

October 22nd, 2023
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Glimpse of Glory

Stewardship Sunday
Washington, D.C.
Exodus 33:12-23

Moses 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.' Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."

The Lord said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And Moses said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For 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."

The LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."

Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray."

And the Lord 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. But," the Lord said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and 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; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Moses and God had already been through a lot together by the time we get to this scene in Exodus. This is a classic conversation with God where Moses is trying to stipulate terms with God Almighty. It is an if / then, quid pro quo kind of conversation that humans often try to have with the divine. Moses says, "If I am going to continue to lead your people then you have to do something for me!" God offers Moses the promises that God offers to each one of us, God says, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Sounds like familiar words from Jesus to the disciples. But it isn't what Moses asked for...Moses wanted more than the knowledge of God's presence.

Moses wanted answers, grand revelations, and to direct access to God. Moses is like all of us. We want very clear signs from God, we want unmistakable epiphanies, we want immediate resolutions to our problems to show us God is in fact doing God's job. But God told Moses, that he could not have that kind of access to God. God said, "You cannot see my face' for no one shall see me and live."

That is a hard truth. We do not get exactly what we want from God. We want to see God and know God fully but on this side of heaven we can't handle it. The mysteries of the universe are vast, and our imaginations are miniscule in comparison. So, it just is not a reasonable request for a human to ask to see God's glory.

Yet God must be somewhat sympathetic to Moses because he does not completely ignore the request. Instead, God says Moses will be allowed only to catch a glimpse of the back of God as God passes by. Not a full look, not a long stare, not a snapshot of the face, just a glimpse of the back as God passes on God's way. It reminds me of making those pinhole projector boxes in school in order to safely watch a solar eclipse. You stand with your back to the sun and let it shine into your box and project on the opposite side. I mean this, as a kid, is really lame. It was even lame in the 80s when cardboard boxes were cool.

When you want to see the sun, sticking your head in a box seems like a good way to NOT see the sun. It is exactly what God did to Moses. Moses, I'm passing your way but hide behind a rock and when I'm basically gone then I'll tell you it is safe to look at me.

Moses saw God but just barely. A glimpse of God's glory was apparently all Moses really needed. A glimpse was enough for Moses to keep on going. A glimpse was enough to shore up his faith.

The poet Jan Richardson captures the beauty and the frustration of Moses's experience. It is called *In the Cleaving*. Here are a few excerpts but please look it up and read the whole thing.

I know how hard it is to abide this blessing when some part of it remains always hidden from view even as it sees you from every angle, inhabits your entire being, calls you by your name. I know the ache of vision that comes in such fragments, the terrible wonder of glory that arrives but in glimpses...So I am not here to make excuses for this blessing, for how it turns its face from us when we need to see it most...I want to be unafraid to turn toward this blessing that binds itself to us even in the rending; this blessing that unhinges us even as it makes us whole.

God's ways are so mysterious and the shape and timing of God's blessings equally enigmatic. How frustrating for humanity who want more from God than such fleeting sightings of the divine in our world when we constantly stare into screens displaying images of despair, and horror, and unthinkable evil. We would like to see God's full glory shown to us and the mysteries revealed and yet glimpses are what we receive. And so, the glimpses must be enough to remind us of God's presence and God's faithfulness.

The Trappist Thomas Merton monk wrote, "We receive enlightenment only in proportion as we give ourselves more and more completely to God by humble submission and love. We do not first see, then act: we act, then see. And that is why the man who waits to see clearly, before he will believe, never starts on the journey."

The greatest blessing God provides is a constant spiritual presence for us throughout the journey of our lives. What great comfort it is, in times of great worry, of seasons of darkness, in periods of heartbreak – that the divine being who accompanied Moses through the Red Sea, and surrounded

Jesus while he was tempted in the wilderness and the Apostle Paul when he was imprisoned – that very same God surrounds us today. That is the blessing God promises.

Now I must admit that I feel very bossy with God. God go over there and fix that mess. God go visit that person and give her strength. God fix his body right now. God don't let this fall apart. And as I boss God around, I also humbly acknowledge that I do not know the mysteries of the universe and I do not know God's will. I also know very deeply in my being that God is present, and God is active and somehow that knowledge has to be enough. That was the real blessing God offered to Moses, not a quick sighting of God backside but the knowledge of God's constancy was the blessing. God was always going to be there for Moses.

Last week, I was in Princeton for the board of trustee meetings for the seminary. Enrollment is something we always talk about at our meetings. Who is enrolling in the Master of Divinity program and also who will be graduating and pursuing traditional congregational ministries. If you dig into the numbers, it is pretty alarming. Very few people think that they want to serve traditional congregations like Georgetown Presbyterian Church. I asked the Dean of Students why not even though I already knew what he would tell me. He said that leading a traditional church feels like too much of a burden, too limiting to the freedom they want to have in their ministries, and too much of a responsibility to keep a church afloat. They want to be out in the world where God is on the move.

I get that. Running a church is hard but here's one thing to note, God didn't leave the church and go elsewhere. Glimpses of God's glory can still be found every single week within the walls of the church. Every week, in the church, people who yearn to see the glory of God come together for a shared experience of worship. And maybe just one person per week experiences the divine coming close to them is enough to justify all of the work of running an institutional church. Or maybe just one soul who has never stepped foot inside the walls of the church but who has had their life improved by the ministries of that church justifies existence. Maybe just one child who learns about the person of Jesus and hears about unconditional love from God makes it all worth it.

Or maybe this is what I tell myself so that I can sleep at night. Because it is hard to run a church and it is stewardship season, and it is budget season and while the programs are booming at GPC, we still are not at the pre-pandemic giving or participation levels. We have to increase our stewardship response by 13% from last year's budget to square the numbers but that still doesn't get us back to our peak giving number five years ago. Everything is more expensive from the paper we print the bulletins on to electricity bills to keep the lights on. Running a church is hard even for stately places like Georgetown Presbyterian Church.

So maybe one seminary student would argue that instead of trying to raise the 1.2 million dollars of income needed to run this shop, we should just go out and find God on the move. It means we don't have to ask all of you to support the church financially, but it also means that no one gets to show up here on a Sunday and slip into a pew and experience the peace and serenity of this place for one hour. It means no one gets to join their voices in the hymns and be uplifted by other voices singing the faith around them. It means the children are not welcomed by kind teachers and told the stories of Jesus. It means that we don't get a chance to work alongside each other to serve our

community. It means that there is no longer a place where people come together because of the faith and not their politics to study and to worship and to enjoy each other.

Let us remember the words of Jesus to Peter commissioning the work of the church – “You are Peter, and, on this rock, I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.” The church is not a modern invention – the church was the idea of Jesus for the people of God and the disciples were supposed to lead it.

1.2 million dollars to do our ministry for one year. Now you can go out and try to find glimpses of God in the world or you can invest in a place where the ministry of Jesus Christ continues. We are proud of the 243 years of ministry of this congregation but what we should be even more proud of is the legacy of our church connected to every church since Jesus himself sent the disciples out to preach and teach and heal and serve. Christ is the rock on which we stand. God promised Moses to always be with him. God promises the same to us today. It is the churches job to proclaim that message. And it is worth every dollar if in this place people experience the presence of God, or people find rest for their souls, or people are encouraged to keep going for another week. It is worth every dollar if someone experiences a glimpse of God’s glory in this place or someone is reminded that they are not alone.

In this stewardship season, and we really need you to believe in the work of this church and the ministry of this place. This institutional church is a visible sign of the promise God offered to Moses and Jesus offered to the disciples. *The Lord said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."* Our world needs every reminder of this blessing it can get. So, we thank God for the gift of the church in this place and throughout the world. And we give thanks for the blessings of this our congregation and pray that we will be faithful stewards in our season of ministry. May we cling to the glimpses of God’s glory and persevere with joy, in serving Christ today.

Thanks be to God. Amen.