

Where Is God?

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Hymns: VT 619 – In the Rifted Rock; 161 – I sought the Lord; 548 – Open, Lord, My Inward Ear

Exodus 33:12-23

¹²Moses 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.’ ¹³Now if I have found favor in your sight, please show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider, too, that this nation is your people.” ¹⁴He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” ¹⁵And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶For 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.”

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

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, “Whose head is this and whose title?” ²¹They answered, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” ²²When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away.

How do we know we’re in the presence of God? Is this a question we think about very often? In our context, this seems like a strange thing to concern ourselves with. Even in church contexts, it would seem we’re much more comfortable talking about practical matters, budgets and concrete programs and plans, rather than spending a lot of time discerning God’s leading or presence. In Bible times, this seems to have been a much more straightforward practice: look for the burning bush or the pillar of cloud, the parted

sea or the rushing wind of the Spirit – that’s where God is! Pretty simple. Nowadays, it’s much less clear, and we don’t want to waste time on such an ambiguous project like seeking God’s presence. It’s too mysterious, too uncertain. What if we get it wrong? And yet, is this not part of our calling as God’s people, risks and all?

When I think of images of God, I remember when my 5-year-old was a bit younger, she used to find one of my long sweaters and put it on her little arms. Then she’d swish it around and say, “Look, I’m God!” Something about long robes and her pastor-mama who works at a church made her associate my sweaters with God. And there is some truth to that, isn’t there? In part, church is about meeting God here in some form, whether in the music and words of worship, the community gathered, the conversations and embraces.

Our Scripture texts from the lectionary for this week speak to this topic of seeking God’s presence in perhaps some unexpected ways. Our passage from Exodus 33 continues the story of the exodus from Egypt that we have been following in our Fall sermons. As Patrick spoke about last week, this chapter follows the story of the golden calf, and the idolatry of the people while Moses was still on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments from God! The irony of this is so profound – they fail before they even start, breaking the covenant while it’s still being made between Moses and God. And yet Moses manages to convince God not to completely give up on them.

This chapter, Exodus 33, marks a change in the journey of the Israelites. They’ve been camped at Mount Sinai for a while (long enough to get up to no good, evidently), but now God is telling them to pack up and move on, to continue their journey, and God’s presence will go with them. But that promise alone doesn’t seem to satisfy

Moses, who insists pretty forcefully on seeing God’s glory. He is asking for what’s called a “theophany,” a “personal encounter...with the Holy One,” which happen to everyone from Adam and Eve to Abraham, to Hagar and Jacob. Exodus contains multiple examples of these, as Moses often meets God – most famously “in a burning bush that was not consumed” (ch. 3) or in chapter 19, where “God’s presence appears amid thunder, lightning, cloud, and fire.”¹ After all this awe-inspiring imagery, it’s interesting to note the very intimate and familiar terms that God and Moses seem to be on as they speak to each other. As we’ve seen, Moses even feels comfortable enough to intercede on behalf of the people, to argue with and convince God to change God’s mind after they’ve worshipped the golden calf. And here he again pushes God to show God’s face or glory to him, even after God has already answered no – borderline “cheeky”! And because of their close relationship, Moses again convinces God to fulfill his request and Moses gets a glimpse of God’s back while protected in the cleft of a rock and covered with God’s hand.

Despite the somewhat concrete imagery for God here, in these Exodus encounters between God and Moses, however, there are some puzzling contradictions in the text as well. Our passage is all about Moses begging somewhat desperately to be able to see God’s face, despite the substantial risks that “no one shall see God and live” (v. 20). Plus, as commentator Lisa Wolfe points out, “Only nine verses earlier, in 33:11, we read ‘the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.’”² So which is it? Has Moses seen God’s face or not? And to add to the confusion even more,

¹ See Lisa Wolfe, “Commentary on Exodus 33:12-23,” *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-29/commentary-on-exodus-3312-23-6>

² Lisa Wolfe, “Commentary.”

the words for “presence” and “face” are in fact the same Hebrew word. Wolfe says, “Thus the ‘presence’ that Moses is assured of as company is also the ‘face’ that he cannot be allowed to see. This passage itself contains some of that theological ambiguity about whether one really could see God and live!” But whereas we might get frustrated by this ambiguity, Wolfe sees it as a positive thing, reflecting an ancient “theological debate” and how the ancient Israelites dealt with such things. She concludes, “We could be comforted by the idea that we are not the first community of faith to struggle with conflicting understandings of God. Our ancestors of faith ...retained both views [“you cannot see God and live” and “some people can see some parts of God”] side by side, woven into our compelling, complex, sacred texts.”³

So let’s turn to another situation of debate – our second passage from Matthew 22. Here we have the well-known encounter where the Pharisees and Herodians (normally each others’ opponents!) have teamed up to try to stump Jesus and publically humiliate him in the Temple, where he is teaching the crowds. They test him with what they think is a very black-and-white, either-or question: “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (v. 17). They’re trying to set Jesus up in a lose-lose situation, where no matter which way he answers, he is in trouble. As commentator Yung Suk Kim says, “A simple ‘yes’ seemingly contradicts his general teaching about God since true loyalty is rendered to God only. A dauntless ‘no’ will make him an anti-imperial radical revolutionary. They expected Jesus to choose an ‘all-or-nothing’ position whose logic is ‘If you give everything to God, there is nothing you can spare to give to Caesar, or vice versa.’” Both answers would undermine Jesus’ authority “and his followers or those who

³ Wolfe, “Commentary.”

heard him teaching would be confused and divided.”⁴ The problem is, they seem to have misunderstood the way that Jesus teaches. Since when does he give all-or-nothing commands to be unquestioningly followed by his disciples? This is someone who regularly uses parables – you know, puzzling stories that have multiple layers of meaning – as a teaching device! And his answer here is no different. Showing them a coin worth one-day’s wage for an ordinary worker, he turns the question around – “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” In other words, use your own wisdom to discern this. Seek for yourselves where God can be found, what God’s will is, what path bears good fruit. As Yung notes, “For Jesus, good teaching does not stay with knowledge, but must bear fruit.” But the Pharisees and Herodians don’t seem very interested in this more profound answer at all.⁵

Does this sound familiar to us? How many times have we looked to God to give us a clear answer about something? Such simple either/or thinking is very enticing for many these days, which is why religious fundamentalism is so attractive. There is comfort in the very rigid boundaries around what is right and wrong, what is Christian and what is not, what the Bible allows and what it doesn’t. Full stop, no take-backs. But the root of this kind of either-or thinking is fear, and the fruit that it bears is power as control over other people. This theology does not produce wisdom or wise living; it produces rigid divisions between us and them that quickly lead to the golden calves of our day: discrimination against LGBTQ+ children in our schools as God’s will; a war in Israel-Palestine with civilians being targeted on both sides as God’s will; any number of

⁴ Yung Suk Kim, “Commentary on Matthew 22:15-22,” *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-29/commentary-on-matthew-2215-22-6>

⁵ Yung, “Commentary.”

forms of violence being declared as the place where we see God's face. This is what it means to take the Lord's name in vain. Jesus calls for a much different path of wise discernment, of a way that leads to life and shalom flourishing for all, especially those most downtrodden by these rigid systems. Jesus calls and prepares us to do this wise thinking and discernment for ourselves, to seek God's presence in our own contexts and communities – and so does the Bible itself!

In his book, *How the Bible Actually Works*, Peter Enns reminds us that the Bible was never meant to be “a source of unchanging information.” When it contradicts itself (such as in our Exodus passage about seeing God's face and surviving, but also the narrative of Exodus compared to Deuteronomy, and many other examples), this is not because the writers of the Bible messed up or forgot to look at the other books. Rather, the “author accepted the sacred responsibility to rethink the past because the changing circumstances demanded it: ‘What does God require today? How do we embody God here and now, in our time?’” In other words, the Bible is an ongoing conversation about where we find God, and our job is not to copy the answers of the past as accurately as possible, but to “keep our eyes and ears open for how [God is speaking today], reading the times as well as the text.”⁶

In this sense, I think we would do well to learn from Moses' example, his tenacity in asking to see God's face anew, seeking God's presence with that kind of insistent affection, speaking to God as one would speak to a friend. Perhaps that's where we are able to find our own comfortable rock clefts, our own glimpses of God's glory in the here and now, which allow us to fully and truly live. AMEN

⁶ Peter Enns, *How the Bible Actually Works: In Which I Explain How an Ancient, Ambiguous, and Diverse Book Leads Us to Wisdom Rather than Answers – And Why That's Great News* (New York: Harper One, 2019), 88. For more from Enns about Exodus, see: <https://thebiblefornormalpeople.com/pete-ruins-exodus-part-6/>