

⁹Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of Israel's elders, ¹⁰and they saw the God of Israel. Beneath his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as clear as the sky itself. ¹¹God did not harm^[a] the Israelite nobles; they saw him, and they ate and drank.

¹²The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and stay there so that I may give you the stone tablets with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction."

¹³So Moses arose with his assistant Joshua and went up the mountain of God. ¹⁴He told the elders, "Wait here for us until we return to you. Aaron and Hur are here with you. Whoever has a dispute should go to them." ¹⁵When Moses went up the mountain, the cloud covered it. ¹⁶The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day he called to Moses from the cloud. ¹⁷The appearance of the LORD's glory to the Israelites was like a consuming fire on the mountaintop. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud as he went up the mountain, and he remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

Quarantine

Quarantine: doesn't sound like such a bad idea. Imagine being stuck at home, unable to do anything for an extended length of time. It's like a vacation as long as you're not sick, and there is plenty of food, and no pressure to pay bills. Other than that, it sounds awesome. Quarantine however has never been enjoyable process.

In history a quarantine was a specific period of time when a ship suspected of carrying disease was kept in isolation in harbor. The word quarantine comes from the Italian – which literally means 40. It stood for forty days. There seems to be something magical about that number. Forty years was how long Israel wandered in the wilderness. 40 days was how long Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. 40 days and 40 nights was how long the waters fell on the earth in the flood.

And even here Moses seems to be under quarantine with God for forty days.

But why and did it work? God came down and his presence was threatening his imperfect people. God's power and perfection were on display as a consuming fire. His holiness demanded judgment for sin but God didn't put himself in timeout. But God wasn't the one in quarantine.

Here he makes his plan to be with his people who are harvesting an infectious disease. This disease had spread from generation to generation. There is no stopping it. The mortality rate is 100%. It's much worse than the coronavirus. It kills all who come into contact with it. We have it. But there is hope, and it is found on another mountain but first it starts with quarantine.

And there's good reason for it. God's has just brought his people out of Egypt. There they had been among the pagan gods. Each plague was designed to strike at the false gods of Egypt, these false cures, and snake oil cannot save. He leads them out of Egypt, decimates their army, and then they arrive at Mount Sinai where the cloud descends and the fire starts. A fence is set up around the perimeter of the mountain in order to keep people away. God then speaks to his people. *Exodus 20:18-19* ¹⁸*All the people witnessed^[a] the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain*

surrounded by smoke. When the people saw it^[b] they trembled and stood at a distance.¹⁹ “You speak to us, and we will listen,” they said to Moses, “but don’t let God speak to us, or we will die.”

Moses must have felt like he’s just signed up for something without knowing what he was getting in to. God calls him up the mountain.¹² *The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and stay there so that I may give you the stone tablets with the law and commandments I have written for their instruction.”* It’s never a good thing to be called into the teacher’s office. That’s where God called him and that’s where he went, taking with him 70 of the elders along with Aaron, his sons, and Joshua. They had just finished ratifying the covenant. The people have just agreed saying, *“Everything you command, we will do.”* And now Moses is going up to receive the law and the commandments, what it means to be the people of God.

When Moses went up the mountain, the cloud covered it.¹⁶ The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day he called to Moses from the cloud.¹⁷ The appearance of the LORD’s glory to the Israelites was like a consuming fire on the mountaintop. Moses later tells us, *I am trembling with fear.*

Moses was terrified because he knew that he too carried the disease that infected them all. Moses was a murderer and a man who talked back to God, “Send someone else.” He was a sinner standing before a Holy, powerful, just God who has just punished Pharaoh and his armies. And now Moses stands as a mediator between man and God. A mediator without any bargaining chips. No PPE. No mask. No shield. No distance. There is nothing to hide behind only the cloud of glory that envelopes the mountain. And as Moses is on the mountain this disease bursts out among God’s people. Here among God’s People. These people are now involved in gross idolatry.

We always like to place the blame on people or individuals for problems – so who’s at fault? Moses could be blamed he knew the people would have problems. “If there is a dispute go to them.” Maybe Moses should have selected better leaders. Aaron would later blame the people and then even the gold, “It came out like this.” Some would even turn on God and accuse him of waiting too long. The quarantine is just too much.

We can blame China for our current problems. We can claim, “It’s not my fault,” and there are many things that are out of our control. That only becomes a problem when nothing is ever our fault.

What about us? When it comes to the problems in our life, who do we blame? It’s popular to perpetuate a victim mentality among many. It’s not your fault, you’re in debt. It’s not your fault you work at entry level job and have never advanced in life It’s not your fault. After all you can’t help it. If you believe that then you might as well believe, “You’re just a helpless and powerless individual.” You can blame your genetics. You can blame God, but you’ve seen how well that worked out for Adam and Eve.

We’ll pretend to be victims in order to save face. And in that case it’s always someone else’s fault. But the problem with telling people they’ can’t do anything, “You’re a victim.” Is that they may actually believe you. They may believe that your efforts don’t matter, that there is nothing you

can do. You become enslaved to others and prevent life from getting better. We are a victim of our own foolishness. We have the same sickening disease inside of us. Every one of us is dealing with our own disease that burst forth like chicken pox. If you've had them, they're with you for life. You can go through life without noticing but under stress they can come back forcefully and painfully.

What a victim mentality fails to realize is that everyone is going through the same thing in different ways. There isn't a single person who hasn't struggled or isn't struggling. We're all victims. Victims of our own sinful nature.

So are we going to stand before God saying, "It's not my fault. They did this to me." Are we going to think of God as the senile Father who says, "You're still selling drugs to children... did you have a good time?" Or maybe our image of God is as an over excited puppy, Always waiting for you at home to smother you with kisses. That's not the picture of the transfiguration.

Our God is a consuming fire. He is just. Look what he did to the Egyptians for their mistreatment of mankind. They turned the Nile into an abortion mill, just throw the children to the crocodiles. The people of Canaan weren't any better and God brought judgment on them with his people. God should bring disaster on us too. When we see God as he is, we realize that we cannot approach him as we are. That's what God was telling his people. There is a difference between us. That's what we deserve. But instead he steps in. God came down to deal with sin instead of destroying people.

God spoke to Moses. He gave them his Word. He established a covenant with them, knowing full well that they couldn't keep it. Later he would deliver another covenant, one that we could keep. But first he sent a Mediator and instead of a consuming fire he came in a cradle to a teenage mother. He enters into our world. He is born in Bethlehem, surrounded by sin and death. He didn't terrify us with his wrath; he invites us with his grace. When the disciples are terrified Jesus touches them and said, "Get up; don't be afraid." ⁸ When they looked up they saw no one except Jesus alone.

Instead of a covenant fulfilled by our obedience he brought a covenant written in his blood, for the forgiveness of sins. And we can keep it because it doesn't depend on us. If anything Jesus could claim to be the only true victim. He's done nothing wrong. He has not sinned. He has not fallen into temptation or this sickness. But he took it upon himself. He touched people. He cleansed lepers but instead of making him sick – his holiness healed them.

Finally as he nears the end of his ministry he heads up this mountain where he shows his disciples, "I'm in control. I'm not a helpless victim." I wonder if all of this was revealed to Moses in the cloud of glory on the mountain. I wonder if he stepped out of time when he saw the glory of the Lord. I wonder if Elijah too when he saw the glory of the lord pass by the mountain if he saw Jesus and talked to him about his exodus with Elijah. Jesus didn't deserve anything. But he gladly and willingly went to the cross for us.

We're not victims either. We get what we deserve and then more. We're not victims when Jesus has made us victorious. Paul says that in Christ, "We're more than conquerors." No matter what happens to us in this world we have a home. He has empowered us with his Word. He's motivated us to move on and thrive. We still win.

As Lent approaches and we stand before a consuming fire of God's wrath over sin. As we confess our sin and head up that mountain we go down to another. Calvary. There we see our savior hanging on the tree – not as a helpless victim but as a willing sacrifice who took away our sin. There he calls us closer. He wants us to gather close, to see the cross, see the cost, see our sin taken upon himself. He calls us closer. In baptism he invites us into his family, into his home. In the sacrament he shares a meal with us. He reminds us that on the cross he became what we were in order to make us what we were not. He wants us close. He wants us there with him. He gives us no reason to fear or be afraid.

So even if you soon find yourself under quarantine, you're not a victim. You're a child of God. I pray your 40 days is a much needed break. We are about to start another quarantine in the church year as Lent begins in three days on Ash Wednesday. The forty days are served during the week while Sunday remains an island of refreshment a place to find food. As we wait we remember our God who came for us. Amen.