

A Glimpse of God  
Exodus 33:12-23  
May 24, 2020  
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Good morning! It is so nice to be with you this morning. I have said many times how much I wish I could be both at my church and at First Presbyterian at the same time. Now, with the miracle of Zoom technology, it is possible! There is no substitute to being together, but I'm glad we can share these few moments virtually anyway.

*Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." "But," God said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." And the Lord continued, "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; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."*  
Exodus 33:18, 20-23

What if God said during these days, "You will find yourselves in the midst of a terrible pandemic, and during these days, you will also find *me* in the midst of the pandemic? Does that sound paradoxical? Hardly. As people of faith, we can affirm both are true. How could it be any other way?

Some people may feel today that God is nowhere to be found. As the Jesuit priest James Martin notes in a recent New York Times article, "Even the most religious people ask me: Why is this happening? And: Where is God in all of this? Martin continues:

*The question is essentially the same that people ask when a hurricane wipes out hundreds of lives or when a single child dies from cancer. It is called the "problem of suffering," "the mystery of evil" or the "theodicy," and it's a question that saints and theologians have grappled with for millenniums. The question of "natural" suffering (from illnesses or natural disasters) differs from that of "moral evil" (in which suffering flows from the actions of individuals — think Hitler and Stalin). But leaving aside theological distinctions, the question now consumes the minds of millions of believers, who rail at steadily rising death tolls, struggle with stories of physicians forced to triage patients and recoil at photos of rows of coffins: Why?*

(James Martin, "Where Is God in a Pandemic?" New York Times, March 22, 2020).

It is an honest question, and one that is difficult if not impossible to answer. What people wouldn't give for even a glimpse of God right about now. Personally, I believe God chose to give up power and control, and demonstrated this in the person of Jesus, who came as a suffering servant to show us the true nature of God, but that's another discussion for another time. You can read more this line of thought in Philippians 2:6-11.

Regardless of theological perspective, some people have said that they have felt God's presence in the midst of the pandemic, and remarked that they would not be able to make it through such a time as this without God in their midst. I've even read a couple blogs where people said, "My faith and spirituality has grown more in this time of pandemic than at any other time during my life." That's quite a statement.

If people have more time, and they are using it read, write, pray or meditate, perhaps we can understand why. Yet some may not see it. Like a lot of things, it depends upon where you look. It's not just the "devil's in the details," as the old aphorism states, but God . . . God is in the details as well.

In fact, the presence of God in daily life can surround us in a thousand different ways, yet we may hardly even notice – if we're too busy . . . if we're caught up in daily routines . . . if we take things for granted, or if we don't know where to look.

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In today's reading, Moses worried about many of these same things. He was summoned by God to lead God's people out of captivity. He was worried about who else God would send to help him accomplish this monumental undertaking. Moses was wondering if he himself would be enough to carry out this mission. Moses proclaimed -- and I can imagine him almost yelling at God, maybe even shaking his fist -- "Show me your ways . . . show me your glory. That's what I need."

And then God answered in a very different way than Moses was expecting. Maybe that's the way most prayers are answered. God said, you know Moses, no one can ever look at God's face and live. Imagine the sun magnified a thousand times, and you begin to get a sense of God's brilliance. We could not survive.

So God said, this is what I will do for you, Moses. I will be passing by your way in all my glory. There is this rock. Go and stand on the rock, and when I pass by, I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

We are not told if Moses was disappointment. It really didn't matter. God put a hand over the face of Moses so he could not see, and after God passed, Moses was able to see God's back, perhaps it was barely a shadow.

It was a glimpse of God. That's all Moses got, but it must have been all he needed, because we know Moses successfully led God's people out of slavery and to the Promised Land. It was a glimpse. Not a full frontal view. Not face-to-face. Just a glimpse as God passed by.

Today during these troubled times, we all need a glimpse of God. Let's not be greedy and ask to see God face-to-face like Moses. We want answers. We want solutions, and mainly, we want to know when this terrible pandemic will be over, so we can return to church, return to the company of friends and family, and return to life, whatever that will look like. Certainly it will be different. It will be a new normal. We pray for answers. We pray for miracles, but are granted small glimpses. We may only be afforded minutes or moments of revelation. What were we expecting?

I don't know how long the experience of Moses lasted. Probably not long. But it was enough. Enough for a lifetime of inspiration and ministry. But maybe that's all we need too. Like Moses, we may only catch a glimpse of God in the rearview mirror, or a faint outline of the divine shadow, but imagine what that could mean.

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As a brash and wildly naïve young man, I used to believe and pray for answers to prayer that would strike like a thunderbolt from the sky, and of course that does happen. I prayed for visions and answers that would rival Paul's blinding experience of God on the Damascus road.

But that's not usually how life works, and not usually how God works. Maybe we should be more focused during these challenging times on catching a glimpse or glimmer when God passes by if major epiphanies are in short supply. Maybe that's all we get, but maybe that is enough.

I would rather look for God with a microscope than a telescope. I think that is where God can be found, but that may be hard for many, especially during these times, when patience and perseverance are getting to be in short supply, and we try to force God's hand.

Maybe we're looking in the wrong places, or looking with the wrong set of spectacles. I am reminded of what the prophet Jeremiah said: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." Jer 29.13 Perhaps it comes down to the eyes of the heart. Moses had to be reminded of how to see, and maybe we do too.

I had one profound revelation as an answer to prayer as I mentioned in last week's message about the vision of my dogs in heaven. Most of the time it has been more like a flickering moment or a holy hunch, or a crack of light coming from under the door into a dark room.

Such is God's language. Sometimes it's like we have to play detective to discover the answer to our question, "Well, where did *that* come from? Where is God in that?" Rather most of the time, we have to learn to see in a different manner, and hear in a different language – God's language.

That's why I think meditation and contemplative prayer are so incredibly important. It's not about talking or grasping, but being still and sweeping away the distractions long enough to listen for the voice of God within, or recognizing the faint lines of the nearly invisible when a divine shadow is cast across our path.

If we could learn to be like Moses, maybe we could know where to look for glimpses of God. Our faces would be radiant like the sun, and our most difficult days would be surmountable. If we could catch a glimpse or glimmer of God, we would see that God is always with us, rather than us looking for God.

We used to enjoy making up creative games when I was a kid, and one of those games was showing others a picture or object for a few seconds, and then it was the job of the other players to draw a picture of what they thought they saw for those few seconds. The best players at the game were usually those who remembered the most accurately after just catching a glimpse of the object. Moses would have been good at that. It was probably more of a theological endeavor than a young mind realized when playing that game.

What do we notice today when given just a brief clue by God? That's our job during these days when death and suffering seem everywhere. These are hard days, and there will be more of them ahead.

Yet whatever Moses actually saw, it was enough of God's presence to keep him going – like a cleft in a rock, a divine shadow, a tertiary thought, or a glimpse of the Beloved in passing.

I'm not sure if Moses and his people would have made it to the Promised Land if he had not had that glimpse of God that day while hiding in the rock. But it gave him enough strength and courage to go on, knowing that God would journey with him.

I believe God will give us enough assurance so that we may be a people of hope . . . a people of good courage . . . a people born not only out of hardship, but forged in love as well.

Today you may catch a glimpse of God in the kindness of a stranger, or the tenacity of a nurse working in a covid-19 unit, the will of a teacher as she perseveres in order to make sure her students get what they need through online learning.

Where have you caught a glimpse of God lately? Where would you think to look? Sometimes I think peripheral vision is theological vision. Like Moses, we could not bear the full glory of seeing God face-to-face, but I believe we can see God reflected in the face of others, in fact, maybe that is the best way.

It was enough to know that God was present as Moses continued his long journey toward the Promised Land. When we catch a glimpse of God, it is enough to sustain us, and remind us of why we are here. Sometimes you may only catch a glimpse of God, but most of the time, that is all you will need. Amen.

Exodus 33:12-23

<sup>12</sup> Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' <sup>13</sup> Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." <sup>14</sup> He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." <sup>15</sup> And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. <sup>16</sup> For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

<sup>17</sup> The LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." <sup>18</sup> Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." <sup>19</sup> And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD';<sup>[a]</sup> and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. <sup>20</sup> But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." <sup>21</sup> And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; <sup>22</sup> 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; <sup>23</sup> then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."