

Show Me Your Glory!
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“Show Me Your Glory!” Pilgrim Church UCC October 19, 2014 (Exodus 33:12-23)

There's an old story about a set of twin boys. One is an optimist and the other is a pessimist. A psychiatrist wants to understand how this plays out in their lives and consider the whole nature vs. nurture deal. So he puts the pessimist in a room full of toys by himself to see what happens. The boy just ends up whining and crying after a while, bored and frustrated. The psychiatrist then puts the optimist in a room full of horse manure and gives him a shovel. A few hours pass and the psychiatrist checks on the optimistic boy only to find him still shoveling with a huge smile on his face. Why was he so happy? The boy responded, "With all this manure, there's gotta be a pony in here somewhere!"[1]

There are times when it feels like we are in a room by ourselves staring at a huge pile of manure and some helpful person gives us a shovel and then leaves us to it. How we respond is entirely on us. We've been wandering with the Israelites this Fall. And it seems like God often gives Moses a shovel and says, "Okay, pal, you're up. It's on you." Sure, God may give the shovel—an essential tool to address the mess. But at the end of the day it feels like the call is on people like us to get to work. And where is God in the midst of us dealing with this mess?

Today we hear a tale about the presence of God, about Moses and God on the mountain. We hear about where God is when we deal with our lives in shambles. We always think of Moses as so faithful, but Moses is demanding to know God differently than even God presents God's own self. In Exodus Chapter 33, Moses is alone with God and says, "Show me your glory, I pray." [2] Moses has the guts or in Hebrew the *hutzpah* to ask for God's full self-revelation. Moses yearns to see God—the Creator of the Universe, the great I AM. After everything Moses has been through, after the long hours of shoveling and looking for that elusive pony in there somewhere, there's this moment where Moses turns to God and says, "Can I see you for real now, can you give me more of you? Please?"

What Moses shows is a whole lot of daring in his insistent prayer. Really, he first asks to know God's ways, then to see God's face, then to see God's glory. As scholar Walter Brueggemann says, "This model of Jewish prayer offers much to learn for Christians, whose piety is characteristically too deferential." Moses' prayer is intense and concerned with the presence of God. It's also envelope-pushing and then respectful when a boundary becomes clear.[3] But it's not just praising God for all the ways God is great. Moses asks earnestly—can I know your ways, can I see your face, can I see your glory? This is not an, "O God, I am not worthy" prayer. This is—I want to know you better, I want to have a true relationship with you—can you be more open to me?

As Christians, we do have so much to learn about this story of God and Moses conversing on the mountain. God tells Moses, "You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live." [4] But then, after enough pushing and prodding and envelope-pushing prayers God devises a 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. Moses asks to see God for real, and God responds in a gentle, protective way. Yet even Moses, after all he's been through, even then Moses doesn't get around some of the mysteries of God. Moses wants definitive answers. Moses gets the abiding presence of God.

Last week when we talked about the Golden Calf, I shared that when I picture God I don't picture a golden baby cow. (And that I don't even like cows except to eat.) I heard from a few of you afterwards who were slightly offended that I'm not a fan of cows, and that's fine. Sorry I'm not sorry. However, my point was—when we picture God—who or what comes to mind? How do we explain God for ourselves? If we care about deepening our faiths, developing our spiritualities, knowing more about God and Christianity, then it's important to consider some of our individual beliefs about God.

I've asked these God questions many times of youth in Confirmation and Sunday School. At my former church, I taught Middle School Sunday School once a month and on a holiday weekend ended up having only one student in class. She had just moved to town and was having normal teenage struggles, coupled with the fact that she was the new kid. We talked about school and life and God, and we drew pictures of what we think God looks like. Mine was more abstract as I attempted to depict God in nature and as a more Spiritual Being or Force rather than a human figure. The lesson was about various images of God in the Bible after all, so I chose to draw something to emphasize that perhaps God is different than the Santa Claus figure in the sky we see in popular culture. Her picture was two people holding hands, and she explained that when people are friendly and welcoming and love each other, God is always there. She thinks of God as loving relationships among people. This student was already imagining God on her own terms, finding an image that is meaningful by picturing connectedness in humanity as a symbol of God. It's the idea that to love another person is to see the face of God.

These spiritual exercises are important in our faith developments. Even if we get to a place where we can be like Moses and ask God to help us go deeper, for the ability to see God and understand God's ways and how God works in the world, there will always be mystery here. We won't get our every question answered. Because God is God and we are not. Because there's a part of God that's unknowable, inscrutable. And God holds in tension self-giving and the self-reserve that makes self-giving possible in the first place.[5] But just because we may not get instant answers, it doesn't mean that we don't ask the questions on our hearts.

Moreover, in healthy relationships/partnerships/marriages even, there's intimacy and togetherness and yet the two probably shouldn't become the same exact person, with partners completely losing themselves in the union. My sister's getting married in June and just this week I received some of my instructions as a Bridesmaid about wedding colors, options for hairstyles, the bridesmaid's dress, down to what color shoes I can wear on the big day. And I'm officiating the wedding ceremony, so there's that. Maureen's upcoming marriage has been on my radar and it's especially interesting to hear the advice people give to newlyweds. Author Lydia Netzer speaks to how to make a marriage last and advises couples to both do their own things at times. Netzer relates that her husband "Dan races bicycles. I write books. I don't race bicycles or have any desire to race bicycles. He doesn't write books, nor does he even read the books that I write. Seriously. And I don't care. My opinion is that he's the fastest, coolest most awesome bike racer ever. His opinion is that I'm the bestest, coolest writer ever." [6]

This Exodus story with Moses and God, believe it or not, can help us frame our personal relationships. God and Moses don't completely meld into the same being even in the midst of real intimacy. There's that tension of self-giving and self-reserve that makes for a good and whole relationship. In the end, Moses doesn't get to see God's face or God's glory, but Moses gets to be in God's presence. It's a relationship based on abiding compassion that lasts the tests of time.

The great Christian theologian Henri Nouwen emphasized that God is a God of compassion. It's true that there are some things about God that we can't understand. It's also true that there are things that we can know about God based on these sacred stories we hold close and our

own experiences of holiness. If anyone could speak to our God of compassion from personal religious experiences, it was Henri Nouwen. He was a Roman Catholic priest, a writer and thinker, and taught at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard. What a slacker, right? Yet, Nouwen eventually left the academic world to live alongside people with developmental difficulties. Some folks thought that he was crazy for stepping away from academia, but he wanted to live out all he taught about solidarity with the poor. He believed that more important than any answer to all our questions is simply being aware that we can be in the presence of a deeply compassionate God who cares about us.

Nouwen wrote, "By calling God Immanuel, we recognize God's commitment to live in solidarity with us, to share our joys and pains, to defend and protect us, and to suffer all of life with us. The God-with-us is a close God, a God whom we call our refuge, our stronghold, our wisdom, and even, more intimately, our helper, our shepherd, our love . . . The mystery of God's love is not that our pain is taken away, but that God first wants to share that pain with us. Out of this divine solidarity comes new life." [7]

In Christianity, we worship a God who is right in the thick of things with us. We worship a God who promises, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." [8] We also worship a God whom it seems gives us a shovel and tells us to get to work if we have any hope of finding that pony. Yet God doesn't leave us to shovel the mess alone since God intimately shares our pains and our joys. And out of this divine solidarity, new life truly is ours. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Regina Brett, *God Never Blinks: 50 Lessons for Life's Little Detours*, 95.

[2] Exodus 33:18.

[3] Walter Brueggemann, *Exodus 33:1-23 Reflections*, *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, 942.

[4] Exodus 33:20.

[5] Brueggemann, *Exodus 33:1-23 Reflections*, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 942.

[6] Lydia Netzer, "15 Ways to Stay Married for 15 Years," *Huffington Post*, October 19, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lydia-netzer/marriage-secrets_b_1459770.html

[7] Henri J. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, 12 and 16.

[8] Exodus 33:14.