

## No Other Gods

### Exodus 33:12-23

All humans have a desire and yearning to know God. The desire to "know" God in Exodus (and in the rest of the Bible as well) is rooted in the desire to understand God and one's self in relation to God. Moses' initial request in Exodus 3:13-15 was that God disclose God's name; Israel's fear in Exodus 32, at the foot of the mountain, that God may have gone missing and might no longer lead Israel in the wilderness; and Moses' plea in Exodus 33:12-23 to see God's glory in order that he might "know you and find favor in your sight" (v. 13) are all questions about God's reality, prompted by a recognition that God's character and identity determine human identity and destiny.

Moses was in a difficult position. The Israelites, whom Moses led through the wilderness, had short memories when it came to their former enslavement in Egypt. As anxiety levels rose, the people complained against Moses. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" (Exod. 17:3) The threats were serious enough that Moses cries out to God in fear for his life. "They are almost ready to stone me," Moses says (Exod. 17:4).

Moses had gone up on the mountain to receive the commandments of God for the faith community. The first of which was "you will have no other gods before me." In Exodus 32:1 Moses has been "delayed" on the mountain. Both Moses and God seem to have gone missing; "as for this Moses, the Israelites said... we do not know what has become of him." Israel had been left alone in the wilderness, and in their anxiety the people ask Aaron to make them gods "who shall go before us." In the wilderness, where death lurks everywhere, a god in the hand was worth more than a God in the bush (or on the mountain), and in their anxiety the people give in to

idolatry. In our scripture Moses has gone back up the mountain and begged to see God's glory and therefore to know God's presence, so that he would know that he and his people had found favor or grace with God, and God would continue to be with them.

In Exodus 3, before Moses knew God's name, God addressed Moses by name (v. 4) and commissioned him to deliver Israel from Pharaoh (v. 10). Now on the mountain Moses' words imply: Lord, "You give me this monumental responsibility, but you leave me guessing as to how to accomplish it. You say that I have found favor in your sight, but I feel very vulnerable. You say that you will go with us, but if you will not be there too, then do not send us!"

Moses wanted to know this God who commanded that "you will have no other gods." Moses understood that the knowledge he sought could not be acquired, but was knowledge that could only be given and received; the knowledge could not be discovered, but was knowledge that must be disclosed; not knowledge to be grasped by human inquiry, but knowledge that was a gracious gift. Moses could know God only because God chose to disclose God's self to Moses. In Exodus 33 Moses knew God's name, but he did not know God's ways and had not seen God's glory; he asked, "Show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight" (v. 13). We learn from this that we know, and it is because we are known that we are enabled to know.

Although Moses had learned God's name in 3:14, Moses still asked that God reveal "God's ways." God's name, disclosed in the burning bush as "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE"—reveals that God is what God does. Unlike every form of human identity, there is no difference between who God is and what God does. God is "pure action." So, in order to know God and in order to know if God is indeed favorable or "gracious," Moses must know God's "ways." Favor or grace is what

God does; it is the very reality of who God is as the one who leads and the one who delivers. In knowing God's ways Moses also knew God's presence.

God granted Moses his request, in part. Because God had chosen to know him, Moses had found favor with God, and God disclosed God's glory to Moses by "passing before him." God is the life-giver and reveals: "I will be what I will be" and "will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy" (v. 19b).

Moses could not see all of God's glory, because God is holy. So Moses saw God's favor, grace, and mercy precisely in what God did not allow him to see. God not only hid Moses in the cleft of the rock but also covered him with God's hand in order that Moses could see only God's back, and not God's face. Even more, God agreed to lead Israel in the wilderness, despite Israel's idolatry at the foot of the mountain. **George W. Stroup**

Who of us find it difficult to relate to Moses' urgent need for God to show up? Which of us, at one time or another, has not cried out, "God, I need you; I need you to speak; I need you to come. I need you to be present—and not in some hidden or veiled way. I need to know your will, and I need to know it now!" Who among us has not felt scared and longed for unmistakable evidence of the presence of God to see us through? Rather than chastising Moses and the Israelites for their need for absolute certainty, this is the human characteristics that we share with our biblical ancestors, and we remind ourselves that God loves us in spite of our quirks and our doubts. Chances are that most of us can relate to the desire for confirmation that God travels with us on whatever journey we undertake. **Leslie A. Klingensmith**

There was a young woman who was forced to make a very difficult decision, a decision that she felt was hugely important—one that would change the course of her life forever. At first she prayed calmly and gently, hoping that clarity from God would come. It did not. As time went on, the young woman grew from concerned

to stressed to panicked to angry. "God, you say you love me. You say you care about my life. You say you are here for me. Where are you? Speak! Show up!" The young woman resolved not to move from her room until she had heard from God a very clear answer.

It was not long, to her surprise, before she received her answer. God showed up with remarkable clarity. God did not tell her what to do in regard to the decision that she had to make. However, God became intimately present to her. God graced her angst-filled silence with calm and peace and told her again and again, "I love you." It seemed that God perceived a more urgent question. God addressed a more important matter, and suddenly the young woman's question, which had previously been so pressing, could wait.

Well-meaning Christians are fond of saying, "God never gives us more than we can handle." Of course, the problem with such a statement is the assumption that it is God who is dishing out these burdens. However, if the wording is changed just a bit, perhaps the statement reflects an important truth. We might say, "God never gives us more of God than we can handle." We can translate that statement to mean something like this: *God comes to us as we are best able to receive God. God addresses not our questions but our primary need for God.* Perhaps the image from our Scripture of Moses in the cleft of the rock, shielded from viewing God's face but offered instead a view of God's back, provides us with a fitting symbol of our God who commands that his faithful ones worship and serve no other gods.

### **Timothy B. Hare**

God does not say, "I will walk by you," or "I will sit down beside you on this rock." God says, "I will make all my goodness pass before you" (v. 19). The implication is that God who cannot be seen or experienced in conventional ways, but God is one who encompasses all that is good. We catch glimpses of God in the magnificent miracles that occur around us. We sense the presence of God within

the relationships that nourish and sustain us, in the breathtaking beauty of nature, and in God's peace.

Even at the moment when God is most present, we catch only a glimpse of the wonder of God. As unsatisfying as that may seem, the limited experience we have of God is astonishing, how much more wonderful will it be when God finally fully reveals God's self to us? (see 1 Cor. 13:12). That moment is something to which we can look forward with awe and hope, rather than abject terror. **Leslie A.**

### **Klingensmith**

Have no other gods...the one that created the heavens and the earth and is present with us is quite enough!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).