

"Getting a Glimpse of God"

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Exodus 33:12-23, Exodus 34:5-9

The context of this passage is fascinating. Moses received the Ten Commandments in Ch. 20. He then receives a lot of instructions which are recorded in chapters 21-31. There are instructions about the worship - the space, the tabernacle, religious holidays, daily offerings, etc. What scholars believe about these chapters is that the priests took their worship instructions and incorporated them into the story when they collected them into the form we have them today. There are large chapters of material that reads like a worship book - instructions for worship leaders. And ever since then people in our faith tradition have been doing the same thing - claiming that their worship styles came straight down from heaven. It all started here!

In Chapter 32 the instructions have ended and Moses goes down the mountain carrying the most important instructions written on two tablets. And what does Moses find? - the Israelites have made a Golden Calf and are worshipping it. Moses gets so mad that he threw the two tablets of the Ten Commandments down on the ground, and they broke into pieces. Did you ever break a dish that was your Great -Grandmother's? And you were just petrified. Those of us who have can perhaps emphasize with Moses a little. He broke the Ten Commandments! So Moses and God have some difficult conversations. By this point in Chapter 33 they're starting to get back on track again, and they're back talking about taking the Israelites to the Promised Land. Let's take a look.

Exodus 33:12-23

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."

Exodus 34:5-9 (here's the event taking place)

The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, "The Lord." The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. He said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."

Generally speaking, name-dropping tends to annoy me a little bit. Do you have friends who name-drop? I do it myself. I'm not proud of it though, and the last time I saw Bill Gates I mentioned that to him. But I have friends who name drop a lot. Sometimes they really rub it in by saying, "I remember the first time I met the Senator." Or, "The last time I was at his house, he gave me a complete tour." The story would be so much more interesting to me if I was the one who got the tour.

I've even been with entire families who name-drop. I had a parishioner

many years ago who as a young man had been a chauffeur in Washington, DC. His name was Waldo Cooper, a wonderful gentleman if there ever was one. Mr. Cooper spent years driving around senators, congressmen, and even a president once. And the family loved to hear him tell those stories. "Tell about the time you drove Eleanor Roosevelt." Name Droppers!

One way to look at the Bible is that it's a collection of family stories written by habitual Name Droppers. In our faith, these are our family stories. But the thing that keeps popping up in these stories is that our family members kept meeting someone very important and then telling us about it. They kept meeting God. And they couldn't stop talking about it. And they kept retelling these stories and eventually wrote them down for our benefit. Instead of saying, "Mr Grandfather once drove Eleanor Roosevelt all around Washington DC." - they say, "Our Ancestor Moses, once met the Creator of the Universe on Mount Sinai. It's an amazing story. It goes like this . . ."

So the Bible is a collection of stories of people who had an encounter with God, and they collected these stories so that we could know God, too. One of Jesus' closest friends, John, once wrote this: *"We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you might have fellowship with us, and our fellowship is with God."* (1 John 1:2) Elsewhere he wrote, *"These things are written that you might have life - real life, spiritual life - in his name."* (John 20:31) That's the best kind of name dropping! Most name dropping is exclusive - "I know this person and you don't! Ha!" Instead the Bible name drops and says, "I met this wonderful God and you can know God, too. Let me show you the way."

OK, that brings us to our story today. Moses and God have talked things out. They're on track once again to have Moses lead the Israelites to the Promised Land. But there's only one problem - Moses wants a little reassurance. Now think about this - this is after the Burning Bush, - this is after the 10 Plagues, - this is after the Crossing of the Red Sea! - this is after God handing him the Ten Commandments. And Moses still needs some reassurance? What more does God have to do? So the next time you're feeling a bit weak in your faith and feeling like you need a shot in the arm, think of Moses. You're in good company.

So Moses says to God, *"Show me your ways so that I may know you (vs. 13). Show me your glory" (vs. 18).* The first request is easier than the second. *"Show me your ways"* is an easier request than, *"Show me your*

glory." God has already spent considerable time instructing Moses on the ways of God and how the people can follow them. But Moses wants more. He wants to feel God's power, God's might. He wants to stand in the eye of the storm of God and have the greatness and glory of God swirl all around him. He wants it all! He wants to see the face of God - which means, "I want a direct hit. Not a nudge, not a prompting, not a still small voice. Hit me with your best shot!"

There's only one problem with that, God says. It will kill him. *"You cannot see my face," says God, for no one can see my face and live.*" "Therefore, Moses, I'll grant part of your request. See those rocks over there and that crack between them. I will place you there. And when I pass before you I'll place my hand over you to shield you, and all you'll see is my back."

This is where I got in trouble in college. It was one of the first sermons I ever preached. The audience was almost college students, except for my Mother and her friends. So I'm describing this scene. God passes by Moses, shields him with his hand, and all Moses sees is God's back. So I said, "I don't think the Lord meant to moon Moses." Everyone laughed . . . everyone except my Mother.

The following week the long-time Chaplain of the College, a very proper and distinguished man, called me up and asked me to come into his office. He was not there for the service but listened to the tape. He complimented me a lot, but then he said, "There was just one thing I didn't understand about what you said, 'What's mooning? God wasn't mooning Moses?'" To this day I cannot remember what I said. I'm just glad that I like Moses lived to tell the story.

Back to Exodus 33. You now know the story. Moses wants to see God, and all he gets is a glimpse. By the way, St. Thomas Aquinas, who lived in the 13th Century, said that this is one of those passages that reminds us that not all the Bible is to be taken literally. God doesn't have a face, hands and a back. But the thrust of the passage remains the same - Moses wanted all of God and instead all he got was a glimpse. What do we do with that?

It reminds me of a fairly well known poem by the American poet John Godfrey Saxe (1816 - 1887). Three blind men were walking through the jungle one day when they chanced to meet an elephant. It was their first encounter with such an animal and they were anxious to understand the nature of the beast.

1 - The first blind man grabbed the elephant's trunk. "An elephant is just like a big snake," he exclaimed, "long and round and sinuous."

2 - "You are quite mistaken," contradicted the second blind man as he placed his two hands flat against the elephant's side. "An elephant is like the side of a house, broad and flat."

3- "You are both wrong," said the third blind man who was hanging on to the animal's tail. "

An elephant is exactly like a piece of rope. I am sure of this because I am holding it in my hand."

And so they continued through the jungle, each man convinced that he alone understood the true nature of the elephant.

Maybe part of the message of Moses only getting a glimpse of God is that Divinity is such a huge subject and even the greatest of saints only saw in part. "*We see as in a mirror dimly*," said St. Paul. But maybe there's a reason for that. John Ortberg is one of my favorite writers. He puts it this way:"

You have to believe that God has a good reason for keeping his presence subtle. It allows creatures as small and frail as human beings the capacity for choice that we would never have in the obvious presence of infinite power God wants to be known but not in a way that overwhelms us, that takes away the possibility of love freely chosen. "God is like a person who clears his throat while hiding and so gives himself away," said Meister Eckhart." (God is Closer Than You Think, p. 42)

Moses got a glimpse because perhaps that's all he could handle. Perhaps that's all that we can handle, otherwise it wouldn't require faith, and faith is what God seems to want to develop in us - faith and trust and a loving partnership. Let me move towards closing by bringing us back to my original thought, which was this - the Bible is a collection of family stories where members of our family are name-dropping, all because they met someone important - they met God! That's largely what the Bible is - story after story, encounter after encounter. And so we look at these encounters and ask ourselves,

1 - *What can we learn about God from this encounter?*

2 - *What can I learn about how I can relate to this God?*

First, What can we learn about God from this encounter? Well, we've been saying that one thing we learn is that the fulness of God is beyond our comprehension right now. We see in part, then we shall see face to face.

But let's not downplay the fact that God did reveal himself to Moses. God did respond to his request and God drew near! So we learn this about the character of God - God draws near, especially when people ask God to. And God especially draws near when we need strength and reassurance, like Moses did, and when we need mercy and forgiveness, like Moses did. Remember, he broke the tablets containing the Ten Commandments. That would require some additional reassurance. Listen to God's Words,

I am "The Lord, . . . a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation."

God reveals his character to Moses, that God is slow to anger, eager to forgive and start anew. God extends forgiveness to Moses. It's a 2nd chance. God draws near with a message of reassurance, I am with you, Moses, and forgiveness, "abounding in steadfast love." And God intervenes at a critical time - a time of turmoil among the Israelites and between God & Moses. God intervenes to bring peace and reconciliation. That's what we learn about God.

The other question we ask is, what can we learn about how we relate to this God? At the risk of oversimplifying. The answer seems, Just ask. *"Show me your ways, O Lord. Show me your glory."* And God did. All Moses had to do was ask.

That's my suggestion for us all this week. Ask God to show you God's glory this week. Ask God to give you a glimpse. I'd like to close by leading us in a prayer. If you're comfortable, please pray this prayer with me:

*Dear Lord,
Let me see your glory this week.
Let me see you - your goodness, your glory, your love.
Give me a glimpse
of you.
Amen.*