

Mo Blessings Mo Problems Sermon Series
Glimpses of God - Exodus 33:12-23
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My seminary professors called this “The Divine Mooning.” Actually, they didn’t, but they should have. As we continue our sermon series today on the life of Moses, let me give a quick recap of our journey so far, because it will have a bearing on today’s passage. Moses was born in Egypt and raised by Pharaoh’s daughter but fled the country after he killed an Egyptian. He settled down in Midian, got married, and became a shepherd. One day, while tending to his flock, he sees the burning bush and hears a call from God to go back to Egypt to rescue the Israelites from slavery. To show Moses that God means business, God gives Moses God’s name to tell to the Israelites – “tell them ‘I Am Who I Am’ sent you.” The giving of God’s name establishes a relationship between Moses and God.

Moses goes to Egypt and leads the Israelites out of slavery, through the Red Sea, and into the freedom God had for them. They finally make it to the base of Mt. Sinai, where Moses goes up the mountain to receive the 10 commandments from God. The Israelites pledge their undying loyalty to God...until about a week later. While Moses is gone up the mountain, they break the first two commandments by fashioning a golden calf which they can worship instead of God. God finally loses patience and threatens to wipe out the whole lot of them and start over with Moses, but Moses talks God out of it. Through all of this, their relationship deepens.

That’s where we left off last week. An important point to note in the Golden Calf story is that, at one point, Moses is so mad at the Israelites for breaking the commandments that he takes the stone tablets on which the commandments are written, and smashes them on the ground. Their relationship is strained, their vows have been broken, God is ready to wipe them all out, and once again, as we’ve seen many times before in this story, the Israelites are at a dead-end. God went into God’s room and slammed the door, the Israelites went into their room and slammed the door, and Moses is caught out in the hallway, completely helpless.

In the beginning of our chapter today, God commands the Israelites to leave Mt. Sinai and head toward the Promised Land, where God will drive out the foreign nations - the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Termites, and the Cellulites - so the Israelites may live there. Then God says, “Go to the land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go with you, or else I would destroy you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

Have you ever dealt with any tension during a long road trip? I was leading a youth group from Chicago to Kansas City for a mission trip. We had two vans, and about three hours into the drive, the lead van abruptly pulled off to the side of a busy highway. I was driving the second van, so I followed suit, worrying the whole time what was wrong. Did someone get sick? Is the van having problems? The driver, who was the senior minister, got out of the van, stalked around to the side door, opened it, and dragged out one of the middle school boys. He grabbed him by the arm, marched him to our van, opened the door, and said with deep exasperation, “He’s all yours.” I think that might be how God is feeling here about traveling with the Israelites.

So, in our passage today, we’re overhearing a conversation between God and Moses that takes place right after this pronouncement. Moses is disturbed by God’s decision and lets God know about it. Moses says, “Look, you told me to lead these people, but how do I do that if you’re not with me? If you really trust me, God, give me your exact marching orders. Tell me step by step what I’m supposed to do. Show me your ways.” This is a critical moment in the

relationship between God and Moses. By asking to be shown God's way, Moses is seeking to know God as much as possible. In fact, a more literal translation of the original Hebrew says, "You have not let me know. You said, 'I know.' Show me that I may know." We are embedded with a desire to know. The more Moses can truly know God, the more comfortable he will feel in his faith, which is probably true for every single one of us. I know it is for me. "If I could only know you, God! Show me! Tell me! Let me see your face! Post a neon sign so I'll know exactly what to do." Sometimes, we just want to know who God is and what God wants from us.

I played basketball in high school, despite having no discernable skills. My role was a space-eater. The coach told me to stand in a certain place and set picks for the other players, players who could do things I couldn't, like jump and shoot and pay attention. If I strayed from my spot or dared to put up a shot, the coach would call a timeout, grab the clipboard, draw a big red X on it, and say, "Wilcoxson, you stand right there!"

Sometimes I wish I could see God's clipboard. Most of the time in my life I'm OK with trusting, but sometimes I need to know. I think that's where Moses is in our story. He's seen the miracles, but he needs a deeper understanding of who God is, not just what God does. This is not the burning bush, which aroused Moses' curiosity. This is not a series of plagues, which put the fear of God in him. This is not the parting of the sea or the giving of manna from heaven. This is Moses asking to know God in a deeper way.

God doesn't offer Moses a glimpse of the clipboard, but God offers him something even greater. After some negotiations, God retracts the earlier threat and promises to go with Moses and the Israelites to the Promised Land, saying, "I will do the very thing that you asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." In one of strangest instances of humanizing God in all of scripture, God hides Moses in the cleft of a rock, covers the opening and passes by, removing God's hand so that Moses can see God's back.

No fair! I want that. I want to see what Moses saw. I may not be lugging around a couple million Israelites, I might not be able to even part the water in my bathtub, but I have my own doubts, I also need a pep talk from the Coach every now and then. I want the supernatural experience. I want the booming voice and the blinding light. I don't want to have to trust all the time; sometimes I want to know.

I think Paul must have struggled with this same question, but he seems to have come to a peace with the lack of an answer. We know I Corinthians 13 as the "Love Chapter," but in it is this intriguing verse: "Now I know only in part; then (when we stand before God) I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." How interesting that I am fixated on what I need to know, which has caused me to forget that what's important is not what I know, but that I am known. Just as God knows Moses by name, God knows us by name. The fact that we are known is all we need to know, because it means that as we strive to follow God, God is with us. Whatever you are going through, whatever you are struggle with... God knows. You are known.

By giving Moses this intimate glimpse, God recommits to Moses and the stubborn, stiff-necked Israelites. At the burning bush, God sealed the agreement with Moses by giving God's name. Here, God seals it with a closer encounter. The only way to know someone more completely than knowing their name is meeting them in person, even if it is only from the back. In the next chapter, Moses will make two new tablets and write God's laws on them, re-establishing the covenant that was broken with the Golden Calf. Once again, through God's grace, a dead-end turns into a path through the wilderness.

That covenant will last, even though the Israelites will continue to break it. God gave them all these laws to help them know how to be God's people in this world, and yet time and

time again the people broke them. So, God sent prophets to the people, folks like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, to remind the people of the covenant God made with them. The people would repent for a time and recommit themselves to following the laws, but they were humans, so eventually they would revert back to their sinful behavior, breaking their end of the covenant over and over again.

Finally, God threw up God's hands and said, "This isn't working." It would have been completely understandable if God had given up on us, if God had truly turned God's back on these stiff-necked people. But instead of turning God's back, God turned the other way. In Jesus Christ, God turned around so we could see God's face. Through Christ, God says to us, "Here I am. I love you. I am with you." Through Christ, God made flesh, we know God. We have seen God face-to-face.

In Jewish tradition, it was customary for students of a rabbi, the master teacher, to follow the rabbi around, soaking in all that the rabbi had to say. They would follow closely on the rabbi's heels for the entire day as the rabbi walked down dusty roads. By the end of the day, the students would have dust all over them from living in the rabbi's wake.

Our goal, as Christians, is to be covered in the dust of our rabbi, to follow Jesus so closely that our lives are saturated with his teachings, his will, his love. Here's one of the paradoxes of faith: The more we strive to connect, the more we ask God to teach us God's ways, the more we pray for a deeper relationship with Christ, the more we *may* know, but the more we *will be* known.

Through Christ, God has said to us, "I am with you. My presence goes with you." And each day, we have a chance to see this presence, to glimpse God's glory all around us. Where do you see it? I see it anytime I visit a newborn in the hospital. Maybe you see it in a radiant sunset or a blooming flower. Maybe you hear it in a favorite song or a loved one's voice. Maybe you smell it in fresh baked bread or taste it at the communion table. God's glory is ALL around us! God IS with us! We have seen it!

Poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees, takes off his shoes. The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries, and daub their natural faces unaware." Are we aware that we have seen God? No matter how checkered our past, how pervasive our doubts, how many times we've told God "no," the glory of God has been revealed to us – to us! The Bible tells us that God says to Moses, "I know you by name." Through Christ, God has said the same to you. There's so much I wish I could know, but for now, I find rest in the incontrovertible fact that I am known. And that is enough.