

“FROM OUT THE CLEFT OF THE ROCK”

Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22

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There are many great heroes and she-roes of the Hebrew Bible, but among them no one comes close to Moses: Moses the Prince of Egypt who gave up power, position, a life of comfort to align himself with a despised and oppressed people; Moses who dared to threaten Pharaoh and who led his people out of bondage through the waters of the Red Sea; Moses, the only prophet who dared argue with God, instruct God, who spoke to God in the words of Exodus “friend to friend.” A man as close to equal with God as a human could be.

But to be as equal to God as any human could be is still to be very different, as we are reminded in this morning’s scripture. Moses, having successfully negotiated with God for God’s continuing direct presence with the people, blurts out in a moment of rare intimacy, “Show me your glory.” The word for “glory” here is a word we cannot translate well. It means “Show me the full sum of you. Let me behold all of your magnificence.” Moses, closer to God than anyone has ever been, wants to draw closer yet, to know fully this God whom he has loved and served, and argued with and devoted his life to. Show me all of you,” he cries. “Erase all that can be erased between us.” In ancient days, the storyteller would most likely pause here, let the last notes of Moses’s cry linger in sacred silence. And then God answers, in words of surpassing tenderness, “This is what I can do. I will have all my goodness pass before you and I will proclaim to you my name^{1/4}but you cannot see my face, for it is just not possible. So I will put you in this place. You will stand on this rock, and while my glory passes by, I will cover you with my hand, and when I have come and gone, I will take my hand away, and you shall see as much as you can see from out of a slit in the rock of my retreating back.”

“You shall see what you can see out of a slit in the rock of my retreating back.” That’s all. That’s all that even Moses, that great spiritual giant could see—just a sliver shot of God’s back side—the most that God could reveal.

I have read this story maybe 100 times, and it still leaves me with chills. So often I think we pare God down; we recreate God in our image, only just a little larger. We lose sight of God’s greatness, God’s glory and magnificence. We assume we know all there is to know of God, and when we do that, we cannot help but be wrong.

I think our Hindu friends do better with God’s greatness. They create image after image, images without end, and for each one proclaim, “This is one face of the divine”—not all, never even approaching all, but one face, many faces, an endless parade of images, because the glory of God is too vast to be caught in any one aspect, in any one understanding.

On this celebration of Hymnody Sunday, I would say that I think maybe in our tradition the hymnists get it best. They are the ones who struggle in poetry and music to reveal face after face, aspect after aspect of the divine goodness and our response to it. I am thankful for the length and

breadth and depth and variety of their art—old words, new words, old melodies, new melodies—even the tunes I have a hard time singing, because when I think about it, why should it always be easy to sing about God. Maybe it is right for us to struggle to learn new melodies, new rhythms of praise and devotion. We don't have to like it every minute. We can grumble to our hearts content. But it is a great reminder of how we need always to stretch some more, to move to new and uncertain ground, if we are to see the most we can of God. So think about that next time Ryan or I choose an unfamiliar hymn: it's a spiritual discipline that reminds you of the vastness of God.

God is vast and glorious, mysterious and complex, and impossible for us to fully know. That's why I'm not a Christian exclusivist. Because by our own scripture's telling, we cannot possibly know all there is of God. Even if we limit ourselves to our image of God revealed in Jesus Christ, who can fully comprehend the depths of what that is, what it means? One of the delights of Christian scholarship these days is the explosion of voices taking part in the conversation. Theology is contextual, we have come to understand. Christians around the world share the same Bible, the same God, the same Christ, but each of us—out of our life situation—comes to our faith with different eyes. We see, borrowing the Exodus image, out from different clefts in the rock. Native Americans ask different questions, catch different nuances, than African theologians; Christians in Korea and Japan find different insights than our brothers and sisters in Latin America. Men read the Bible differently from women; people of power read it differently than those with no power. No one of these groups is right or wrong, only different. Just like each one of us here brings our particular experience personally and culturally to our understanding of our faith. And the good news is that in these days, we are fortunate to understand this contextuality as a gift, to rejoice in the many voices of faith, the many aspects of God revealed in part to each set of eyes.

Liberal church scholars do not speak of Christianity any more; they speak of Christianities, both historically and in the present. This not-so-subtle shift is important. To speak of Christianities is to acknowledge that there's no one of us who is right and the rest are wrong. To speak of Christianities is to say that what speaks to you in our faith and tradition may never be the same as what speaks to me, and that's ok; that is right and appropriate. To speak of Christianities is to affirm the variety of our lives and the insight that comes from that variety. It is also to acknowledge our interdependence as we seek to know God better.

I remember one of the first conversations I had with Masato Tsukuda, minister of our partner church in Takarazuka. He told me that until recently Japanese Christians felt they had to mimic the great German theologians, that they had to deny their culture to study the Bible to be Christian. In the past fifteen years, though, that has changed; and at least in the liberal church, we have come to celebrate how much we have to learn, especially from Christians from non-Western cultures.

I think in large part, it has been the impetus of understanding our different Christianities that has led Christians—in greater numbers and depth than ever before—to enter into conversation with those of other faith traditions. I know for myself that the richest part of my sabbatical was the opportunity I had to speak with Hindus and Muslims about their worship and experience of God.

I am a committed Christian, and yet my private devotional life has been changed forever because of the model of devotion I saw in the Hindu family with whom I was partnered. I love my own faith tradition, but when I read the words of the great Muslim apologist Tariq Ramadan, when I observed the kind and compassionate faith of the young Muslim women I had the privilege of meeting, I could see the appeal of that way of surrender to God. Every time I get to speak about God and religious experience with a person of another faith tradition, it feels like looking through yet another cleft in the rock; and what I see there most of the time, like the multiplicity of voices within my own tradition, only adds to my love and understanding of God.

No one of us has the corner on religious truth; all our attempts to know God are partial, limited. That means that after a certain point, if we are to keep learning, we must enter into conversation with those whose experience of faith is not like ours, both those within and those outside of our tradition. It's not optional. So in the face of that, we can choose to be distressed at God's largeness, preferring a smaller God whom any one of us can understand. We can hoard that small sliver of God's being that we can see and claim that's all there is. Or we can celebrate God's vastness and magnificence, and enter into the conversation taking place with persons of all denominations, of all faiths, and so draw closer to the glory, the magnificence of the God of all life. Thanks be to God. Amen.