

October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020

## Exodus 33:12-23 “The Big Reveal”

We are unbelieving believers--or believing unbelievers. We are mixtures of faith and doubt, trust and skepticism, confidence and suspicion, enchantment and disillusionment. Sometimes our beliefs seem childish. And sometimes our cynicism seems foolish. Most of us are more comfortable talking about the ways we believe than about the uncertainty that we feel, but there's a bit of agnostic in us all.

This ambivalence can be even more distressing for those whose occupations are involved. I have on occasion wondered what would happen if my unbelief ever overcame my belief. What would I do for a living? There aren't a lot of jobs for religion majors with multiple seminary degrees who no longer believe. The last job I had that was open to atheists was as an automobile mechanic. On my final day at the garage, my boss said something along the lines of, "As a mechanic, I hope you're a good preacher."

It's disconcerting that I'm not one hundred percent sure of what I believe one hundred percent of the time. Don't misunderstand. I truly believe, but my experiences never seem to be quite enough to prove what I believe beyond the shadow of a doubt. Like everyone else who has ever taken anything on faith, I'd like to be more certain.

Moses wondered what he would do if his doubt ever overcame his belief. There aren't a lot of jobs for prophets who no longer believe. This story in Exodus is written in no uncertain terms. The writer expresses with concrete words an experience that had to be more like the wind than concrete. If you listen carefully, you hear the rhythm of belief and unbelief, the longing for assurance, the hope of seeing God.

The people of Israel were camped in the desert on their way to the Promised Land. Moses climbed Mount Sinai and came down with the Ten Commandments. He was surprised to discover that the people had

grown restless in his absence. Out of anxiety or homesickness or boredom, they fashioned a golden calf. In spite of the way Cecil B. DeMille jazzed it up with dancing girls and special effects, the idol wasn't meant as an alternative god. It was supposed to be a picture of the distant, faceless God they couldn't picture. The idol was a result of their frustration at not being able to touch or see the one who had been both powerfully present and achingly elusive.

God responds angrily, "I've had it with you Israelites and your constant need for spiritual pacifiers. If you want the kind of God you can see and hold and melt down when you're tired of it, then that's the only kind of God you'll have. You're on your own now. I won't be going anywhere with you. You make me so angry, I could burn you to smithereens. You've tried my patience for the last time."

This could be the end of the road for Israel out there in the wilderness all alone, without even their distant, faceless God to guide them. They're about to be history.

But Moses, like a lot of us, thought God still had some explaining to do. He brashly decides to give God an earful: "Look God, as I remember it, the Exodus was your idea, not ours. These people are your people. You invented them. You called them. They're your problem. I want you to assure me that you're going to take care of this. You have to promise to be with us every step of the way."

We might expect God to reply, "Just who do you think you are, trying to tell me who I am and what I have to do." But instead, God says, "You may have a point. Forget what I said about incinerating everybody. I'll go with you. I've always been a sucker for losers like you. I'll be there every step of the way."

Israel has broken the covenant, been threatened with fire, and then been forgiven again by the God who will not give them up.

You might think that Moses should quit now while he's still ahead, but he thinks he's on a roll. Why stop with half of what he'd hoped for? He might as well push his luck and ask for the whole bundle. "God, what I'd really like is to see your glory." Moses wants a vision, to see the Holy One, to be completely sure of the God he's following.

Just when you think it's as strange as can be, the story gets even more bizarre. God says, "Not quite. I'll show you my goodness. I'll be gracious. I'll be merciful. But you can't see my face."

To really know someone you have to look them face to face. "Look me straight in the eye" means "show me who you really are." In Hebrew thought to see another's face is to see all that they are. To see God face-to-face would be to know God absolutely, to exhaust the mystery of God's being, to understand everything about God.

God's counter-offer should make us smile. Moses will hide in a crack in a rock. God will cover Moses with a hand and race by. At the last second God's hand will move so that Moses can catch a glimpse of God's backside.

This is a highly poetic as well as highly peculiar story. The narrator doesn't hesitate to talk in anthropomorphisms, to give God human characteristics. It is impossible to interpret this story in a literal way. We have to recognize that the writer recognizes that any description of God is inadequate. This is not a story about a God with a physical hand large enough to cover the mouth of a cave. The Holy One is beyond our understanding, beyond our imagination.

Moses wants God to be his guide through the wilderness, to give explicit directions for every stop that's to be taken, exact marching orders twittered from on high. Moses receives no such orders. God promises only God's presence. Even in this story in which God is palpably present, God is hidden. This simple story speaks a profound truth that God is merciful and gracious, but God is not knowable.

One Friday night when I was six years old, I went with my father to a high school football game. At halftime, when there was still no score, I prayed that God would prove God's existence to me by making the Benton Bulldogs win their first game of the season. When they miraculously won, I was sure that I had conquered all doubt forever. When I told people at church about this new, conclusive evidence for the existence of God, many of them, particularly those who knew the most about the football team, agreed with me and encouraged me to pray each Friday night. Like Moses, I thought about pushing my luck. But with my record at 1-0, I decided never again to ask the Almighty to intervene in a football game. Looking back, I wonder if part of the reason I stopped while I was ahead was the fear that if I tried it again, I might lose the certainty I now had.

Even at our most believing, we'd like proof. Who hasn't wished for a sign from God because some days it seems like the world has explained God away? H. G. Wells said, "There was a time when I looked up at the stars and felt a sense of awe and wonder. Now I look at the stars in the same sense that I look at the wallpaper in a train station waiting room." On a routine day, God can seem absent. In the midst of responsibilities a mile wide and an inch deep, God seems far away.

Then when the inevitable crisis comes, we become even more desperate for God to make God's self known. We read about the war in Afghanistan or starving children in East Africa and want the invisible God to do something visible right then, right there. We pray for the blind to see, the lame to walk, the cancer to be benign. But the doctor says she's going to run some tests. We lay in bed, unable to sleep, wondering where our far too silent God is.

And yet, sometimes during a crisis or on an ordinary day, just every once in a while, we have the almost unmistakable feeling that someone is holding us, someone is loving us. There are intimations, hints,

inklings of mystery. Sometimes we sense God's presence in a creation that seems to bear the mark of a single hand.

At other times we hear God's voice in the voices of people we love. They'll mention some half-forgotten scrap of the past and we'll laugh more than is sensible. Something tells us that those moments matter eternally. Sometimes when we're completely silent, we'll feel a spirit, a hope, that tells us we're not alone.

We've known moments when life's meaning seems a little clearer, when we discover something we believe in. We've had joyful moments so surprising that the cynic in us can hardly respond. You've known that feeling that your life is trying to tell you something, trying to take you somewhere. Those glimmerings of truth bring us closer to the truth, that there is One who is more than we can see, one older and wiser than we are.

Maybe the signs of God's presence are all around us, but we've forgotten how to see. Abraham Maslow wrote, "The great lesson from the true mystics is that the sacred is in the ordinary, that it is to be found in one's daily life, in one's neighbors, friends, and family, in one's back yard." God's graciousness passes before us each day.

God isn't into glory as much as goodness. God says, "Don't hanker after glory. I'll give you something better than glory. I'll give mercy and grace."

God's silence keeps us listening carefully, straining for the whispers of grace. Karl Barth wrote a dozen dense, thick volumes describing in loving, dogmatic detail the nature of God in Christ. Buried there in *The Church Dogmatics* is Barth's confession: "In faith itself we are forced to say that our knowledge of God begins in all seriousness with the knowledge of the hiddenness of God."

We learn of God's goodness precisely because our longing for God isn't satisfied. It's because we understand that we cannot understand God, that God is worthy of our worship. Whatever we may experience or know about God, there is always more to be experienced and known. God is close to us, loves us, and stands with us. At the same time, God is far above us, far beyond our knowing.

We've not been given so much that we have no choice but believe, but we've been given enough to choose to believe. The incomprehensible nature of God is a source of hope and challenge if we are willing to trust the goodness we've been given, to venture into the wilderness, living in the light of God's face, following the glimpses of God's love.