

## **The Bang and the Flash**

2Corinthians 3:4-11

The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity, August 19, 2018

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

In order to understand what God is getting at in 2Corinthians, chapter three, it is necessary to understand what God is talking about when He talks about the covenant of the letter and the covenant of the spirit.

The covenant of the letter is the covenant that God convened with His people after He had rescued them from slavery in Egypt. He brought them to Mount Sinai. At Mount Sinai He proclaimed the initial stipulations of His covenant to them. When that scared them half to death, God allowed Moses to bring the rest of His stipulations to the people on God's behalf.

We have numerous ways of referring to this covenant. We call it the Sinaitic Covenant in the Wednesday Morning Adult Bible Class. They are an erudite group. We typically call this the Old Covenant. It is what the Old Testament is named after.

The Ten Commandments were originally carved in stone. God refers to that in 2Corinthians, chapter three. And while the commandments are statements issued from God in the form of promises, they are taken by people as commandments. This is done with good reason. The people do not live up to the commands that God issued from Mount Sinai.

This is what is meant by the covenant of letters.

God also talks about the covenant of the Spirit.

This is the covenant that God convenes with His people through His Son, Jesus Christ. In this covenant there are no elaborate stipulations. There are very few things here that could possibly be taken as commandments.

It is a covenant that is achieved by the blood of Jesus. In order for the covenant to be convened, Jesus dies. He sheds His blood. Then in the miraculous sacrament of the altar, that blood is applied to the people with whom the covenant is made. That is why Jesus calls the cup that we bless the cup of the new testament in His blood. The words could just as easily be translated the cup is the new covenant in His blood.

Unlike the covenant of the letter the covenant of the Spirit is based upon forgiveness. The covenant of the letter was based upon obedience. The reason that the covenant God convened with His people through His Son, Jesus Christ, is called the covenant of the Spirit is because Jesus received the Spirit in the water when He was baptized which recalls the Spirit that hovered over the waters in the creation. Jesus is here to bring about the new creation. He does it with and in the power of the Spirit. Therefore the covenant that God convenes with His people through Jesus founded upon forgiveness of sins is the covenant of the Spirit.

Now, if you made a movie of the establishment of the covenant of the letter, the old covenant, and you made a movie about the establishment of the covenant of the Spirit, the new

covenant, which movie would require more special effects? In other words which covenant has more bang and flash to it?

Fortunately for us movies have already been made of the establishment of both covenants. When a movie is made of the establishment of the covenant of the letter it always includes the life of Moses. Therefore somehow a bush that is on fire, but that does not burn up has to be portrayed on screen. Moses and Aaron using the power of God and at God's command changing their staffs into snakes will somehow need to be portrayed on screen. The plague of where Moses and Aaron at the command and with the power of God change the Nile into blood will have to be portrayed on screen. The plagues do not require that many special effects except to demonstrate their scope. But a pillar of fire by night leading Israel through the wilderness is going to take some doing to get in on screen. And then when Israel is fenced in by the Egyptian army because Israel is up against the sea and God moves the pillar of fire so that it stands in between Israel and the Egyptian army holding back the Egyptians while God blows with His wind to part the waters of the Reed Sea so that Israel may escape across the sea with a wall of water on their left and a wall of water on their right is going to take some doing.

I commend to you Cecille B. DeMille's classic, *The Ten Commandments*, as still the prime example of the special effects that it takes in order to portray the establishment of the covenant of letters.

It does not take as much special effects to portray the establishment of the covenant of the Spirit. When Jesus performs the miracle of changing water into wine which admittedly is a great miracle on screen all you have to do is release food coloring into the water at the right time. When our Lord heals a paralyzed man, all you have to do is have an actor pretend to be paralyzed until Jesus tells him to stand up. At that point all the actor has to do is stand up. Even the most wonderful miracles of our Lord like the people that He raised from the dead and His own resurrection only require an actor to pretend to be dead and then at the right moment get up and walk out of the tomb.

Portraying our Lord commanding the wind and the waves or walking on the water or His transfiguration may require a little more bang and flash, but those things were short lived and were not that heart of the covenant of the Spirit. His death and resurrection are the heart of the covenant of the Spirit. The resurrection is easy to portray and the crucifixion requires special effects only because it would be illegal to crucify the actor for reality's sake.

There is more bang and flash in the covenant of the letter than there is in the covenant of the Spirit. The glory of the covenant of the letter appeals to fleshly man and fleshly man desires it more than the glory of the covenant of the Spirit.

Everyone wants a bang and a flash.

Naaman, the top general in the Syrian army, has leprosy. He hears about a prophet in Israel named Elisha who can heal people of leprosy. Naaman gets letters from his king, assembles a huge entourage with his servants, and goes to the home of Elisha. Now think about this. The Syrian general, the most important military commander of a foreign nation is outside of Elisha's door with all of his entourage and with great wealth with which he is going to pay

Elisha for a healing. Elisha has more important things to do than to meet with this man. Elisha sends a servant out to tell Naaman, "Dip in the Jordan River seven times and you will be healed." Naaman is angry. The prophet has just given him his healing and he is angry and comes close to refusing to be healed because he expected Elisha to come out, wave his hand over his leprosy, call on the name of his God and heal him. Naaman thinks that the waters of Syria are better than that trickle of a river that Israel calls the Jordan. Naaman wants the glory. He wants the bang and the flash. Fortunately for Naaman he was humble enough to listen to his own slaves who told him that if the prophet had told him to do something great and glorious to be healed, he surely would have done it. How much more when he simply tells you to be washed and be healed?

When the Samaritans rejected Jesus and refused to let Him into their cities, James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume them. The disciples wanted the bang and the flash. It was also James and John who wanted to sit at the right hand and the left hand of Jesus when He entered into His glory. And the rest of the apostles were indignant when they found out about it because when it comes to asking Jesus about sitting at His right hand and his left hand in His glory James and John beat them to it.

The Pharisees repeatedly asked Jesus for a sign. What they wanted from Him was some spectacular miracle that would impress them so that they would believe in Him. Jesus consistently refused to give them a sign. He told them that a sinful and adulterous generation seeks for a sign and none will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. And if you do not know what the sign of Jonah is, look it up. Your salvation depends on it.

Now if you are not interested in glory then rejoice. If you are receptive to a humble Savior, then rejoice. But beware our sinful flesh likes the glory of the bang and the flash. Our sinful flesh is not impressed with the glory of the Spirit.

Which is more glorious, the congregation who does one mission trip a year or the congregation that does three mission trips a year? Which is more glorious a congregation that has Vacation Bible School or a congregation that does not? Which is more glorious a congregation that has a Sunday School or a congregation that does not? Which is more glorious a congregation that has 15 children who come forward for children's messages or a congregation that has 30? Which is more glorious a congregation that has an average attendance of 160 or a congregation that has an average attendance of 30? To which kind of congregation would you rather belong? Would you honestly be just as satisfied sitting in our sanctuary with only 30 other people praising the Lord as you are now? When you go on vacation and attend congregations that have better music programs, better youth programs, better mission programs, are you embarrassed or ashamed of your little congregation out in the middle of nowhere? Which is more glorious the congregation who has a food bank or the congregation who does not? Which is more glorious the congregation that has a soup kitchen and an English as a second language program or a congregation that does not? Which is more glorious the congregation who has an elaborate liturgy with great music or the congregation who does not? Which is more glorious the congregation who has the great praise band who works everyone

up to an emotional high praising the Lord or the congregation that does not? Which is more glorious the congregation that has screens in the sanctuary or the congregation that does not?

When I first encountered Immanuel Lutheran Church it was at Wayne and Casey Long's wedding. I had never worshipped here on a Sunday morning. Christy and I walked into the church here in the middle of a corn field and we looked in the sanctuary and I thought to myself, "Wow, this is big." Since I had never been here on a Sunday and Wayne had I asked him, "Do they fill this sanctuary every Sunday." Without hesitation Wayne said, "Yes." And I was ashamed because Immanuel in the country was doing better than the two congregations that I served in Kansas and they at least were in town. And then I became your pastor and realized that all of you thought that you were small in comparison to other larger and more elaborate congregations that you had visited on vacation. That is what happens when you are enamored with the glory of the covenant of the letter. You can always compare yourself to someone else. You can always boast in your own heart that you are better than some other congregation because you have this or that, but then by the same law there is always a congregation that damns you because they do this or that bigger and better than you do. And while you are focused on the glory of the covenant of the letter you are missing Jesus. You are missing Jesus because He is humble and modest. His glory is hidden and does not require elaborate special effects to portray.

He doesn't care if even only two or three come together in this church. When they do so in His name, He will be there also.

Think about this. What if through some kind of unforeseen financial disaster in our area combined with political change forced our congregation to sell this building? Would you meet with me in the place wherever I could arrange it for the congregation to meet and continue to listen to the words of Jesus and continue to eat His body and drink His blood? Or would you be so embarrassed that the congregation had lost its building that you could not bear to do that? Would you be willing to meet for Divine Service in someone's field even if it were a member of the congregation for which you did not care? Would you be willing to meet in someone's machine shed even if it belonged to a member of the congregation for which you did not care? You would be willing to take the Lord's body and blood in vessels that are not as fancy as the ones that we use this morning? If so, then you are in love with the glory of the covenant of letters. You want the Law so that you may run comparisons between one congregation and another. The Law allows you to run comparisons. As soon as God gives the covenant of letters anyone can use those letters to see whether or not any individual or group of individuals is living up to those commands. One can see how far they have fallen. One can see how far oneself has fallen. One can see how far one has succeeded.

And since you can see it, it is temporary. The things that are seen are temporary. The things that are unseen are eternal.

So Jesus is the incarnate God, but aside from a couple of occasions He does not look like it. That is because what is unseen is eternal. So when you film the life of Jesus and His foundation of the covenant of the Spirit, it does not require any big special effects. There is no

bang and flash. He does not give signs when people ask Him for signs. The signs that He does give are witnessed by His apostles only or a small select group. The signs that He gives leave question marks for those who witness them. When Jesus raises those young people from the dead, how do we know that weren't sleeping? But Lazarus is hard to explain. They actually got him buried and Jesus brought him back. But even after brining Lazarus back to life the Jews plotted his death in order to get rid of the evidence of His glory. When Jesus changed water into wine the chief steward did not know where the wine came from. The groom of the wedding feast did not know where the wine had come from. The only people who knew where the wine came from were the slaves serving it.

Jesus is born of a virgin. It is a great miracle. But His birth does not look different from any other birth. By looking at His birth it looks like Jesus could have been conceived through natural means, but He wasn't. That's the miracle but the miracle is obscure. The miracle is not obviously a miracle. This is not like parting the Reed Sea! You wouldn't even know it was a miracle unless you were out in the fields by night watching your sheep and bunch of angels showed up to tell you.

And finally Jesus rose from the dead. The resurrection of our Lord is the greatest demonstration of His power and majesty. It is greater than any parting of the seas or changing the Nile into blood. It is more powerful than those things because of the sheer weight of its impossibility. The resurrection of our Lord from the dead gives us hope of a life after this one which we would not have without it. The resurrection of our Lord defies logic and regular human experience. But when the disciples saw the risen Christ, He appeared to them in much the same form as He did before He was crucified. The only difference is that now the body of Jesus bears the marks of His crucifixion. That is not exactly glorious.

His miracles are obscure. They are not seen The reason that they are not seen is because the things that are seen are temporary. The things that are unseen are eternal.

Therefore our Lord's virgin birth, His miracles, and His resurrection are all eternal. The salvation that He procured for you is eternal. It cannot be seen and that it is because it is eternal.

And so the Lord is content to save you in ways that are not visible.

Consider the following passages of Scripture: When God waited patiently in the days of Noah who along with eight of his family were saved through water and this water is a foreshadowing of Baptism which also now saves you, not the removal of dirt from the body, but the appeal of a good conscience to God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And also God says that He saved us not through righteous things that we had done but because of His mercy He saved us through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

In these two passages and in others it is clear that Baptism saves you, but when a child is baptized it does not look like a child is being saved. That is because the things which are not seen are eternal.

Four times in Holy Scripture the institution of the Sacrament of the Altar is recorded. It is obviously important to our Lord if He takes the time to record four times its institution. In it he gives us His body to eat and His blood to drink, but it sure does not look like it. It looks like

bread and wine. He forgives us of all of our sin at this altar, but it does not look like it for forgiveness is a change in the heart of God toward you. And the reason that these things cannot be seen at the Sacrament of the Altar is simple. What is not seen is eternal.

And finally our Lord promises those who speak on his behalf that anyone who hears them hears me. Here I suppose you will need the ears of faith and not just the eyes. You are listening to the voice of Jesus. It sounds like me, but then that makes sense because those things which are not seen are everlasting.

And so the covenant of the Spirit does not look like much. The Lord who convenes it does not look like much. He does what He does in great humility in order to divest us of our arrogance that we would presume that God must do things that way that we expect Him to.

But in spite of the fact that there is no bang and flash, it is still more glorious that the covenant of the letters because the covenant of the letters is not eternal, but the covenant of the Spirit is.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.