



One of my favorite authors is Eugene Peterson, who I'm sure many of you have heard of. He tells a story in one of his books from his childhood, when he grew up in Montana, and specifically about an encounter he had with a Norwegian farmer named Leonard Storm.

When Eugene was just about five years old, he would walk across the meadow between his backyard and some fenced fields. He would stand at this barbed wire fence and watch Leonard Storm plow his fields with this huge tractor. What Eugene, this five-year-old boy, wanted more than anything else was to be able to get closer and maybe even ride on that tractor. He wrote:

One summer day, I was standing at the fence watching Brother Storm plow the field. I would never dare to climb through it. He was probably a hundred yards away when he spotted me. He stopped the tractor, stood up from the seat, and made strong, waving motions with his arm. I'd never seen anyone use gestures like that. He looked mean and angry. He was large and ominous in his big overalls and straw hat. He was yelling at me, but the wind was blowing against him, and I couldn't hear anything. I knew I was probably where I shouldn't be. Five-year-old boys often are. Sadly, I turned and left. I hadn't felt I was doing anything wrong. I was only watching from what I thought was a safe distance and wishing that someday, somehow, I could get to ride that tractor. I went home feeling rebuked and rejected.
Peterson

Now, Eugene made some assumptions about Leonard Storm's disposition. He interpreted his large frame, booming voice, and strange gestures as anger and displeasure. So, Eugene ran off and was scared to death. He never stopped to consider that maybe Leonard Storm wanted him to come closer and maybe even ride the tractor. I think many of us relate to God in quite the same way. We long to draw near to God. We long to, if you will, jump on the tractor, but we're afraid. So, we view God from a safe distance. We wonder about his intentions.

We read scripture, and we see how large God is. We know that God is holy, and we know he won't have anything to do with sin. We hear his booming voice and see his strange ways, and we wonder if he is angry or if he is calling us to draw closer.

I want to focus on how and why we can climb the fence and dare to draw near to a holy God. He is holy; this is the theme of Exodus 24. It takes place at Mount Sinai. The occasion is the formal sealing of the covenant, which God proposed in chapter 19.

Moses is the mediator of that covenant. The stipulations are given in the Ten Commandments and what is called the Book of the Covenant. The human players in this drama are going to be threefold: the people, the leaders, and, finally, Moses. Each is going to be invited to come near to God in a different way.

In each encounter, there is a sense of danger. God is holy. Humans are not. But in each encounter, this holy God doesn't destroy his people, he welcomes them. It starts with an invitation starting in verses 1 and 2.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance, but Moses alone is to approach the Lord; the others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him." Exodus 24:1-2

So, God speaks to Moses, and he sets the ground rules for this encounter. He invited Moses, three members of the priesthood, and 70 elders to come up to the Lord. These elders represent the people. The number 70 stands for the entire nation of Israel. But notice they're only allowed to worship at a distance. Moses alone is invited to approach the Lord. Meanwhile, the people are not to come up with him.

I want you to notice here at the outset that there are three groups of people, each with their own instructions. The people are to stay at the bottom of the mountain. Then, the priests and the leaders can apparently come to the top partway. Let's just say halfway up the mountain, and finally, Moses alone can approach the Lord at the very peak of the mountain. But I think the important thing to see right away

is that even though there are restrictions, God is inviting his people to draw near.

In the New Testament, this invitation is not made just to draw near to people like Moses or priests and leaders. It's an invitation that's made to every single one of us. The writer of Hebrews said, *"let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings"* (Hebrews 10:22a). I think oftentimes when we think about drawing near to God, what we feel is pressure and guilt. We think of it as a duty. We feel like a child who's being scolded for not eating his broccoli. It's not that we don't want to be near to God. It's just that we've tried so many times and feel like we failed.

I don't know about you, but maybe you can relate to the experience of setting your alarm an hour early, determined to pray and read the Bible. We crawl out of bed, shivering, eyes swollen, nose running. We pray for our family, our cousins, our leaders, our friends, and our neighbors, and then we check our watch and see that only five minutes have gone by.

We try hard to carry on another 55 minutes. We open our Bible, hoping to land on maybe a verse that will speak to our situation, but the words that stare back at us are like an ancient textbook that we don't even understand. We plod on, hoping for a breakthrough, and after two or three mornings of this, we know we're beaten.

The alarm rings, but we hit the snooze button and decide we need sleep more than torture. We feel distant and a little bit guilty. So, what do we do with our frustrated attempts to draw near to God? I'm convinced the answer, at least to begin with, lies more in our assumptions than in our technique.

Drawing near is not a duty. It is an invitation.

Drawing near to God is not, first and foremost, a duty. It's a response to God's own invitation. He's pursuing you. He created you with a longing to be near to him intimately. That calling, that longing that you feel from time to time, is God's invitation to you. I love what Augustine said to God. He said, "God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

I remember one winter day many years ago; it had been raining and raining like day after day. As a result, when I went into the garage to drive the car out, I noticed a massive lake at the end of my driveway. I knew that if I were to get out of my driveway, I couldn't drive through that lake.

So I remembered that there was a drain at the end of my driveway that often got clogged with leaves from the massive oak tree above it. I put on my boots, grabbed my rake, and waded out onto the street. I poked around and found the drain. When I found it, as soon as I pushed those leaves away, I saw this swirl begin. There was this sucking sound as the water just rushed down that thirsty drain.

Each of us has a longing, a pressure almost to be near to God. We may not always feel it, but it's there deep within. Your soul is a tabernacle that God built to commune with you, and from that place, he calls to us with tender urgency. As long as we stay away, the pressure builds. But coming to God is not so much a duty but a way of unplugging the dream, a way of release, and a way of setting us free.

I love how scripture says in the Psalms, *"Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me"* (Psalm 42:7). From a deep place, God calls into a deep place of your soul. And the issue is not how long or how hard, or how well we pray. It's not about saying the right words or finding the right verse. It's about responding to his invitation.

In the next section, Moses is going to deliver all the instructions he's received from God to the people, and the people will respond. So, let's pick it up again in verse 3.

When Moses went and told the people all the Lord's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the Lord has said we will do." Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said. He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he splashed against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey." Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words." Exodus 24:3-8

Don't you love how twice here the people say, "Everything the Lord has said we will obey." Yeah, right. I mean, how stupid are they? They could have said at least, "We'll obey most of the time." Or they could have said, "We'll try really, really hard to obey

everything you've said." But no, they say, "We'll obey everything you've said, God."

I think they were sincere. I mean, God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. They really wanted to obey him, but you know how that goes. Before Moses even came down from the mountain, they had absolutely obliterated the first commandment by making a golden calf and worshiping it.

So Moses hears this and proceeds to build an altar representing the presence of God. He sets up 12 pillars for the 12 tribes of Israel. Sacrifices are offered. Blood is sprinkled on both the altar and the people. Now you might wonder why the sacrifice? Why the sprinkled blood? This symbolizes that they're being brought into a life-and-death sort of covenant with the Lord. But that's not all.

We also know that for a holy God to relate to sinful people, death is required. The shedding of blood. God could have required our death. We're the ones who sinned, but God wants to be in relationship with us. So, he allowed for animals here to be the substitute. The sprinkled blood over both the altar and the people was a way of saying that sin had been atoned for. These people are clean. Israel is set apart as a holy nation.

I want you to notice the words that Moses uses here. He says, "Behold the blood of the covenant." Let me ask you, does that sound familiar to you at all? At his last meal with the disciples, Jesus passed the cup. Remember what Jesus said? He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."

So, there is absolutely no question that Jesus had Exodus 24 in his mind, and his disciples would have known that as well. But this was a new covenant, not made with the blood of bulls and goats, but with the blood of God's only Son. It's a better covenant.

Here in Exodus 24, there's still a distance. The people can't go up on the mountain. There's a sense that the blood of animals doesn't quite cut it. In fact, the New Testament Book of Hebrews says it's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. But the once and for all sacrifice of God's Son does cut it. It's that sacrifice that makes us clean. and allows us to draw near to a holy God.

See, the one thing that will keep you from drawing near to God is a guilty conscience. We all know what that feels like. We all know that deep down, we have not done everything the Lord has said. We have not obeyed everything. And we've heard that nagging

voice within saying, "God is really disappointed in you." You have to do something to clean yourself up to be close to him. Like a little boy that needs to wash up before dinner. Nothing will keep you from wanting to draw near to God more than that voice. Who wants to be in the presence of someone who condemns?

This past summer, Lynn and I just had a blast because we took five of our grandchildren to a family camp at Mount Hermon. I highly recommend it, by the way. They had the time of their lives. One day, four of the boys, seven, eight, and nine years old, went on an activity called creek walking. The parents are listening to sermons, and the kids are out having fun. I'd rather be with the kids sometimes, but anyway, they're there.

So they were creek walking. That was their activity for the day. Then we had to come pick them up. I'll never forget when we came to pick them up from their creek walking adventure. I mean, they were so excited. They were so thrilled. They wanted to tell us all about it, and they ran right up to us, gave us a big hug, and I realized they were sopping wet.

I thought it was just creek walking, but true to form, for them, it became creek swimming. As they approached us, they didn't say, "Don't touch me, I'm all wet." No. It never crossed their mind. They came near with confidence. We can draw near to God with the same kind of confidence. Hebrew says we can draw near to God with full assurance and read what it says, "Having our hearts sprinkled clean to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and have our bodies washed with pure water."

Each time you go into the presence of God, this is where to start. By reminding yourself that you can come to God because Jesus has made you clean. You have been sprinkled, if you will, with his blood. He has replaced your wet, dirty clothes, and you are now clothed in his righteousness. With those clothes, you are just as pleasing to God the Father as Jesus Christ is. When you draw near to God, remind yourself that a sacrifice has been offered.

Now, it gets even better here. After Moses meets with the people at the bottom of the mountain, he takes the leaders part way up, a few of the priests, and the 70, just as God told him. Look what happened, starting in verse 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 lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did

not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank. Exodus 24:9-11

Now, this is quite an encounter. I mean, the writer himself is amazed. He says these leaders saw the God of Israel. What does that mean? You probably know later in Exodus, God says to Moses, "You cannot see my face. No one can see me and live." And we know that in the very first chapter of the Gospel of John, it says no one has seen God at any time. So, how can it say they saw God?

Most scholars agree regarding these men that what they saw wasn't the essence of God himself but something of a reflection of God's glory. Notice when it describes what they saw, it only mentions what was underneath God's feet. Kind of like later when Moses would see just the backside of God. It seems these men aren't even allowed to see above his feet. But that's plenty. Even what's beneath the feet of God is absolutely stunning and breathtaking. It's described as looking like a pavement of sapphire or lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky.

Let me ask you, what is the most beautiful thing you've ever seen? A tropical island surrounded by clear blue water. Maybe a meadow dressed in colorful wildflowers. I'll tell you, nothing compares to the absolute beauty of God. Imagine a vast shining blue like you've never seen spread beneath the very feet of God. I mean, if that's what's under his feet, what's it like to see his face?

There's always danger when people get a glimpse of even a reflection of the glory of God. Remember, Isaiah fell on his face and said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined." So what amazes the writer here is that God didn't raise his hand against the leaders. You know what that means? He didn't kill them. I think the writer's kind of surprised. That's what he's saying because you would expect them to be dead. You can't look directly at the sun and come away unharmed. When people see God, they expect to die. The fact they live is surprising, but what happens next is absolutely crazy.

The people not only see God, but they also sit down for a meal and eat and drink in the presence of God. Back then, sharing a meal was how people consummated a covenant. Eating a meal together was the supreme act of fellowship and communion. To this day, in the Near East, sitting down and eating with someone is deeply symbolic of friendship and trust.

Don't you just love sitting down for a meal with good friends or family? Lynn and I went to Italy last year. That's where my people are from. I love Italy because what do they do? They eat in the early afternoon, they talk, they laugh, and then they take a nap, and then they wake up and do the whole thing over again. It's awesome.

But a meal is more than just a time to get fed and fill your stomachs. A meal is a time to enter into fellowship and communion and joy and celebration with those you love. You know that Jesus was always sharing meals. Often, he was accused of eating with the wrong kinds of people, but we all remember that on the night of his betrayal, he sat with his friends, ate, and then drank with them.

Later in Revelation, he calls the lukewarm church of Laodicea to repent. Isn't it interesting what he said to them? *"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."* (Revelations 3:20). What is this? This is a picture of the inner fellowship and communion we share with Jesus.

That's what's going on at Mount Sinai. That's what it means for us to sit down with the Lord and eat. It's a picture of the deep fellowship and communion that we share with the Holy God as we worship him. That's why you often gather at the table as a church community as part of your worship, eating the bread and drinking from the cup.

Earlier, God told Moses that he wanted these men to come up to him and worship. Well, that's really what's happening here: they eat and drink. They're worshipping. And worshipping is not just recognizing the Lord's greatness and holiness, but it's enjoying his presence. Like you're sitting down and dining with him. Wow!

We draw near to God. We draw near to worship him, and in the process, he reveals more and more of himself to us. We find ourselves in communion and fellowship with him. Like these elders, we see, eat, and drink; we experience his presence. There's an intimacy, a closeness with him that's like sharing a meal together. We can't see him. We can't touch him, but we know we've been with him.

Now, the last thing we see is Moses alone is invited to come to the very peak, the top of the mountain. Let's pick this up in verse 12. *"The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commandments*

I have written for their instruction" (Exodus 24:12). So God calls Moses further up to the top of the mountain, and he's told to remain there.

God's purpose, of course, is to give him the stone tablets Where God himself had written the words of the law, what we call The Ten Words. His law is for their instruction. It's there to help them, to teach them how to live. God wants them to have it in his own writing. This is a repeated theme throughout the chapter. Earlier in verse 3, Moses recounted to the people all the words of the Lord and his ordinances. Then, in verse 4, he wrote down all the words of the Lord. In verse 7, he took The Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people.

It's a reminder to us that in order to draw near to a holy God, we need God's Word. So we can talk about hearing God's voice and feeling his presence, but really, what we need is to be saturated with scripture. It's not just about knowing God's Word. That's a good place to start, but it's about letting God's Word know us. Letting God's Word examine us.

We may know all about the Bible, but what we're really in need of is an encounter with God's living Word. I love what Job said in the midst of the whirlwind. He said, "My ears had heard of you," he said to God, "but now my eyes have seen you." It's different. So Moses takes Joshua with him, and he heads up the mountain. Look at verse 13.

"Then Moses set out with Joshua his aide, and Moses went up on the mountain of God. He said to the elders, "Wait here for us until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur are with you, and anyone involved in a dispute can go to them." Exodus 24:13-14

It's very interesting that in order to obey God's call to meet with him, Moses had to leave behind some very important responsibilities, just like we will. He leaves Aaron and Hur in charge. So here's a man, Moses, with more weight on his shoulders than any of us will ever have. And yet, he knows what his first priority is. He's willing to delegate to others in order to meet with the Lord. Remember, he's going to spend over a month up there on that mountain. As he heads up, things get really interesting. Somewhere along the way, Joshua stops, and Moses alone keeps climbing.

When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the

glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud as he went on up the mountain. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights. Exodus 24:15-18

So, what this does is describe the scene primarily from the perspective of the people at the bottom of the mountain. They're really too far away to see Moses, but they see something of a manifestation, if you will, of the glory of God. This looks like a consuming fire. Not just a fire, a consuming fire.

We all know what that's about. We've seen the damage that a consuming fire can do just this week. So they probably want to warn him. I'd want to warn Moses. "Moses, get out of there; you're going get fried." But Moses sees something different. He walks right into the consuming fire, where he'll stay 40 days and 40 nights.

What's he doing up there? Well, one of the things he's doing, we know from the rest of Exodus, is that God is giving him instructions to construct a portable dwelling to make it possible for this holy God to dwell with his people on their journey to the promised land. Isn't that amazing? Think about that.

What is our God like? He is so holy that he is a consuming fire. And don't ever forget that. That's what he is. He is holy. He's a holy God. His holiness doesn't go away in this chapter. He is holy. He's a consuming fire. Yet he is also hungry to be close, to be intimate with his people. He's so hungry for that he will confine all that holiness inside of a portable tent so that he can travel with his people on their journey through the wilderness to the promised land.

What does that do to your vision of the Old Testament God? What do you think of him? We sometimes see God as a harmless, congenial old man who just wants to grant our every wish, like an old grandpa or something. Or on the other hand, we often see God as a distant, angry, and completely unapproachable old miser. The reality, he's neither.

We need to have a vision of God that understands that this God is at the same time both holy and hungry for you to draw near. What kind of God is like that? It's pretty amazing. If you get nothing else from this morning, I hope that your vision of God has been refreshed. Let's go back to the story that I started with at the very beginning. Eugene Peterson's experience didn't end that day when he ran away from Leonard Storm's fields. He wrote,

The Sunday after my disappointment at the edge of the field, Brother Storm called me over after worship and said, "Little Pete." He always called me Little Pete. I hated that. "Little Pete, why didn't you come out in the field that Thursday and ride the tractor with me?" I told him I didn't know I could have. I thought he was chasing me away. He said, "I called you to come. I waited for you to come. Why did you leave?" A few days later, I was back at the fence watching, hoping I might get a second chance. The giant Norwegian saw me, stopped the tractor, and did it again. He made that sweeping motion of invitation. I was through the barbed wire in a flash, running across the furrowed field and then on top of the big green John Deere tractor. He let me stand in front of him, holding the steering wheel, pulling the plow down that long stretch of field, my smallness absorbed in his largeness. Peterson

Isn't that great? The Lord says to each of us today, "Come up to me, come up to me." I love what the Apostle James wrote. Remember what he said? *"Draw near to God, and he'll draw near to you."* God has made every provision for you to do that. Oswald Sanders once said, "We are at this moment as close to God as we really choose to be."

Isn't that something? I want to encourage you at the very beginning of a new year to dare to draw more near to God this year than you were last year. He may seem big and scary. You may think he wants to harm you. You know he's holy, and you know you're not. But remember, the Lord himself is inviting you. A once for all sacrifice has been made to allow you to draw near and even enjoy a fellowship meal with him. So, my call to you this morning is to jump on the tractor. Dare to draw near to a holy God.

Our Father, we recognize you today as Isaiah said, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty. The whole earth is full of your glory." Lord, we don't want to whittle away anything of your holiness. We thank you that you are a holy God. But we are even more thankful this morning for the provision that you have made for us to draw near to you.

We thank you that each of us, through faith in Jesus Christ, has been sprinkled with his blood. Cleansed with his water. We're so grateful that you have invited

us, not so much as a duty but as a wonderful privilege to draw near to you, Lord. Whatever it is in our lives that keeps us from doing that, whatever it is in our lives that has kept us at a distance, we pray that you would remove it, and we would draw even closer to you.

We may not get all the way up the mountain as Moses did into that consuming fire. But Lord, we want to get closer. We know that one day, we will be with you perfectly. But as we move up the mountain this year in 2025, give us grace to know more of you, more of your fellowship. Thank you for the deep places in our lives where you call us to draw close.

For those aches and that pressure that builds within us just to be near to you, help us to respond gladly, willingly, and joyfully to your invitation. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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