

Looking Back to Look Forward

Exodus 33:12-23

October 16, 2011

- Crosswalk – Moses
- Fast forward – Moses leading the people into the wilderness on the way to the promised land.
- Took a lot longer than people expected – they were impatient...wanted an assurance of God's presence; something concrete. While Moses was up the mountain receiving the 10 Commandments, they made the golden calf.
- Moses was angry – but God was more angry. God threatened to remove God's presence from the people.
- Then Moses – because he was a good leader – tried to change God's mind...to beg that God would not withdraw God's presence. That's where our passage begins – with God and Moses having another heart-to-heart.

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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. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' Now 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."

He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For 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."

The 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."

Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray."

And 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. But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."

And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and 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; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

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I get why Moses would be concerned. Aside from his own anger at the stiff-necked people he was leading through the wilderness, I understand how Moses would be worried about what God was suggesting.

Moses wanted the same thing as his people did when they got impatient and made that stinking golden calf: an assurance of God's presence. I imagine the thought of leading the people through the wilderness and into the Promised Land without God's presence would be untenable to Moses. It was hard enough with the presence of God!

It is something we all have: a hunger for the presence of God. We find security in it. We find peace in it. We find hope in it.

Moses wasn't as whiney as the people, but he had the same issue. He wanted to be assured of God's presence. And Moses didn't just want to be assured of God's presence. He wanted something more concrete; something that offered a little more security...He wanted to see God; to see God's glory. To meet God face to face.

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I think we all do...want to see God face to face. It meets that human need to understand, to comprehend, to know where God is in the midst of our journey.

Seeing God face to face means we can anticipate what is getting ready to happen. Seeing God face to face means there aren't any surprises. Seeing God face to face means that we know that who we are and what we are doing is in line with who God wants us to be and with what God wants us to do.

But when we really think we need to see God face to face is when life's journey becomes difficult: when there is heartache, or sickness, or financial trouble, or troubled kids. When we feel stuck, or overwhelmed, or overmatched, or overlooked. When we really want to see God face to face is when we worry that maybe we are in a season of our life without God's presence; that we are wandering through life on our own.

And that is a scary feeling to have.

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Moses begs to see God's glory, to see God face-to-face – and the answer he gets from God is...well, rather strange. God tells Moses that, yes, he will have a chance to glimpse God's glory...but that no one – not Moses and not us – will see the face of God. The alternative plan is for God to place Moses in the cleft of a rock; from there, Moses will only look at God from behind.

That may not be the answer that Moses or we would wish for, but maybe God's presence is like that.¹ Maybe it is only in looking back that we can see where God has been.

¹ With thanks to the Rev. Dr. Joe Clifford, whose paper on this text was helpful in lifting up Rabbinical commentary on this scripture. (The Well, Austin, 2011.)

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When I was a kid – probably in first grade – I remember that there was going to be huge solar eclipse while we were in class during the school day. Our teachers helped us make a contraption...it was shoebox, where we would poke a hole in one side, cover the opposite side with white construction paper, and cut out the bottom. It looked like this.

Once you made the contraption, you would stand with your back to the sun and point the end with the hole toward the eclipse – watching its projection on the white sheet. You go through all these steps because you cannot stare directly into the sun. We're just not built that way. The light is too much for our eyes...it will blind us.

It's a good metaphor. I think that is kind of how we see God's presence in our lives. We look back – through the chapters of our life's journey – and we see where God has been. With us in our rejoicing. Holding us up in despair. Saving us from our bad choices. Bearing us up as we navigated our way.

It is when we look back that we know – without a shadow of a doubt – that God has been present with us since the beginning. And though we cannot see God face to face, that knowledge should give us the confidence for our journey ahead.

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Today, a focus of our service is on children. One of the ways we develop the faith of our children is by unconditionally loving them and investing in them in such ways so that when they look back on their life, they will see the presence of God.

We do that here by teaching them the stories of the Bible; by building a community in which they feel safe and secure; by helping them use their

imaginations to discover the depth of the Christian faith; by creating positive experiences of the church that reflects the grace given to all of us in Jesus Christ.

But it doesn't stop here. Beyond the walls of the church, we are called to live out our commitment to children in our support of quality education, affordable healthcare, and mentoring programs that keep kids off the street. We demonstrate our commitment to children by making choices now – about the environment, our economy, and our personal comfort – with an eye to what it will mean later...when these children will inherit the world we inhabit.

And when they do – when they are grown and the memories of their childhood are faded around the edges – how wonderful it would be if our commitments to them now would help them see how faithful God's presence is with them on their journey.

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