

Big Show, Simple Message

Exodus 24: 12-18 Matthew 17: 1-9

I wasn't going to watch the Super Bowl. I enjoy football, but I'm not that big of a fan. Typically, I can find other things that I would rather spend time doing.

However, that Sunday afternoon, my wife asks if I'm going to watch the Super Bowl. I'm thinking that's odd; it must be a trap, but I tell her that I wasn't planning on it. She said that she wanted to see the halftime show with Shakira and Jennifer Lopez. I think about that for a fraction of a second and realize, you know, I should watch the Super Bowl – a matter of manly obligation, of course.

The game was exciting as the Kansas City Chiefs, having been shut out in the 3rd quarter, came roaring back in the 4th quarter to win by a handy margin.

The halftime show did not disappoint either. It was crazy as these two women – Shakira at age 43 and J-Lo at age 50 – danced and sang individually, coming together for the last two minute finale amid a continual extravaganza of light shows, special effects, dozens of skilled, artful dancers, even J-Lo doing high strength moves on a dancer's pole. It was fantastic!

Before the women's perspiration was dry, the comments were flowing about thrusting hips and insufficient clothing. Really? Elvis Presley had thrusting hips and got criticized in the 1950s. And by the way, have you been to a beach since Elvis Presley started thrusting his hips to see how scanty garments can really be?

The message of the show, a supreme celebration of Latin pop by two of its top performers, never registered apparently. I guess there were too many thrusting hips and insufficient clothing for it to sink in. Too bad – those folks failed to appreciate the truly amazing show.

Putting on a big show is a favorite ploy of magicians who like to exploit the dazzling in order to employ sleight of hand techniques in their transitions. If the audience is fascinated by that over here, then they won't notice this happening right there.

Misdirection isn't simply a common tool for the magical, it is commonly what happens when we get the big show in scripture. Of course, motion picture portrayals don't help matters. The latest special effects can be employed to make the supernatural occur in front of your face. This expectation carries over as we read scripture and the movie plays from our memory banks. What happens then? The simple message gets lost in the big show.

Today's scriptures have two big shows, one trying to imitate or emulate the other. Each passage has its simple message, too. So, let's watch the show but reach for that message that probably has a whole lot more value than the show.

Moses and his leaders get an invitation from God to come-on-up to the mountaintop. God has provided a pathway like sapphire, blue and “clear as the sky itself.” Moses, his most trusted leaders, and the seventy elders all went up together. According to instructions, only Moses makes the final ascent to receive the tablets of stone.

As Moses enters this sacred space, a cloud covers the mountain, and “the glory of the Lord” settled there. We don’t know exactly what “the glory of the Lord” is, but one might assume it is brilliant light since the Israelites saw it as “a consuming fire.” This is a big show and special effects artists have a blast with this one. But the big show is not the message.

Moses doesn’t get to speak with God until the seventh day. And he ends up staying there forty days and nights while the elders and leaders cool their heels waiting.

Of course, we shouldn’t take this time sequence literally, although many will – I’ve read what other pastors are planning to preach on and “waiting” was a common theme. The time spent on the mountaintop is certainly meant to reflect sacred time; the seven days of waiting corresponding to the seven days of creation, and the forty days and nights recalling Noah and the Flood and the covenant that emerged between God and God’s people. If the big show isn’t enough, then the calibration of time adds to the event’s importance. But this isn’t the message either.

For the next seven chapters, the phrase, “the Lord said to Moses” gets repeated again and again. It’s lots of detailed stuff. God tells Moses how *everything* is supposed to be, right down to how to hang the draperies in the Tabernacle. God has even picked the fabrics! Talk about a control freak! God does this with everything; the lampstand, the altar, the ark of the covenant, the table, the courtyard, the oil for the lampstand, the priestly garments. By the way, boxers, not briefs for priestly underwear – just kidding, but not really. No wonder Moses was up there forty days and forty nights. Again, we should not imagine Moses came down from the mountain with this mammoth list of items to furnish a big tent which is all that the Tabernacle was, the longtime place of worship for God’s people before the Jerusalem Temple gets built. All these details have likely been added by priests of a much later era. All these details, as long and extensive as they are, are not the message

God has decided that it’s time to step back from the day-to-day provisioning, guidance, and care of the Israelites, God’s people. They need to know what’s expected, and Moses needs to have the authority to set them on the right track and keep them there. They need to start responding independently and responsibly. They need to know that God has plans for them, that God wants them to behave differently from other people, to reflect God’s own values and priorities. They need to know that God remains with them, not as the big show – tower of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night – but as the one who would guide and direct them to the fulfillment of God’s plan and to the promise of God’s blessing.

This event – meant to evoke faithful obedience to God’s will and way – quickly gets its first challenge and envisions the gargantuan task ahead. When Moses and the elders head back down the mountain, they discover the orgy of the Golden Calf as God’s people have decided replace their God who is putting on a spectacular light show on the mountaintop. Not a good start. The big show did not keep God’s people from going off the rails, and it would begin God’s unfolding and unceasing efforts to get God’s people on track and aligned with God’s will, purpose, and promise.

Maybe Jesus will fare better? Matthew 17 begins “after six days” which puts Jesus in step with Moses who waits around 6 days before God appears. Therefore, for Jesus, it is the seventh day like Moses, only Jesus isn’t required to wait around. Jesus brought three folks along with him; Peter and the Zebedee brothers, just as Moses had brought the elders with him.

Jesus is transformed (transfigured) and the bright light that would shine from Moses’ face – “the glory of God” – is eclipsed by the description of Jesus’ face shining like the sun and his clothes becoming white as light. Then the big show gets even bigger as Moses and Elijah, the two most revered figures in Judaism, appear and speak with Jesus. How did they know who they were? Nametags. Think about it.

Peter, ever the impulsive one, sees this bizarre display before him. He decides to step up and show some leadership. Peter had been the one disciple who affirmed Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” in the preceding story. Of course, he also steps in it promptly enough by denying that Jesus would ever wash his feet. Peter’s middle name is “impulsive.”

Undeterred by any insight or learning from past experience, Peter steps in this one, too. He suggests the building of three booths for Jesus and his two friends. This would sound like the way the Feast of Booths is celebrated, a festival commemorating the time of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness and God’s people being dependent on the benevolence of God to survive. Of course, there is no reference to suggest that this was the season of the Feast of Booths, but let’s at least assume that Peter hasn’t had a total meltdown, and that this time period is indeed that festal season of Booths or Sukkot.

Jesus has probably done a face-palm, but God moves firmly ahead, despite Peter’s distraction. The text says: *While Peter was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!* So, God doesn’t even let Peter finish his daft remarks and cuts him off.

The disciples all respond accordingly and fall flat on their faces in abject terror. Jesus assures them, “Don’t be afraid.” I don’t know if that worked. But the real question is: Did they get the simple message amid the big show? It should have been loud and clear, but was it?

These close disciples may have thought that they knew Jesus' teaching, and they knew how to pray, and how to be faithful, and how to be just, and what the Kingdom of God was all about. They had heard it all, and they figured they were mature in their faith. They weren't like these other people who didn't know anything, who hadn't spent significant time with Jesus. In their self-satisfied spirituality, they thought they were already fulfilling the expectations of their Lord and of God. They had no idea that they had been missing the point, that their confidence in their self-perception was misplaced and inadequate. They had not been listening after all, and quite frankly, God was totally fed up. God yelled at them.

Yes, they may have been with Jesus, and they may have heard him preach and teach, and seen him heal and feed and bring hope. But despite all of that, it doesn't mean the disciples were listening. It doesn't mean that they truly understood what Jesus was all about.

It might be hoped that the leading disciples who accompanied Jesus to the mountaintop would also bring down from the mountaintop a new perspective on Jesus' ministry, having been awakened to their own need to get on the ball. However, they fail to show any change; the very next story has the disciples look silly and useless as they fail to drive out a demon. Like Moses, Jesus' experience coming off the mountain was rather disheartening.

As far as the people of God getting the message, clearly that will take some long term efforts. God's people are one hot mess in both cases. Moses and Jesus will have short time periods remaining for them to work with their particular people of God to get them straight. They will rely on their closest disciples to keep things moving forward, to keep the message of hope, promise, and new life in front of God's people.

God is doing God's best to lead the sinful faithful into their new life, toward God's Kingdom promise that awaits. God can be the overbearing mother whose attention is smothering, or the angry father who has heard enough nonsense to last a lifetime. Regardless, God is there, ready to provide guidance and sustenance in every season, to us and to those for whom we care deeply.

May we praise God and give thanks for the simple message to listen, to seek to be faithfully obedient. May we, too, shine with radiance from the glory of God who simply asks us to listen and pay attention to what's important.