

Hespeler, 18 October, 2020 © Scott McAndless

Exodus 33:12-23, Psalm 99, 1 Thessalonians 1, Matthew 22:15-22

**T**he children of Israel had been at Mount Sinai for a very long time. According to the Book of Numbers, they were camped near the mountain for 11 months and five days. And what a year (or nearly a year) that had been! It had not all been good, of course. I mean, nobody wanted to talk about the whole golden calf incident. But it was also a place where God had been present for them like never before. The thunder and lightening had flashed from the mountain top, and many swore that they had heard a heavenly voice booming from the dark clouds. There the elders of the people had gone up the slopes of the mountain to eat a covenant meal with Yahweh, Godself.

But most of all, at Sinai, the law code that would be central to the life and identity of the people of Israel had been given to them. Down those slopes Moses had carried the two tablets upon which had been inscribed the Ten Commandments – the centrepiece of a whole body of law that was meant to guide the people into their future.

But now, apparently, it was time to leave. All of the laws and lessons of Sinai were about to be put to the test in the real world. And it is one thing to talk about such matters in theory; it is quite another to deal with living them out in cold hard reality. So can you really blame Moses for the way we see him talking at the beginning of our reading this morning?

**“If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here,”** Moses pleads. **“For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us?”** Moses seems genuinely afraid. They are about to head off towards something new. Everything they have learned at this mountain is about to be put to the test. And Moses knows that they’re not going to make it unless this God they’ve come to know at this mountain is going to be with them.

And I’ve got to say that I certainly understand where Moses is coming from here. Anytime you do that – anytime you begin to break away from that place where you have learned so much and which has been so formative to your identity and start to head out into something new, it is natural to seek that kind of reassurance.

I remember, for example, the first summer when I didn’t go to Glen Mohr Camp. Glen Mohr is a Presbyterian Church camp that is up in Muskoka. Today it’s part of a larger group of camps collectively known as Camp Cairn. And, for so many years of my life, Glen Mohr was a huge part of my summer. First as a camper and later on as staff, I learned so much there. It cemented my Christian identity and a whole lot of my personal



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identity. And I remember the year when I was basically too old to go anymore. It was like I was missing something of myself. I didn't quite know what to do with myself. I was fine, but I did feel lost for a time. I was looking for some reassurance.

In some ways it feels as if we are in a time like that in the church today. The Christian church has enjoyed a long and stable history in Western society. Mainline churches like the Presbyterian Church in Canada have learned so much about what it is to live as Christians within this society. We have written endless books on theology and Christian life which are classics and contain so much truth. And of course, we've developed these wonderful traditions that we've handed down through the decades.

But we seem to be leaving that time of stable learning. Things are changing rapidly for the church, not just because of covid (though there is no doubt that that presents a huge challenge) but also simply because of the rapid change of the society in which we find ourselves. It increasingly feels as if we are heading out into uncharted territory, into a place where we're going to have to put all of these lessons to work in the midst of the challenges of the real world and it is not going to be easy!

And so I think that we would say, along with Moses, **"If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here."** And the good news I have to share with you today is that God was responsive to Moses' request and so, I believe, God will be responsive to ours. **"The LORD said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.'"** And God's promises are reliable. Moses knew that, and we can know it too.

And yet, Moses knew that there was something more that he needed. He needed to know what would provide for him the reassurance of that presence as they moved on from there. He needed something big, something unmistakable. **"Show me your glory, I pray,"** he cried.

Now, that is what I call a big ask. The glory of the LORD is generally described in scripture as this unmistakable sign of God's presence. In a vision, the prophet Ezekiel describes the glory of the Lord as **"a great cloud with brightness around it and fire flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like gleaming amber."**

Moses was clearly looking for something impressive and unmistakable. That is what we often look for as well, thinking that, such open displays from God would make it so much easier to follow God. And I believe that God understands our desire for that, but knows that things really do not work like that. **"You cannot see my face;"** God says, **"for no one shall see me and live."**

Now, I can't really claim that I understand this idea that humans can't stand to see the face of God. It seems that it would be so wonderful to just have all of the answers and all of the certainty about life the universe and everything simply handed to us on a silver platter so that we never had to doubt it one bit.

But I guess that the problem is that we humans don't really handle such certainty very well. I have noticed that people who are absolutely certain about something that they believe seem to be the ones who are most likely to hurt or abuse others.

I don't think that we, as human beings were really designed to have all the answers because we thrive in the quest to understand and to interpret the world around us. If we just knew the absolute truth, yes, I think there is a real sense in which we simply couldn't handle it. So God says no, I'm not going to just lay it all out there for you in a way that settles everything. But God does say what he will do for Moses, and I think it is what God will also do for us.

**“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.”** So, God promises that he will tell Moses (and us) his name. What does that mean? It obviously means more than what you usually mean by telling somebody else what your name is. The name that God is promising to tell Moses – the name that is translated as “the LORD” is the Hebrew word *Yahweh*. This was considered to be the true and powerful name of God – two syllables that were considered to be so holy that a Jew would not even dare to pronounce them aloud.

But, from what it says in this passage, it is clear that this holy name was like the perfect expression of the character of God and particularly of God's grace. By proclaiming his name, God is declaring to Moses that he is going to be gracious and merciful in his dealings with the people – not because anyone is forcing God to do that, but because that is simply what God's true nature is.

And I think that this is something that we need to hold onto as we head out into the unknown. We may be uncertain about many things in such times, but there is one thing that we can just know. We can know that we can trust in God's never-failing love to be there for us when we need it most because that is just who God is.

Next God says this to Moses. **“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.”** So here we see that not only God's grace but also God's glory are at work in this world, but Moses is strangely sheltered from seeing it. This is something that God does with care, as if Moses is being protected from seeing something by God's own hand.

I believe that this reflects the simple fact that we often do not see God at work in this world while that work is ongoing. You see, when God is at work, the result can often be rather disruptive. God's calls for justice, for example, can often lead to reactions like protests and civil disobedience. These are activities that are, in their very nature, designed to stir up chaos and make things seem very uncomfortable. This is what is sometimes necessary to bring about genuine change. But chaos and disorder have the effect of making people

feel bad or nervous or upset. Nobody likes to have their lives disturbed by such things!

And this can be exactly why we often fail to recognize that God is actually at work in the world. We become focussed on the things that are making us feel uneasy and we find it so difficult to look at the bigger picture of what may really be going on. This passage in Exodus suggests to me that this might just be by design – that God is covering us over with his hand at such times to spare us the difficult transitions. For this or whatever reason, it can be particularly difficult for us to perceive the great works that God performs while they are happening. That is why God offers one more reassurance to Moses.

Once God has passed Moses by as he stands in the cleft in the rock, God promises a very special glimpse: **“Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”** Now what exactly does that mean. It means that we may not always understand exactly what God is doing in this world while that work is ongoing, but we will be able to look back afterward and realize that, yes, God has indeed passed this way.

This is indeed how God most commonly reveals God’s presence with us. We will often only see where and how God has been at work after the events have passed and we can look back on them and see what has happened and what the impact of those things might be.

I think that this is a particular comfort right now with everything that is going on. As we contemplate the deadly impact of this virus, as we look at the political chaos that continually overflows in the United States, as we watch meaningful and yet disruptive protests in the streets, it is easy to get discouraged and to think that everything is only spiraling out of control and getting worse and worse.

But I suspect that the feelings of hopelessness we may have in such times are actually there because God is hiding us within a cleft in the rock. The day will come and it will come soon when what God has been working on quietly in the dark will be brought to light and the hope that results will be for all of us. We will be able to look back on these very days and recognize exactly what God has been doing. And what God does is good and bright and life affirming.

It is hard to move forward at a time like this. Everything seems so uncertain and there are no guarantees. I hope you will take comfort in knowing that sometime soon, you will be able to understand by looking back, exactly what the name of the LORD is, the one who is gracious and merciful because that is God’s very nature.