

Looking for the Face of God

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Exodus 33:12-23

"You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."

Do you have something to hide? Do you have something in your past that you may not want others to know about or be aware of? We all have something, we all have skeletons in our closets, things that we have done that we may be ashamed about. A politician's worst nightmare is when an investigator finds out about his or her one night of bad judgment, careless speech, or moment of impropriety. Do you have something to hide? Maybe there are days when you feel like, *The Fugitive*, always on the run, hiding your true identity and your past from every one you meet. Maybe you feel like you are always looking over your shoulder, like you are in a witness protection program. Do you have something that you are ashamed of, something to hide?

When we find Moses, he has something that he would like to hide. Just a few verses ago, Moses went down from Mt. Sinai and found his people, the Israelites gathered around a golden calf, worshipping the statue as if it were God. Just a few verses ago, Moses pleaded with God who was intent on wiping out these disloyal, untrusting, and sinful people. All around this mountain, Moses saw the Israelites turn against God, and God find their actions offensive. You can imagine that Moses wanted to put these offensives, the chapter of his story behind him and move forward. You can imagine that Moses wanted to hide this part of his past. Maybe that is why there is such fear and passion and insistency in his plea to God. For God has told Moses that he still must lead the people out of the wilderness. God has told Moses that he still must speak for the people and speak to the people for God. But Moses is scared and uncertain because of the recent sinful actions of his people.

We should join Moses with his fear and uncertainty, shouldn't we. We all have something to hide, something to be ashamed of, and we should worry that God might remember our past. Think of the history of Christianity, and we have cause to blush and feel our shame well up. Christianity has been enmeshed with slavery, racism, injustice, pride, war, oppression, and suffering. We have again and again created our own idols to dance and prance around. We have again and again placed our trust in armies, militias and politicians instead of the Lord. We have again and again sought to take power rather than follow the power of the cross.

Look at what the Catholic Church is dealing with right now. Many in that institution tried to hide the sex offensives of the past, and today they are feeling the repercussions legally, financially, and spirituality. And God knows and remembers. The churches in Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant are both partly responsible for the great amount of bloodshed that occurred there. And God knows and remembers. The many, many churches here in the United States that have acted selfishly, that have acted in pride and arrogance at the expense of individuals are too many to count. Oh I have heard so many stories of churches which have treated a pastor and his or her family in a way that was void of any mercy, justice, kindness or love. I have heard so many stories of churches that have treated members of the church or the community in a way that was void of any mercy, justice, kindness or love. And God knows and remembers. The historian Justo L. Gonzalez states in the introduction to *The Story of Christianity*, "Throughout the centuries, some sought to witness by the word spoken and written, others by prayer and renunciation, and still others by the force of arms and the threat of inquisitorial fires." Do we have something to hide, a past we are ashamed of? For God knows and remembers. We all can find ourselves on the mountain top with Moses, pleading, hoping, and wondering if God will really be with us as we venture into the wilderness, into the world because of that which we have been, what we have done, and where we have come from. Can you see yourself there, hoping that God will forget our past, hoping that God won't bring it up?

But God instead offers a hopeful future. God responds to Moses' instant pleading for assurance, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." God offers hope that things will get better, that rest will be found. And it isn't just a good night's sleep, but a state of balance, of harmony and peace. Rest and "shalom" have similar roots; they come from a similar idea. So God is not just offering a temporary comfort, but point Moses to where he is going – a place of harmony and peace. And God promises to be with them when they get there.

This is comforting, and hopeful. It is like when a parent promises to be with the child, and the child finds some

peace in that knowledge. Even if the child isn't hold onto the parent's hand, he or she finds some security when he or she is able to see the parent. The parent's presence gives hope and assurance to the child. That is the vision God gives to Moses and to us. That we will one day be at a place where harmony and peace is known and experienced, and where we know God will be present. It is King's "I have a dream," speech, a speech that speaks to a vision and a hope far off, but God is giving it to us as a reality. It is the dream we yearn and long for, and God offers and promises it as a place where we will someday dwell. Like a sculpture taking a mass of clay, lumpy, ugly and cracked, and promising to make that clay into a piece of art more beautiful than we can imagine, God has promised us the glory land.

Isn't this hopeful for us, this promise? Isn't it hopeful to know that God will bring us to a place where we will no longer struggle as a church? Isn't it good to know that we will someday be a church where we will truly love each other, care for each other, and look out for each other without any pride, greed, or ill will getting in the way. Isn't it good to know that we will someday be a church where God's presence is always felt and assured? Isn't it good to believe that people will one day walk by this church and say with conviction, "that is a place where God dwells?" Isn't it great to imagine, and believe that all churches that follow the Lord will someday be at that place? What hope, what blessed assurance, and what a conviction that God gives to us.

We are at the mountain with Moses, wondering if God is going to leave us, hoping God will forgive us, and God offers us the promise of rest and presence. God will not leave us, or punish us, but bring us to a place of shalom, and holiness. Can we find peace, solace, and assurance in God's answer to our anxieties and our questions?

No. We are still anxious with Moses, because we still have to get there. We still have to wander through the wilderness to reach this Promised Land, and getting there still seems so hard. God has offered us a nice promise, a nice vision, and we can see through the looking glass, but do we really want to take the plunge into what may be the unknown. Can we take the risk and go to this promise land? You know what it is like to take this kind of risk – it is a risk that calls for responsibility, for accountability and for sacrifice. Like becoming a parent, all of a sudden someone else relies on you, and your decisions matter. Like leading a team, a company, a committee, all of a sudden your decisions carry weight and matter. It is moving into an unknown territory, un-chartered, and this anxiety, this risk is similar to the risk Moses perceives God is asking of him.

In the great work by Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, there is a profound moment when he moves from Purgatory to Heaven. Virgil has been his guide through Hell and Purgatory, and informs Dante that at the end of Purgatory he is ready to see heaven, but Virgil will not be able to join him. And just as Dante begins to move from Purgatory to Heaven, Virgil disappears leaving Dante with a feeling of loss, fear and grief. His guide and teacher had left him, and despite all the glory that Heaven offered, the lack of his known security causes Dante to have doubts.

Isn't that what we are afraid of? God may promise to be at the end, despite who we are and what we have done, but will God be with us as we go there? Will God accompany us down the mountain and through the wilderness? Will God go with us as we try to live into the vision we are given? Will God be with us as we claim to be God's chosen people? Will God be with us as we say "no" to the temptations of the world? Will God be with us as we are mocked and rebuked by the world because our conviction to follow God? There is too much work to be done. You see, to get to God's promise of rest and peace, we have to grow into the community that we are called to be, we have to be different, separate and often country to the world. When God called the Israelites his people, such a claim made them distinct; so it is with us.

Remember that invitation to the banquet last week? Don't you wonder with Moses if God will be with you as you dine with the least of society? Don't you wonder with Moses if God will be with you as you work towards the promised land? Don't you wonder with Moses if God will be with you as you face further hardships and trails and temptations? We are anxious despite God's promise, because in the here and now, we are not yet, and still have to get there.

God offer further assurance, that we will be known and named by God, and we will declare God's name, and that God will know our name. We forget how powerful it is to know someone by name. We forget what that means. There is something intimate about knowing someone's name. When you become friends with someone on a first name basis, or when you learn someone's middle name – it denotes a deeper level in the relationship. Maybe you have seen the very beginning of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. In the beginning of this movie, the Sundance Kid is playing poker and accused of cheating. The accuser seems pretty sure of himself, until he hears Sundance's name. The name says who Sundance really is, what he can do – a fast and ruthless gunman. Through his name, he is known. On the Appalachian Trail most everyone who is hiking has a trail name. It is an alias that people use. But when you learn the real name of the hiker, you have learned an intimate part of that person's life – you know that person in a way that others do not.

This is God's promise to Moses and to us, that God will know us and our name; God will know who we are. God

will know our desires, our concerns, and our anxieties in an intimate and profound way. God is promising not just to be waiting for us in the promise land, but will be with us as we go there, guiding us, leading us and protecting us. God will walk with us as a family member, as a parent, as a spouse – God will not leave us, but knows our names, our being, our very essence. Can we now leave the security of the mountain, and begin to walk with God? Can we move on now with the assurance that God not only promises to lead us to a promise land, but also promises to be with us on the way there? Can Moses and us finally trust God?

Maybe, but Moses pushes it still a little further. “I need to know for sure! I need to see your grace and experience your glory!” This is the cry of Moses, and isn’t it our cry as well. You know God will be with you, but don’t you want the full, deep and real assurance that God’s presence can offer. Just let us see for a moment, Lord. Just let us glimpse at your presence and your face. We want proof, we want to see, touch and feel. It is when things are so difficult, so insurmountable, and so unbelievable that we need to have the proof that God will be with us. Like doubting Thomas, we can’t just rely upon good stories, we can’t just rely upon the witness account. No, we need to see, touch and feel God.

Moses is standing on the mountain top, he is still thinking about the way the people have turned from God, and he really needs to know that God will stay with them. He needs more assurance, more hope, and more promise than God’s words have offered thus far. You have been in that place before, haven’t you? When you have suffered so much that just reading the Bible, just talking to other Christians, just resting in hope isn’t enough. No, you need to see and know, you need proof that God will be with you.

As a church we find ourselves on the mountain top, we find ourselves wondering if God is indeed going to stay with us, and be with us. Have you ever asked for proof? Just this week it felt like the building was crashing down around me. It felt like the problems of this church were becoming insurmountable, and I turned to God – show me your face in all of this, God! I have heard that God is with us, I have seen the effects of God’s presence, but this time, this time I wanted to see God’s face.

This is Moses’ persistence on the mountain top. He wouldn’t let go, because he was so scared that he needed to see the face of God. He needed that proof, and that assurance. Don’t we also look for the face of God? In those times of anguish when we are surrounded by fears, we cry out – show me your face, God.

But we have been promised the glory land. We have been assured that God will be with us, and knows our name. Has it gotten so difficult, so hard that we need more, that we need that proof? Are you crying out with Moses for God’s glory to be fully revealed, and for God’s face to be fully known?

God responds, God hears and answers. God’s goodness will be around us, we will see God’s grace and God’s mercy, but we will not see God’s face. We will not get the proof, the evidence, and the privilege that we desire. We will not get to see God’s face. God is clear - those who receive mercy will receive mercy. Those who receive grace will receive grace. Goodness will go before us, will be with us, but God’s face, God’s true glory will not be seen. That is the promise land. That is the final day when Christ returns and heaven and earth are one - and that is not today. Instead, God is calling Moses, and is calling us to trust. We are to follow God, to walk with God to the Promised Land and trust that God’s goodness is sufficient. We are to follow the goodness before us, rest in the hope for God’s grace and mercy, and trust that God’s promises are sufficient. We can’t live as if our actions will bring about God’s face.

I know churches (and we may fall into this trap from time to time) that have events for the sake of their own glory. They would have a concert so people could see how great the organ is. They would offer a dinner so people could see how good the food is. Preaching, building, whatever can be shown off is - and now instead of looking for the face of God we are trying to replace it. We aren’t called to impress people. We aren’t called to dazzle people with our depiction of God’s face. No, we are called to follow God into the wilderness, and into the promise land. So anything we do, we do it to serve our brothers and sisters, to share with our brothers and sisters, and to listen to our brothers and sisters. With humility we turn to the community around us, and declare that we have not seen the face of God. We have not viewed that glory, but we are following God’s goodness. We are trusting in God’s mercy. And then invite them to take that risk and walk with us.

This is the challenge, that we have faith and trust in God. The challenge is to know that God has indeed covered our eyes and walked before us. The challenge is to know that God has indeed been in this place and God’s goodness is evidence of the holy presence. The challenge is to rest in the evidence of God, not the face of God and know that God’s goodness will be sufficient. Can you let go of your fear, your anxiety, and your need for certainty? Can you let go of your worries, your despair and go down the mountain with Moses, down the mountain with God, and continue to walk into the wilderness? God is before you, guiding you, and waiting for you in the Promised Land. Ask God to open your eyes to the

evidence of God's goodness. Ask God to open your eyes to the road we must take. Ask God to open your eyes to the suffering that needs tending. Ask God to open your eyes to the love that needs sharing. God will lead you and guide you to offer the grace and the mercy that we experience from our Holy Lord. Trust in God, and you will see God's face in the Promised Land.

AMEN