

April 18, 2019 – Exodus 24:1-11, Romans 5:1-10 (Maundy Thursday)

Have you ever been a VIP? Have you ever had back-stage access or a special pass to some otherwise forbidden area? It's a great feeling, isn't it?

I remember having that sensation during seminary. I was in my second year, I think. And my fieldwork pastor had asked me to visit one of our members who was having surgery at the hospital next door to the seminary.

It was my first hospital visit ever. And, at his heeding, it was the first time I had ever worn my black clergy shirt with the white clerical collar out in public. Now, you have to understand, this is St Mary's Hospital in St Louis, MO. And everyone there was Roman Catholic.

Which meant that when I walked through that hospital, I was greeted as “Father” more times than I could count. But even better, it meant that I could go anywhere. I think I could have walked straight into the operating room and no one would have stopped me. In fact, I happened to be a running a little late and when the surgeon came in and saw me there, he immediately said, “Oh, it's OK. We can wait a few minutes for you to finish.” The surgeon waited for me. I was treated like a VIP.

At the same time though, we don't particularly enjoy being kept away from the important spots. It's always tempting to peak behind the “Employees Only” door. It's always frustrating to go to a ball game and see people sitting right behind home plate while we're up in the nose-bleed section. It's always annoying when someone cuts in front of us in line.

Our congregation has to deal with this on a regular basis. As confessional Lutherans, we believe in closed communion. The idea that not every single person who comes into our building should be invited to the Lord's Supper. That's there are boundaries to participating in this sacrament.

It's not that we, in any way, teach that they are less saved than we are. It's not that we're trying to exclude them. It's not that we're trying to make them feel like we're more important than they are. But, unfortunately, that's how it's often perceived. No one likes being kept away.

And yet, we have a “closed communion” going on in our Old Testament lesson today. A group of people who are stuck waiting for access to God. Even though they are, in fact, the priests and elders of Israel.

God says to Moses, “*Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar.*” Worship from afar. Employees only. Reserved seating. Back of the line for you. Worship from afar.

Oh, except for Moses. You can come up. “*Moses alone shall come near to the Lord, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.*” Moses is a VIP. The rest of you are not. Moses has access. The rest of you don't.

You might expect that there would be some people upset about this. “Why does Moses get to meet with God? What makes him so special?” But there aren't. The people hear this and they immediately reply with one voice, “*All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.*”

Why are they so willing to be denied access? Well, frankly, because they're terrified. The Lord has descended on Mount Sinai in a cloud of smoke and fire. Lightning flashes all around. The sound of trumpets blasts until the earth shakes. When they first see it, the people immediately shove Moses forward and say, “You go talk to God. He likes you. But we're not going anywhere near that mountain.”

They have seen God for exactly who he is. A terrifying God of absolute power. A God would could destroy everything and everyone, if he chose to. A God who demands complete obedience from all his children.

A God who needs a mediator. Someone who stand between the people and God. Someone to meet with God and hear his Word. Hear his laws. Hear his promises. And then deliver that Word to the people.

That's what Moses was for the Israelites. A mediator between God and man. Someone who could go up onto the mountain and meet with God without fear of being destroyed. And then return with his Word.

Return with his Law and with his Gospel. Because, despite the fact that they were so terrified of God, the people of Israel are still rebellious and disobedient. As we discussed just last week, it is while Moses is on Mount Sinai, being that mediator, that the Israelites craft the golden calf and bow down to it. It is while they are camped in front of this mountain covered in the fire of the Lord that they brazenly disobey the Lord.

And according to the Law, because of that willful, stubborn sinfulness, they will never have access to God. Mediator or no mediator. They deserve God's wrath. They deserve to be consumed by that fire.

But God is gracious and merciful. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He doesn't consume the people. In fact, he tells them to worship from afar specifically so that they aren't consumed.

And then he brings Moses onto the mountain. And he tells him to make a sacrifice. And to take the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkle on the people. And to say, *"Behold, the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."*

Behold, the blood of the covenant to forgive you and give you access to God himself, without fear of his wrath. *"Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel... And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank."*

Through his mediator, God made a covenant with the people of Israel. A covenant made in blood. And by that covenant, those who had no access to God now had access. Those who were sinners and enemies of God were treated as friends and VIPs.

On the night Jesus was betrayed, a new and greater mediator sat with God's people. And he made a new covenant with them. A covenant made in his own blood, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. And by that covenant, those who had no access to God now have access. Those who were sinners and enemies of God are treated as friends and VIPs.

Those who come to this altar see God himself under bread and wine. We behold God and we eat and drink with him. We eat and drink of him. Of his body and blood, given and shed for us.

As St Paul tells us, *"We have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand."* It is by faith that we cling to the promises of this covenant. It is by faith that we receive the blood of this covenant. It is by faith that we behold God face to face here at this altar.

Without that faith, there is no grace in which we stand. Without that faith in what Christ has done for us, we stand before Mount Sinai as it is covered in smoke and fire and lightning. And if we're not terrified by it, we should be. Because it is the consuming presence of God in all his absolute power.

Without that faith that this is the body and blood of Christ given and shed for the forgiveness of sins, we worship from afar. And we thank God that he doesn't demand we come into his presence. We thank God that we can encourage people to stay in their pews and know that they are still his chosen people.

But for us who know that we are invited. Who have been called as Jesus' disciples to sit at the table of our Lord. Who have been given that access to God's presence and the promise of his grace through the blood of a new covenant.

For us, this church is paved with sapphires. For us, this altar is Mount Sinai itself. For us, we behold God as we eat and drink. And remember the sacrifice he made for us. Amen.