

Pastor's Message – 10/18/20
Exodus 33:12-23

Several years ago, I co-lead a small group study on the book and the movie: "The Shack." In the book and the movie, God is portrayed as a black woman, Jesus as a middle eastern man and the Holy Spirit as an Asian woman. Those portrayals caused some controversy.

However, this is far from the first time that God has been portrayed in unconventional ways. In the movie from the 1970's, "O God," John Denver met God in the form of George Burns. In "Dogma," God was Alanis Morissette walking on her hands in a garden. Morgan Freeman was God in "Bruce Almighty." People have been trying to portray God in paintings and sculpture and drawings since the beginning of time.

Our Bible reading for today is part of a story told in two parts, with the opening scene set by last week's story. The people of Israel, in last week's lectionary reading from Exodus, have made themselves a golden calf to worship. Moses is away on the mountain chatting with God and the people grow restless and fearful down below. A golden calf seems like the perfect object for worship -- visible, not likely to wander off, permanent and eternally the same. God had promised to lead the people, but the Hebrews had begun to doubt that promise. It is a hard thing to follow a God that we cannot see.

To me, this story speaks of the indescribable, indefinable nature of God, the mystery of God's presence. We love to sing that great old hymn "In the Garden," where it says, "He walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own." I truly wish my relationship with God were as straightforward as that. But I usually only get a glimpse of God out of the corner of my eye. Someone has said that faith is what you do between the last time you experienced God and the next time you experience God. Those who are honest about their faith admit that they are like Moses, seeing only the backside of God.

I suspect that none of us wants to "go it alone." Life is complex, and often exhausting. This has been the experience of Israel in the wilderness, and it is our experience as well. We may wonder who is there, who is with us, and who will give us rest. Like Israel, we may want to see God's face, to sense that God is truly with us. "*How do we know?*" surely must be among the most common questions that we cry out in our doubt and frustration. How do we know that God is with us? How do we know that God loves us?

How do we know what God wants us to do? How do we know what God expects from us?

It was so hard for the Israelites that they asked for a golden calf to worship even after God had manifested Himself in many visible ways. God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt through the miraculous works demonstrated by Moses and Aaron. God had led them through the wilderness by providing a pillar of cloud by day and a fire by night. God had fed them with manna from heaven and quenched their thirst by having Moses strike the rock at Horeb. God had clearly been present and visible! And yet, still the people did not feel God's presence. Still they wanted more.

Moses needed to know, for his own sake and for the sake of the people, that God would surely be with them on this next leg of their journey. God had provided cloud, pillar, manna and quail as tangible signs of God's presence from Egypt to Sinai. Would God continue to provide such signs for the more challenging journey through deserts and into hostile territory they would have to fight for to possess?

It was not an unreasonable question. God had, after all, recently said the Presence would not accompany the people (33:3) but sent an angel to do the job instead. And as we have already seen, the attitude of the people toward departing was not exactly positive, optimistic, confident, or hopeful.

God apparently had a change of heart and said, "I will personally go with you, Moses, and I will give you rest" (33:14).

Moses wanted more than words. He wanted to see God's glory. And God complied, allowing Moses to see the "afterglow" as the Presence passed by and sheltering Moses in the cleft of a rock where he could witness this without seeing the Face of God, something he could not see and survive.

So Moses was assured of God's abiding presence through the next leg of the journey.

Some things are simply too powerful for us to gaze upon. Even in nature, there are instances of phenomena that when looked at cause blindness. Take, for example, looking directly at a solar eclipse. Even when the disk of the sun is partially covered, looking directly at it, especially with telescopic equipment, can damage the retinas in a fraction of a second, even leading to blindness. Also, snow blindness is a temporary yet painful blindness caused by looking at the reflection of sunlight in the snow.

These things are pale shadows of the blinding glory of God. We see time and again in the scriptures descriptions of how awesome God's glory really is. It is too much for our mortal eyes and minds to take. As God told Moses, "for no one may see me and live." (v. 20) It's important to realize just

how great and awesome the God we serve really is.

Like Moses, we can't see God's face and live. It wouldn't be best for us. To see God's face means to behold what lies ahead of us. Frankly, if we knew all of what's ahead of us, we would probably die of shock! So God offers us protection. As Moses moved next to the LORD's side, he felt God's hand directing him to a cleft in the rock.

Whatever Moses saw when he saw God's back, it was enough to sustain him as he picked himself up to continue his long journey toward the Promised Land. In the twists and turns of our lives, in the exhilarating but frustrating work of the church, God will give us just enough presence that we know we are not alone. With that glimpse of God's back, we can put one foot in front of the other on our journeys. If we can hold on to the glimpses of God's back, we can face what the future holds with courage. Wherever life leads us, God will go with us. Even when we're lost, God offers help with direction and getting us where we need to go.

I still have some paper maps in the glove box of my car, but I haven't used them for years; I sometimes wonder why I keep them. Sometimes I will still print out directions from MapQuest or Google maps when I am going somewhere unfamiliar, but, more and more, I rely on the GPS in my phone.

A map can be helpful. We would like God to give us a map with the path for our journey that God wants us to take. A map provides clear, unmistakable information for us to follow to get to the destination he has in mind for us.

Sometimes a guide can be more helpful than a map. It's easier to listen to the voice from the GPS giving turn by turn directions and advance notice of a turn coming up. Instead of fumbling with a paper map or a computer printout and trying to watch for signs, and see the sights at the same time, following a guide can enable us to enjoy the adventure more. We simply follow the guide and hear him or her talk about the significant features of the places we visit. We can rest in the assurance that the guide will take us where we need to go and will keep us from places that would be a waste of our time. Who wouldn't prefer a guide over a map?

When we pray, we tend to ask God for a map because it's easy for us to use it in our effort to please him. But he prefers to give us a guide because it makes the journey more rewarding.

Of course, God is the guide. We can rest assured that He will lead us where we need to go, and He will keep us from places that won't be good for us or guide us through them so we can arrive at our destination safe and

sound. God goes with us through life, every step of the way, guiding us along and never leaving us for one minute. Like Moses, we enjoy God's abiding presence because he's our friend. In the presence of the Almighty, our souls find rest. We need have no apprehension because God is near.

Speaking of God's back side: the whole of the Christian life is about following. Jesus says "*Follow me.*" If you follow somebody, what you see is precisely their back side!

Moses is not sure He can trust God. He asks Him twice in our Bible reading today if God will be there. To encourage Moses, God says:

1. I look favorably on you, and I know you by name.
2. I will personally go with you, Moses.
3. I will give you rest—everything will be fine for you.

The good news is that God is saying the same things to us. If we seek the LORD, if we want the LORD to be the center of our lives, the LORD will say to us, as he did to Moses:

1. I look favorably on you, and I know you by name.
2. I will personally go with you.
3. I will give you rest—everything will be fine for you.
4. I look favorably on you.

What it means to be "favored" by God is an issue here too. The Hebrews believed that to be "favored" by God meant that they were better than others. But God's favor doesn't mean we are "better" than others, but that we have greater responsibility because we have this sense of God's presence. Jesus says it differently, "When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required." (Luke 12.48) We have seen God's backside. He has walked with us "in the garden." People can see that we know God.

That changes us and gives us the privilege and opportunity to participate in the Presence of God? When you do the laundry, you can pray for the girl who wears that shirt or the boy who wears that jersey. When you drive to work, you can pray for your client, boss or co—worker or even the other drivers on the road. When you pay your utility bills, you can thank God that you are warm and sheltered and fed. When you pay your taxes, you can thank God that you have freedom of religion, and pray for those who rule over you.

Seeing God's backside, we can be reassured that God goes before us, offering direction and leading us along the way. Having seen God's backside and following God, we can lead others to see God as well.