

“Assurance in the Midst of Mystery”

Exodus 33:12–23

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I have shared with some of you before an experience I had as a teenager. My mother had left the church because of its judgment of her for divorce and its opposition to desegregation. My father had left it because of his military experience in the Middle East where religion seemed to be part of the problem. So, I had not grown up in church.

I started attending youth group meetings at Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, when I was fifteen because a neighbor who was involved there assured me there were some good-looking girls in the group — which there were — but I kept going because I was beginning to ask spiritual questions, questions about why we are here, whether there is something more than this life, whether there is any kind of God out there. Adolescence is the time when we begin to ask such questions and thus youth ministry is critical to our mission.

One evening I was pondering the big questions a bit more intensely, wondering about this idea of God. I was trying to develop a habit of prayer, but what is prayer when you are not sure if God exists? So, I asked God, if God really did exist, to give me some sign that all of this faith stuff was more than wishful thinking. Yet, almost immediately I had an urge to take back the request, not because I feared that no sign would come, but because I feared one would. Was I prepared for a personal encounter with the Creator of the universe?

Yet again, almost immediately I had an overwhelming sense, calming and unsettling, that I was not alone. I did not hear God’s voice or see God’s face. It was more of an internal sense of awe and wonder that I could not prove to anyone, but in that moment, I knew I was not alone. And that experience, cloaked in mystery as it was, was all I needed for assurance. My youth minister helped me in many ways on my journey of faith, as did loving and thoughtful church members, but this mysterious personal experience assured me of God’s presence.

Moses has an experience like this in today's reading from Exodus. When we left him last week, he was up on the mountain persuading God not to destroy the people because of their idolatry. If we had never read this story before, it might have felt like it was a clear-cut, happy ending, the last episode in a season if not a series on Netflix. But this season alone, this part of the larger story, is not over at this point.

God does not destroy the people, but God does decide not to continue with them any farther. An angel will go before them, but God will not. Moses is greatly distressed for obvious reasons. How will they manage without God's presence? He pleads with God and prevails again. If we have a great need, Moses is obviously the one who should do our bidding! Anyway, God agrees to stay with the people, but this isn't enough for Moses. He wants some assurance, he seeks a sign, as he has before, but this time, he asks to see God's glory.

We hear this term and think of bright lights and glorious music, something out of a Cecil B. DeMille film. But the "glory" simply refers to the manifestation of God's works in this world, something tangible and concrete. In this instance, we seem to be talking about God's face, not necessarily in a literal way, like a human face, but a direct view of who God is. The Jewish Publication Society translates Moses' request as, "Oh, let me behold Your Presence!"

Moses wants to see God, the fullness of God, but God knows Moses cannot handle this. So, God offers to pass by and allow Moses to view God's back. God hides Moses in the cleft of a rock and shields Moses with a Divine hand. This protected view is not for God's benefit. God is not like the Wizard of Oz who hides behind a screen to keep secret the truth that he is just an ordinary man. This protected view is for Moses' benefit. He could not handle a head-on view of the fullness of the Divine. It would be like viewing a solar eclipse without protective eye gear. Yet just a glimpse of the Holy, from the back, after God has passed by, is enough to assure Moses in this anxious time.

Such is our experience with God in many different ways. To begin with, as was the case for me as a teenager, and as was the case for Moses, there are times when we have a greater need for assurance that

God is not only out there somewhere but right here with us. We always need God's presence, but sometimes we are more profoundly aware of this need. This seems to be such a time.

We are beginning the eighth month of life altered by a pandemic, an experience unlike any most of us have had before. Almost everything we do has been altered by this one reality. We live with fear and economic uncertainty, if we are in touch with reality, but we also have to do almost everything, including worship, in a different way, and we have so little personal interaction with other people.

I don't know how many times I have said or heard someone else say to the rare person we encounter, "It's so good to see you. In fact, right now it is good to see anyone!" The flipside of this comment is that I have caught myself numerous times in my normal mode of thinking about people I haven't seen in a while and wondering whether I ought to contact them before realizing that I haven't seen anyone in a while. A contact may still be in order, but not for the same reasons.

In such a time of isolation — not to mention all the other challenges we face socially and politically — it is easy to feel distant from God because so much of our experience of God is with, for and through other people. The more mystical among us may be able to connect with God alone directly, but most of us benefit immensely from the companionship of fellow believers.

Thus, like Moses, we long for an experience of God's presence, and God grants what we need, but often in ways cloaked in mystery. There may be some people in their right minds who actually see or hear from God in sensory ways, but most of us have a more subtle sense of awe and wonder, like I had as a teenager. Most of us encounter God in a somewhat hidden or cloaked way, like Moses.

It may be in a private moment of devotion when we suddenly realize we are not alone. It may be while working with children or youth in our church or while connecting with a grieving or homebound member, as we sense the Spirit of God in a moment of joy or sorrow. It may be while helping with the clothing ministry or Toy Joy, Family Promise or the Wyatts' work with immigrants and refugees, as we

recognize the Christ among the least of these in need. Or it may be in some part of the created world — a sunrise at the beach, the beauty of changing leaves in the mountains, a soaring bird in the clear sky — where God's grace and majesty are revealed. But we do encounter God, just in mysterious ways. So, we have to be paying attention to realize it.

I love this passage from Annie Dillard's book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* which won the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction in 1975.

The mockingbird took a single step into the air and dropped. His wings were still folded against his sides as though he were singing from a limb and not falling, accelerating thirty-two feet per second per second, through empty air. Just a breath before he would have been dashed to the ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care, revealing the broad bars of white, spread his elegant, white-banded tail, and so floated onto the grass. I had just rounded a corner when his insouciant step caught my eye; there was no one else in sight. The fact of his free fall was like the old philosophical conundrum about the tree that falls in the forest. The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there. (p. 20)

Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there. So it goes with every revelation of God. God is present and at work in mysterious ways, whether we realize it or not. The least we can do is try to notice.

Yet, there is one other message to glean from Moses' experience. There are times when we desperately need an assurance of God's presence, and God grants that assurance — though in veiled ways, in the midst of mystery — but in the end it is enough. Moses does not get exactly what he asks for, but what he gets — God's willingness to remain with the people and a personal experience with the Holy — sustains him.

So it goes for us. We may not get exactly what we ask for, but what we get in the way of an assurance that God is with us is enough not because it will magically wipe away all of our challenges, but because God's grace will enable and empower us to meet those challenges.

In her book *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, Anne Lamott tells a story about a two-year-old who locked himself in a room one night (pp. 220-221). His mother heard him crying out, "Mommy! Mommy!" and tried to let him out but quickly realized she could not open the door from the outside. She told him several times to jiggle the doorknob, but he just kept crying. He was too frightened to make sense of what she was saying.

So, she fell on her knees, slid her fingers into the opening under the door and told him to kneel down and touch her fingers. He searched for a few moments but then found them and just held her fingers in the dark for some time until finally he quit crying and calmed down. At this point, the mother gently told him to stand up and jiggle the doorknob, which he did, and the door opened.

God's presence calms and empowers us in this way. The experience may not be as obvious as we would like — just the touch of fingers under a door, an internal sense of awe and wonder, the Holy One passing by as we remain hidden in the cleft of a rock. And our problems do not all disappear immediately. The door doesn't open by itself. But as we recognize God's presence even in the midst of mystery, we find the assurance we need to calm down and do what we need to do.

With God's empowering companionship, we can get through this pandemic one day at a time. With God's empowering companionship, we can get through this crazy time in our nation and get to a better place. With God's empowering companionship, we can work through our personal grief, we can deal with our most challenging demons, we can get through a personal transition and make the changes we need to make. God's companionship is enough — for Moses and for us.

(Holy God, who revealed yourself to Moses in many different ways, who came to dwell with us in the mystery of incarnation, and who is present now in Spirit, you are with us always. Help us to discern your presence, to pay attention to your many signs of grace, that we may find the wisdom and the strength we need to persevere in faith. Through the one called Emmanuel, God-With-Us, Jesus our Christ, we pray, amen.)