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¹²Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ ¹³Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” ¹⁴He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” ¹⁵And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

¹⁷The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” ¹⁸Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” ¹⁹And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” ²¹And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²²and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

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“Present in the Presence”

Opening Prayer: Please pray with me. Loving God, it is in your presence that we experience your love for us and feel your tender embrace. Now, send your Holy Spirit among us so that your Word may be spoken, and heard, and understood in this place today. In Jesus’ Name we pray, **Amen.**

Introduction: **How many of you** have ever been to the *Air & Space Museum* in Washington, D.C.? My wife and kids will tell you, it’s my favorite place in our nation’s capital. **Who hasn’t stared in wonder** at the vast array of flying machines in inside the great “*Milestones of Flight Hall*”? Each of these historic machines has a name. **There’s the** 1903 “*Wright Flyer*,” **John Glenn’s** Mercury space capsule “*Friendship 7*,” **the Apollo 11** command module “*Columbia*”, **and even the first** privately developed, manned-spacecraft named “*SpaceShipOne*.” But the flying machine with **the most recognizable name** of all is the “*Spirit of St. Louis*.” But the “Spirit of St. Louis” isn’t in the museum because **Charles Lindberg** was the first person to fly across the Atlantic Ocean; rather it’s there because Lindberg was the first person to do it all alone. Without the aid of a mission control, or ground or satellite-based navigation systems, Lindberg and his tiny flying machine flew across the vast nothingness of the Atlantic Ocean. For 33 hours and 30 minutes Lindberg was all alone flying the 3,600 miles from New York to Paris. Lindberg’s feat is seen as a great individual accomplishment. Today, no one remembers Donald Hall who designed the airplane, or Ryan Aircraft Company who built it, nor the financial backers from Saint Louis for which the plane was named. No, when people hear the name “Spirit of St. Louis,” **they think of Lucky Lindy** and the courage it took to do something all alone. Yes, we admire individuals who dare to face the wiles of the universe all alone.

PAUSE

Move I.

Some people are determined to go their own way. People want to pick their own destination, chart their own course, and make their own fate. We call it independence, and we consider it a basic human right. We like the tales of individuals who strike out on their own and make it big. We listen with envy to the fanciful stories of the self-made-men or women. There's just something about the individual confronting the wilds of the universe and coming out on top that draws us like moths to the flame. We long to be the **“master of our fate; the captain of our soul.”**

Those words are actually the closing lines of a poem written by **William Ernest Henley** in 1875 called *“Invictus,”* which means *“In memory of.”* Let me read you just the first and last stanzas of this hauntingly somber poem:

**Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.**

**It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.**

This poem speaks to the darker side of determined individuality. I first learned of this poem not in a literature class at school, but when it was read as the last words of one of the most notorious figures of our time—**Timothy McVeigh**, the Oklahoma City Bomber. McVeigh issued the words of Henley's poem as a final act of defiance just before he was executed on June 10, 2001 for murdering 168 people. Those haunting words echo to this day inside my head, **“I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.”** 168 innocent people are dead, and now Timothy McVeigh is dead too.

Some people are determined to go their own way, come hell or high water. They are in control of their life, and they would never have it any other way. It matters not who else is hurt or killed. Innocent by-standers don't mean a thing. All that matters is having it your own way—doing your own thing. They think to themselves “*Life really is all about me.*” “*Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead.*” “*To hell with the consequences.*” **Some people really are that determined to go their own way.**

End I.

Move II.

But going it alone can lead to places not worth going. What we think is best for us, often isn't all that good after all. The result of rugged individualism can be very tragic. McVeigh was described as a loner, a true individualist, and his way surely wasn't worth going.

Our Bible lesson today is about human individualism. It seems that the people of Israel had been trying to do things on their own. The book of Exodus is an account of a people who were chosen by God but spent much of their time acting as if they weren't. **Every time you turn around** the people were trying to go their own way and do their own thing. Our Bible lesson today comes right after the story of the "**golden calf.**" The people had grown impatient while Moses was away on top of Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments from God. The people didn't want to wait for Moses or God any longer, so they decided to make a god for themselves to worship. The people collected their golden jewelry and smelted it into a graven image of a calf. The people liked having a god they could see and they all began to dance and worship the golden calf. That's the scene that meets Moses as he comes down from Mount Sinai with the stone tablets of God's law. **In disgust Moses** throws the stone tables on the ground and they shatter. The commandments were being broken even as they were being given. So that's the situation as we come to our Bible lesson today in Exodus 33.

Our Bible lesson today comes right after the Lord has told Moses to go ahead and lead the people into the Promised Land, but that they will have to go without God. **Earlier in Exodus 33:3 (NRSV)** the Lord instructs Moses saying "**Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.**" The Lord is going to let the people have it their own way; they are going to have to go it alone.

This might have pleased the people, **but it didn't please Moses**. Moses was the LORD's man; he was the one the LORD had chosen to lead the people. Moses couldn't imagine trying to lead this stiff-necked people without the LORD going with him. **So, in Exodus 33:12a (NRSV) we read that "Moses said to the LORD, 'See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me.'" Moses knew there was no way to get anywhere worth going if the LORD wasn't going along with you. It would be like going on your honeymoon and leaving your bride behind. You can't do it all alone. You have to have the LORD with you for the journey to be worthwhile.**

So often we try to go through life's journey all alone. We choose the ways of wine, women, and song, only to find that **they lead to the dead-end allies of gloom, agony, and despair. People going it alone get caught up in the snare of addiction. People going it alone get caught up in the snare of materialism. People getting it alone get caught up in the snare of sensual pleasure. As the great teacher says in **Proverbs 14:12 (NRSV) "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death."** It is natural to want to go it all alone. **But going it all alone can and does lead to places not worth going.****

End II.

Move III.

So, we need to remain present in God's presence. Straying away from God is never wise. The further we drift from God the more dire the consequences. Only in the presence of God is there real life. Only in the presence of God can we be who God created us to be. Only in the presence of God can we receive God's great salvation so rich and free.

There's been a heart-warming poem circulating for many years that has comforted countless souls who've experienced times when they've felt far away from God. The poem is called "*Footprints in the Sand*." If you've ever heard this poem, raise your hand. "*Footprints in the Sand*" is about our walk with God; how as we walk side by side with God two sets of footprints are left behind in the sand. **But when we look back** over the course of our lives, we notice that there've been times when we can see only one set of footprints in the sand. Those times have been some of the hardest and darkest chapters of our lives. We assume it was in those times that we have been left all alone. We have been out of God's presence. But the poem closes with these profound words, "The Lord replied, **'The times when you have seen only one set of footprints in the sand, is when I carried you.'**" You've never really been out of God's presence after all.

Most copies of "*Footprints in the Sand*" attribute the poem simply as "**Author Unknown.**" But we now know who the author was. **Mary Stevenson** wrote "*Footprints in the Sand*" back in 1936 when she was only 14-years old. At this young age Mary had already experienced many hardships in life. Mary's mother had died when she was just six and her father had raised her and her seven brothers and sisters in Philadelphia during the height of the Great Depression. So, this piece of wisdom that has comforted countless souls **came from the mouth of a child.** All we can do is stand in awe of the mysterious ways of our God.

Moses was no stranger to being in God’s presence. Moses was in the presence of God when God spoke to him from the burning bush. **Moses was in the presence** of God up on the mountain top when God gave Moses the law for God’s people. **And Moses is in the presence** of God again in our Bible lesson today. Here, the LORD invites Moses to see His glory pass by. This is called a theophany—an appearance of God that’s perceptible to human sight. **In Exodus 33:19a (NRSV)** we read, “And the LORD said, **‘I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’.**” In Hebrew the word for presence and the word for face are the same word, **paw-neww (פָּנִים)**. To look someone in the face is to be in their presence. To be present together is to be standing face-to-face.

But of course, there’s a problem, the LORD God is holy and we are not. No one unholy can stand in the presence of the LORD God Almighty and live. **So, God offers to protect Moses** from annihilation by shielding him as God passes by in all of His glory. Moses gets to see God’s back. **God is eager for** all of us to be in His presence, but God also wants us to live. So, God provides us the holiness we lack so we can abide in His presence and live too. To be anywhere else is to be lost in the darkness. **So, we do need to remain present in God’s presence.**

End III.

Move IV.

And then we can go wherever God wants us to go. In God's presence we can be what God wants us to be and go where God wants us to go. That's the power of being in the presence of God. **For Israel** the *Promised Land* was the land west of the Jordan River and east of the Mediterranean Sea. That's where Moses led the people of Israel as God went with them. In the book of Exodus, we're told that **God accompanied** the people of Israel as a pillar of cloud by day **and a pillar of fire** by night. Seeing those signs of God assured the people of God's presence. The people could see the footsteps in the sand behind them.

There's nothing like the assurance that you're in the presence of God. That you're standing face-to-face with the Lord God Almighty and you are fully and totally alive. The thought of being in God's presence is enough to give most anyone Goosebumps. There's a popular song about what it's like to be in God's presence called "*I Can Only Imagine*." That song was written by **Bart Millard** as he was trying to imagine the better place where his father had gone after dying of cancer in 1991. The song was written in a burst of inspiration in less than 10 minutes late one night in 1999 aboard the tour bus of a music group Bart had joined called "*Mercy Me*." That song went platinum selling over 2-1/2 million copies. Let's listen to just one line and imagine along with Bart Millard.

{**Play Video: "I Can Only Imagine--HD Clip.mp4" [0:18]**}

Not only can we imagine, we can do more than imagine. Being present in God's presence isn't just for some future time and place we call heaven. God is present with us here today. God's right here walking by our side. God's eager to lead us to the Promised Land. We need only imagine and believe. **And then we too can go wherever God wants us to go.**

End IV.

Conclusion: The “*Spirit of St. Louis*” is synonymous with the courage it takes to face the wiles of the universe all alone. **Yes, some people are determined to go their own way.** They want to be the “*master of their fate and the captor of their soul.*” **But going it alone can lead to places not worth going.** Timothy McVeigh went his own way and 168 people died and now he’s dead too. **So, we need to remain present in God’s presence.** Like Moses we need to make sure we don’t go anywhere without God by our side. **And then we can go where ever God wants us to go.** We are surround by God’s glory, open your hearts and see. Let’s marvel in the shear wonder of being “*Present in the Presence*” today.

Closing Prayer: Let’s pray. Eternal God, we thank you for wanting so much for us to be present with you that you sent your one and only son Jesus to be present with all of us. Now we can do more than imagine; we can walk by your side as you lead us to the Promised Land. **Amen!**

10:30 Closing Hymn: “*I Stand Amazed in the Presence*” Red Hymnal No. 371
Verses 1, 4, and 5

Sending Forth: Are you standing amazed in the presence Jesus the Nazarene? Have you been ransomed into his Glory the very face of God to see? Go forth surrounded by God’s glory as you sing hallelujah to Jesus Christ our King. **And all of God’s people said... Amen!**