

Show Me Your Face
A Sermon on Exodus 33:12-23
Proper 24
October 22, 2017

Introduction

We concluded our study of *The End of White Christian America* Wednesday night. White Christian America means white mainline Christians and white evangelical Christians. Both groups are declining and it seems that we are at a historical crossroads for Christianity. People, especially young people, are turning away from the church. The church needs to be transformed.

I asked the group, “What benefits have white evangelical churches brought us?” There was a long silence. Nobody could think of anything.

Today’s text answers that question. It shows us what a personal relationship with God is like. Moses’ personal relationship with God saves Israel. Evangelical Christianity at its best is about a personal relationship with Jesus and how it saves us.

Moses is not just any man. Moses is a prophet. The greatest of prophets. He stands with Abraham and Jacob as someone who talked face to face with God.

Today I would like to explore Moses’ personal relationship with God, and what it suggests for our own relationship with God.

First Move: Moses Talks Face to Face with God

Orthodox Christianity developed an image of God as unchanging and impassable. This is an image of God from Greek philosophy not from the Hebrew Bible. The ideal in Greek thought was to be entirely self-sufficient. God is not dependent on anyone and not affected by anyone. Aristotle called God the unmoved Mover. God is immutable. It is almost like God is an absolute, an abstraction.

Abraham Joshua Heschel is a scholar of the Hebrew Bible and a Jewish theologian. He challenges this philosophical image of God in his book, *The Prophets*, which he wrote in 1962. Heschel says that this image of God is nothing like the God who is described in the Hebrew Bible. The God of the Hebrew people is a God of pathos. God cares about people. God hears the cries of the Hebrew slaves, groaning under Egyptian oppression, and God acts. God sees the rich taking land from the poor, adding field to field and house to house, and expresses his disgust at the offerings given to him by the rich.

In today's text, God is hurt. God is still angry at the people about the golden calf. God has just given them the Ten Commandments and made a covenant with the people, and they already have broken it. The covenant is not an abstraction for God—it is like a marriage. God reacts like a spouse whose partner has been unfaithful. God distances himself from the people. God refers to them as “Your people” and “this people” instead of as “my people.” They are a stiff-necked people. God says to Moses, “Let me be, that my anger may blaze forth and destroy them.”

Heschel says that when the Old Testament talks about the wrath of God, it is describing God in pain. God is hurt when the poor suffer because they are oppressed or neglected by the king and the ruling elite. God is hurt when the people refuse to trust him and worship false idols.

Moses then gives one of the most amazing speeches in the Bible. We usually think of prophets as delivering the word of God to us. But it's not a one-way discussion. Prophets also take the concerns of the people to God. Moses argues to God on behalf of the people. Incredibly, Moses gives three commands to God: turn from your anger, change your mind and remember your promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses corrects God. He says, “They're not my people. They're your people. You can't abandon them.”

We can see why God chose Moses to lead the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. Moses has courage and a passion for justice. He cares about the people. At great risk to himself, Moses throws himself against the wrath of God. Moses has seen first hand what God did to the Egyptians when Pharaoh stood up to him. That doesn't discourage Moses. God had said, “Let me be,” but Moses won't go away. His actions remind us of Jacob's wrestling with God in Genesis 32: “I will not let you go until you bless me.”

Second Move: Moses Pleads for God's Presence

Moses leaves God and comes down from the mountain. Now Moses is the one who is angry. He had pleaded for the people at the top of the mountain when he was talking to God. When he comes into the camp, he is carrying the two tablets with the Ten Commandments. The tablets were written with the finger of God. Moses sees the people dancing around the calf. He gets angry and breaks the tablets on the ground. He burns the calf, grinds it into powder, scatters it on the water, and makes the Israelites drink the water.

We don't like to talk about the next part. Moses says, “Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me.” The Levites, who are the priests, come forward. Moses commanded each of them to take a sword and prove their loyalty by killing their

brothers, their friends and their neighbors. The Levites obeyed Moses and killed 3,000 Israelites. Moses would not let God destroy the people, but he himself ordered that some of them be killed.

The next day, Moses said to the people, “You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord. Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”

Moses believes that he has executed God’s justice. Moses returns to God just outside the camp and asks God to spare the people. “Forgive them, but if not, blot my name out of your judgment book.”

God refuses. God says, “Whoever has sinned against me. I will blot out of my book. Now go. Lead the people. My messenger shall go in front of you. But when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin.” Then God sends a plague on the people because they made the golden calf.

God tells Moses to lead the people to a land flowing with milk and honey. God promises to give the land to them and drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, and the other native peoples.

God tells the people: “I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way for you are a stiff-necked people.” When the people heard these harsh words, they mourned.

Moses keeps challenging God. God has told Moses that he has found favor in God’s eyes, but that is not enough for Moses. Moses sets his own interest aside and pleads for the people. He knows that they are scared. The journey will be a disaster unless the people know that God is present with them. Israel’s existence is viable only with God’s presence.

Moses says, “If I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you. Consider also that this nation is your people.” Moses wants to know how God will be present with Israel.

God says, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” The Hebrew word for presence can also mean face. It is personal. My face will go with you. You is in the singular. God makes the promise only to Moses. To give rest means a land to live in. God will go with Moses and give him a land to live in. Again, Moses is not satisfied. He wants God to include Israel in the promise of presence and land.

Moses gets angry and shows God some attitude. Moses says that if God’s face does not go with Israel, do not carry us away from this mountain into the wilderness.

God grants Moses’ request. “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know your name.” Again, God uses the singular for you. God knows Moses by name, not the people of Israel.

Moses is still not sure that he can trust God. God may destroy Israel on its journey.

Moses is relentless. Again he asks for more presence. God has assured him of face, rest and favor. Moses asks, "Show me your *kavod*." *Kavod* in Hebrew means weighty or heavy. It also means glory. This is Moses' boldest request yet. Show me your face without the cloud and without the fire. Show me your essence.

God is not offended. God says that he will do four things for Moses: I will make all my goodness pass before you. I will proclaim my name, Yahweh, before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious. I will show mercy upon whom I will show mercy.

God says he will grant Moses these four things, but he will not show Moses his *kavod*, his glory, his essence. That is not for you to know. I will show you my goodness, my graciousness and my mercy. Those are my ways. That will show you what kind of God I am.

God reasserts his freedom. We cannot manipulate or control God's goodness. Who are we to complain if God decides to give mercy or a blessing to someone else?

God says, "You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live." Yet God lets Moses see his backside. The backside of God is what people will see if God is leading them. Ancient Jewish commentators describe God's backside as the deeds and actions that reveal God's existence and nature.

God shows concern for Moses' safety. God places Moses in the cleft of a rock and covers Moses' eyes with God's own hand while God passes by. Then God takes away the hand to let Moses see God's backside.

Moses has the sense to realize that he has pushed God to God's limits. Moses accepts God's answer. Moses is reassured that God will be with Israel on its journey.

We learn something about the nature of God: God *repents*. God changes his mind about destroying Israel. God is not unchangeable. This story shows that God is willing to change his mind. God forgives Israel. It shows a tension in the nature of God. On the one hand, God's authority cannot be mocked and God's justice demands that there be accountability and a balancing of accounts. That is in tension with limiting God's freedom to remain in relationship with us even when we are unfaithful. To be in relationship means to care about the other person even when they are wrong. It means to be merciful and to forgive.

Israel exists because God forgives. God chooses to remain in covenant relationship with Israel. There is no golden age of innocence. Israel committed the primal sin 40 days after it received the Ten Commandments. It is the original sin of Israel. God responds with original grace.

Third Move: Putting on the Mind of Christ

Today this sounds like a primitive view of God. God is in human form. God has a face and a backside. Yet this theology also has depth. We cannot know God's essence, but we can know God's attributes.

Israel's theology evolved as its spirituality de-veloped. The Israelites came to see God as present in the Tabernacle, then as present in the Temple. When the Temple was destroyed, God's presence was in all of Jerusalem. When Rome exiled the Jews from Jerusalem, God's presence came to be known through reading the Torah in the local synagogue.

Today we also feel God's presence through reading Scripture. God's presence can make us uncomfortable. It challenges us. I don't like to hear that God wanted to destroy the people of Israel. That doesn't fit comfortably with a gospel of non-violence.

Mary and I attended a series of lectures that Walter Brueggeman gave at First Christian Church of Norman five years ago. Brueggeman is one of the leading Christian scholars of the Old Testament. During question and answer, I asked him how we can preach about a God who brings down plagues on Egypt and kills the firstborn sons of all the Egyptians. God kills even the firstborn of all the animals. Brueggeman said that he believes that God is a recovering violence addict.

Scripture is one way we can feel God's presence. Yet we want more of God's presence, just as Moses did. How can we establish a personal relationship with God today? We cannot hope to see God face to face as Moses did, along with Abraham and Jesus. They were giants of faith.

Catholic mystics like Richard Rohr talk about the levels of faith. Moses, Abraham and Jesus are at the deepest level, about a nine. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila were nines. Gandhi and Martin Luther King might be at seven or eight. Most people are at level two or three. If we spend a lifetime working on our spirituality, we may get to level five or six. The apostle Paul says that we see God dimly, as through a mirror. We cannot hope to know God face to face.

We can know God's backside. We can witness the deeds and actions that reveal God's existence and nature. We can see God at work in other people.

Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk and a teacher of centering prayer, says that there are all kinds of ways that God speaks to us, through our thoughts, through our senses, though actions. But God's first language is silence. Fr. Keating believes that God's presence is available at every moment, but we have a giant obstacle in ourselves, in our worldview. We need to exchange our worldview for the mind of Christ, his worldview.

Jesus saw God all around him. He could see the holy in the ordinary. He thought of God as a fourth dimension that surrounds all things and runs through all things. He called that fourth dimension Spirit.

Fr. Keating uses the metaphor a river for our consciousness. On the surface of the river are our superficial thoughts and experiences, passing by like boats. The river itself is participation in God's own being. When we let our minds rest, let go of our thoughts, we become part of the river. We can't stop thinking, there will always be boats on the river, but we don't have to focus on the boats and climb in them. We can just let them pass by.

We are shifting our awareness from the boats to the river. We let our minds be still. We are connecting with God's spirit through our spirit. We enter into a cloud of unknowing in which we feel nothing and know nothing except a naked intent toward God in the depths of our being.

Christian mystics call this experience contemplation. Keating calls it centering prayer. It is prayer without words or thoughts. Keating encourages us to do centering prayer for twenty minutes, twice a day. The goal is simply to let your soul rest in God.

When we come out of centering prayer, we are changed. There is a calmness at the center of our being. We are not so quick to judge and evaluate everything. We accept things as they are, which is how God sees them. The divine love that we experience in prayer pours out of us into the world. We have put on the mind of Christ.

Conclusion

That would be my suggestion for where the church goes from here. Become schools and laboratories for spirituality. Help people put on the mind of Christ.

It is not something you can do in a week. God thought that Israel needed 40 years in the wilderness to learn how to become a faithful people before they entered the Promised Land.

We are not ready for the kingdom of God. We would go on committing the same old sins. Our hearts and minds need to be transformed first. That only happens through a personal relationship with God.