

Akron Christian Reformed Church

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Exodus 33.12-23; Psalm 96.1-13; Matthew 22.15-22

Prayer: Merciful and loving God, your faithfulness extends from generation to generation. It was being rolled out long before we were and will continue to roll out long after we are gone. We give you praise and honor and glory for allowing us to participate in your faithfulness, here in this place, and we give you thanks for the ability to reflect upon your holy presence among us all of these years.

As we now wait for your word, open our hearts to your teaching, open our ears to your voice, open our minds to your understanding, so that we may leave this place transformed again by being in your presence. In your holy name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

I've loved this Exodus 33 passage ever since I was assigned an exegetical paper on it by Ray Van Leeuwen. That was the paper that when I finished presenting it, Van Leeuwen was animated (he wasn't a very animated guy). As he rushed to the front of the class he shouted, "Perfect. This is a perfect example of what I talk about."

And I'm feeling pretty good about this because I really spent a lot of time on this paper. The text was fun and it was deep into the semester. "This is a perfect example of what not to do. Don't read all of that extra stuff into the text. It's not there." And he seemed so happy to be able to say that.

I slunk away to my seat. Joel Kok slapped me on the back and laughed, and whispered, "Perfect man, perfect."

I really don't remember what I wrote in that paper. Nonetheless, this Exodus passage remains as a powerful influence in my theology. Because within it, I've discovered deep grace. I've always thought, "If when Moses asks to see God's face, and God says no one may see my glory and live, instead I'll cover your eyes and let you look at my butt, and in the end, just hearing the Lord proclaim God's name is enough to drive Moses to the ground in terror; if there's that much grace found in the voice of the Lord, imagine how great the grace is that's revealed in the face of God."

And on the one hand we then naturally think about Jesus and say, "Yeah, the face of God became incarnate in Jesus Christ and truly that grace wrapped up in weakness was more spectacular than anyone imagined." But I also think, that there's so much more. Someday we'll be in front of God, gazing at God's face, and suddenly all of our pettiness will disappear, and things will be clearer.

But that's the last part of the passage. I want to talk this morning about the beginning of the story, because I find the opening to be odd.

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It reads: Moses said to the LORD, "You've been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you haven't let me know whom you'll send with me.

Which is curious, isn't it? I mean, who does Moses think sent the plagues then led them out of Egypt? Who is within the pillar of cloud by day, and the pillar of fire by night? Who opened the Red Sea for them? Who sweetened the bitter water at Marah? Who sent quail and manna to eat? Who opened the rock at Massah and Meribah when the people grumbled: "Is the Lord among us or not"? Who defeated the Amalekites? Who was in the thunder and lightning at Sinai? Who was it who gave them incredibly liberating laws that set them apart from the other nations?

When we read the Scripture story we find it difficult to conceive that this deep into the Exodus story, at chapter 33, after all of these other things have happened, it's difficult to understand why Moses asks: "You haven't let me know whom you'll send with me."

Nonetheless, the Lord patiently replies: "My Presence will go with you, and I'll give you rest." And we might be tempted to add inappropriately: "Dummy."

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When we read the Bible stories the presence of God is always so obvious. Which causes us to scratch our heads and wonder: "Why do the people within the stories often seem so thick?"

But the biblical stories tend to compress time. They tell us of an event here, and another event there, and an event over yonder, as if they happened, "boom-bam-bip." When in reality they probably happened over the course of years, or decades, or even centuries – long periods of time in which God remains silent.

I commonly point to the Abraham and Sarah cycle of stories. When you read Genesis it seems like God is walking and talking with Abraham all of the time. But in reality there's only about 6 stories of God talking to them. That are spread out over many decades, but they've been compressed, to sound like one continuous story.

So, even back in the ancient biblical times, where it often seems to us that God is downright chatty, in reality, it had to be difficult to discern even then the Lord's presence over large swaths of time. It had to be difficult to hold on to the faith that the Lord is actually present and leading the Israelites in the middle of day after day of monotonous, desert heat.

So, I can't quite blame Moses when he says, "You haven't let me know whom you'll send with me."

God must have thought, "Well, I did Moses. Many times I let you know. But you keep forgetting." Then God almost quietly replies: "My Presence will go with you Moses, and I'll give you rest."

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I've been thinking a lot about the past 25 years. Some of you have probably been thinking a lot about the first 25 years. Much has happened here in this congregation, and within our lives. Some of it was great. Some of it was very unpleasant. Most of it was just life.

Whatever the case, sometimes we get lost. Our memory fails. The details of stories get tangled in the ethernet. But still I'm sure that you'll be telling one another stories about your time at the Akron Christian Reformed Church. And some of the memories will be elusive, or conflict with someone else's memory. But the details often don't really matter.

What does matter is that we all remember, that at the heart of all of our church stories, we may discern a faithful God. The God who led the pagans Sarai and Abram into a relationship with himself over 4,000 years ago, is the very same God who led all of us into this congregation for a time. The same God who leads Moses and the people out of Egypt, is the very same God who led all of us into this church to worship and praise God with our sisters and brothers.

Every once in a while, when I'm quietly thinking about the billions of years of faithfulness that our God has already lived with this earth, it will seem as if God will quickly rush past my eyes and I'll catch a glimpse of God, perhaps it's God's backside, and for just a moment everything within me is overwhelmed by wonder, and it all almost makes sense. Because the God whom we've followed into this place and beyond is truly faithful in his quiet presence.

My only comfort in life and in death is that I am not my own, in life and in death, but belong body and soul, to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ. The Lord and his Christ and their Spirit is faithful in life and in death.

Hopefully, the back side of the Lord will be revealed to us today as we rejoice together, as we remember together, as we eat and drink at God's table together, so that we may be filled, be it ever so fleeting, with wonder and worship.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.