as a symbol of God who brought them out of Egypt, as something that would lead their way in the wilderness. Moses came down from the mount. He was so angry that he broke the two stone tablets into pieces. This time was the second time Moses came down from Mount Sinai with two stone tablets.

As mentioned before, the location of the mountain was a mystery. What the representatives of the Israelites saw in the covenant-making ceremony was a mystery. And now, we have another. I don't mean why would Moses have horns, which was based on a wrong translation of Moses having a glowing face. Yes, the mystery was, "Why was Moses' face glowing?" I don't think it's possible to find any reasonable explanation for that phenomenon. However, we can say for sure that, from then on, the role Moses played between God and the Israelites had changed. He became the only mediator between the two parties, and whenever he had a message from God to deliver, he would cover his face with a veil.

Interestingly enough, the dividing veil of the Most Holy Place inside the tabernacle, the curtain in Solomon's Temple and the Second Temple served the same purpose as Moses' veil. They kept God's holiness and the people apart. Do you realize that most churches' architecture preserved the same understanding of the holy mystery? Don't touch anything holy! If you have contact with it, you are risking your life! Uzzah is a frequently named example who died because he tried to steady the Ark of God with his hand. (2 Samuel 6:3-8)

There are many mysteries associated with today's story. How should we understand Moses' glowing face then? Fortunately, an event like that didn't happen just once. It happened with Jesus when he was up a mountain with his three apostles, Peter, James, and John. (Matt 17:1-9) Jesus' "face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light."

What had happened with Moses' face was similar to that of Jesus'. Their faces were glowing. However, what came out of the event was significantly different. In the case of Moses, people believed that there was an unbridgeable barrier. Human beings could not approach God directly. One must rely on a mediator and religious rites. This understanding reflected itself in the Jewish culture, temple operation, and architecture. Through observing laws and rules, people keep themselves acceptable by the holy. Therefore, when someone needs attention, the tendency is not to offer it easily. First, find out who they are and make no moves if they are profane. It is especially so on the Sabbath Day. When someone's life is in danger, don't get involved as the involvement might result in contamination which was offensive against the holy. Never request help from unclean persons. It's simply unacceptable.

In the case of Jesus, his face was glowing the same way as Moses. His apostles were terrified the same way as the Israelites. But Jesus told them not to be afraid. He also ordered them not to tell anyone about what they saw to prevent them from spreading their misinterpretation of that experience. Jesus had a very different understanding of the holy. He had no intention to set a barrier between him and others, between sacred and profane. He showed it clearly when he recognized the faith of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector at Jericho, who was looked down on by most Jewish people. He moved around on the Sabbath to heal

men and women in different places. He used the Good Samaritan parable to illustrate how inappropriate it was to disregard the good works of a non-Jew. He made good use of every opportunity to contact the people he met, even talked to a Samaritan woman, and inspired her through his water request.

The writers who preserved the stories of Moses set boundaries between God and the Israelites. Jesus knew the stories of Moses, of course, but he intentionally crossed those boundaries for the benefit of others. If Moses was the mouthpiece of God, so was Jesus. When we look at a church building, especially the altar's location, do you think we have picked up the idea of holiness more from Moses' traditions or Jesus'?

God was in Christ, and Jesus didn't set any boundaries between him and us. God is the Wholly Other, a mystery, but it becomes tangible through Jesus, in whom holiness touches humanity. The breaking in of the holy does not happen in large, grand, religious, magnificent ways. It happens mysteriously and spontaneously when a son is welcomed home, a neighbor is honored and cared for, a whore is loved, a leper is touched and cleansed, a crowd is fed, a guilty man is forgiven, and a crippled woman stands up straight and laughs and dances.

It's storytime.

A disciple asked, "How does one seek union with God?"

The master answered, "The harder you seek, the more distance you create between God and you."

"So, what does one do about the distance?"

"Understand that it isn't there."

"Does that mean that God and I could become one?"

"Not one. Not two."

"What do you mean?"

"The sun and its light, the ocean and the wave, the singer and his song. Not one. Not two."

Jesus' face was shining up the mountain like Moses', sending out God's message that people didn't comprehend. Do we get it now? Let the holy break-in. Find out what they want, the homeless, the poor, the bullied, the refugees, new immigrants, the Indigenous, the discriminated, those threatened by wars. Be with them, struggle with them, and pray for them. Amen.