

Facing God

Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz

Date: October 16, 2011

00:00

About once a month at my former church I would teach middle school Sunday School. One Sunday, during a holiday weekend, I had only one middle school student in class with me. She had just moved to town and was having those normal teenage struggles, coupled with the fact that she was the new kid in town.

We talked about school and about life and our families and God and I asked her to draw a picture of God and left her to her own devices for awhile. We both shared our pictures—mine was more abstract and I attempted to depict God in nature. I wanted her to think about God as more than just that Santa Claus figure in the sky we sometimes get taught as young children, that's what the lesson was about—all these various images we have of God.

But she did me proud—her picture was simply two people holding hands. She explained it by saying that when people are friendly and welcoming and when people really love each other, God is always there. So she thinks of God as loving relationships between and among people. I was blown away that this young woman was already beginning to think of God a little differently than she may have been taught as a little girl, to think of God a little bit more on her own terms, to find an image that is really meaningful for her.

I was thinking of this experience because as we continue on with Exodus today, I can't help but notice that Moses does this a little bit too. We always think of Moses as so faithful and always listening to God. But Moses is a bit demanding in this passage and seeks to know God differently than even God may present God's own self. Moses is alone with God on the mountain and he says, "Show me your glory, I pray." Moses has the guts to ask for God on his own terms and ask for God's full self revelation. Moses may be seeking a deeper understanding here, and actually he yearns to see God—the Creator of the Universe, the merciful liberator who brought the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, the great I AM as God really is.

This story isn't really new. How often does humanity want to have the Divine revealed to us, to have the answers laid out so we can understand but also to do all that a little bit on our terms? In some respects, we want to be met where we are. I think we're curious by nature and are constantly seeking to figure the world out. We also are constantly seeking proof and reassurances of our beliefs.

As I was exploring this passage, I also discovered that there's a Greek myth about this very concept. I told you I really like Greek and Roman mythology last week, and I shared one of my favorite stories—about Orpheus trying to rescue Eurydice from the Underworld and failing in his quest. He looked back too quickly when he knew he wasn't supposed to and he loses Eurydice forever.

This week I discovered that the Old Testament scholar Everett Fox compares our story today to a Greek myth I had never even heard before about a priestess named Semele and Zeus, the father of all the gods and humanity.

The version of the myth I found says that Semele, who was a priestess of Zeus, was one day slaughtering a bull at his altar and then she jumped into a river to wash off the blood—gross, I know. Zeus happened to be flying by in the guise of an eagle and he fell in love with her—Zeus did this all the time, by the way. Semele ended up pregnant and Hera, Zeus' wife, found out. This happens all the time in Greek mythology too; remember I said it's like a soap opera? Hera

always finds out about Zeus' love affairs and then plots the downfall of the "other woman" — she should have been plotting the downfall of Zeus if you ask me, but that's fine.

Hera, the queen of the Greek gods and goddesses, dresses herself up as an old woman and befriends Semele. Semele confides in Hera that she is expecting a baby with Zeus. So Hera starts planting some seeds of doubt that the father is actually Zeus, and Semele asks him to grant her a wish so she can know he really is Zeus. Zeus promises on the River Styx (an unbreakable promise) to grant her any request.

Semele demands to see Zeus in all his glory as proof of his godhood. That was the term used, the same as the term in our Old Testament story from Exodus—Zeus "in all his glory." Interesting, right? Zeus begs her not to ask this of him, but she insists. He tries to spare her by only showing her the smallest of his lightning bolts and the smallest thunderstorm cloud, but mortals can't look upon Zeus without being incinerated. Poor Semele dies in the story—consumed in a flame of lightning. Zeus somehow saves the baby—he can apparently do that, and the baby ends up being Dionysus, the god of wine and merry making.

Obviously this Greek myth doesn't really have a happy ending—again! Semele dies because she demands to see the glory of Zeus. The Hebrew version of this concept is a bit more vague, and not so tragic. Moses desires more than God was giving him originally. He pushes the envelope a little, he tests the boundary. He knows he can't really stare God directly in the face, but maybe God can show Moses what his heart desires. Maybe Moses in his own way wanted God to prove that God is really as glorious as Moses is hoping and wishing.

We should be having a flashback to the Garden of Eden in this passage. In Genesis, Adam and Eve see God, they talk to God, and God walks around with them in the Garden! Right after Adam and Eve eat the fruit, they make makeshift clothes for themselves and they attempt to hide from God. The best verse is "They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze." [1] My Old Testament professor insisted that God was humming, that's the sound Adam and Eve heard. Can you imagine? Adam and Eve hear God humming as God strolls in the Garden and they hide because they're ashamed of what they've just done?

So in some ways, this story in Exodus 33 is almost a temporary reversal of Eden. God tells Moses, "You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live." So God can't necessarily go strolling along the mountain with Moses, humming as God goes. But then God devises this plan—I'm going to put you in this cleft of rock and I'm going to cover you with my hand until I walk past you. Then I'll take away my hand and you can see my back, but you can't see my face. And considering the fact that this works out just fine and Moses doesn't die like poor Semele in the Greek myth, I'd say it was a successful mission after all. We can't really mistake Moses for being back in the Garden of Eden, but Moses gets more of a glimpse of the entire essence of God than anybody has in a long time.

One of the best contemporary examples I've ever seen of someone wanting and seeking the glory of God, yearning to see God face to face, but also somehow needing God on your own terms is from the movie *Forrest Gump*. I always appreciated Lt. Dan, Forrest's Army commander in Vietnam. Forrest saves Lt. Dan and a bunch of his fellow soldiers during combat, but Lt. Dan has to have his legs partly amputated because of his battle wound. He loses them from the knee down on both legs and he becomes incredibly embittered—turning to alcohol and drugs to numb the pain.

At one point, he asks Forrest, "Have you found Jesus yet, Gump?" And Forrest responds, "I didn't know I was supposed to be looking for him, sir." Lt. Dan remarks that he deals with

these people all the time at the VA who talk about finding Jesus and it seems to ring hollow for him.

Once Forrest is a shrimping boat captain, I'm skipping over a lot of things in between so you need to watch the movie; Lt. Dan shows up to be his First Mate as promised. They're having absolutely no luck whatsoever in finding and catching shrimp and Lt. Dan sullenly suggests Forrest prays. Forrest begins to go to church every week and sings in the choir and occasionally Lt. Dan comes too, sitting in the back pew just looking angry.

One night, they get caught in a hurricane and that's when it gets really interesting. Lt. Dan sits on top of the mast of their boat and is screaming at the top of his lungs in the middle of this storm, laughing and seemingly taunting God. He says, "It's time for a showdown, you and me, I'm right here—come and get me!"

At the end of the hurricane, only one boat survives—Forrest's and Lt. Dan's. They end up catching tons of shrimp and having a successful shrimping business—everything turns around for them that night. Lt. Dan faced up to God and probably his own demons . . . and he won. In a poignant scene, Lt. Dan finally thanks Forrest for saving his life in Vietnam and jumps off the boat into the water, swimming peacefully with a beautiful sunset above him. Forrest narrates, "He never actually said so, but I think he made his peace with God."

I think that the teenager from my former church, Semele, Moses, and Lt. Dan all in their own ways and using their own methods were striving to come face to face with God, with the Divine, with Ultimate Reality. They were seeking God on their own terms, wanting to understand and have some proof of their beliefs and the deep longings of their hearts.

And just as God responds so graciously to Moses' request, I think God responds that way to all of us too—that God does reveal God's own self. God has devised a way for us to experience the abundant love God has for all of creation and all of humanity. In Christianity we would point to Jesus, that in Jesus Christ, God does come face to face with humanity again. Or maybe we can say that all people experience the glory of God through the love we have for one another or through facing up to God and making some meaning out of life even by screaming at the top of our lungs in the middle of a storm. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Genesis 3:8