

**“IS IT ENOUGH?”**  
**Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:34-46**  
**October 19, 2008**  
**The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger**

Our reading from Exodus this morning is one of those that requires some context. Moses had gone up Mount Sinai to speak to God. He was gone a long time, longer than the people expected, and so they got anxious. With Moses gone, who would lead them? The people pleaded with Aaron, who was in charge in Moses' absence, for direction and protection. Aaron had them take off their gold ornaments and make a golden calf and worship it. That was last week's scripture reading. It was a bad decision. Not surprisingly, God was not happy with the people's action; Moses was not happy; and when Moses came down the mountain and dealt with the people, the people weren't happy either. There was much weeping and gnashing of teeth in the camp that night.

But even the delivery of what was deemed appropriate punishment did not cause God's anger to cool. You have to look at this from God's perspective. God had brought the people out of slavery, protected them in the wilderness, fed them miraculous food, and caused water to burst forth from rocks... and yet still in their uncertainty, the people again panicked. "A stiff-necked people," God called them, slow to learn and believe, and it's hard to argue with God's point of view.

God directed Moses to gather up the Israelites and leave Sinai, go forward towards the promised land. "But I," said God, "I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people..."

But Moses did not agree with God. Moses argued with God to continue to go forward with the people, and in the end, God changed God's mind—which is where we get to today's reading. Moses argues with God, and not only does God not take offense at Moses' argument, not only does God change God's mind, God also grants Moses a special request. "Show me your glory, I pray," asks Moses, and God responds to him: "I will make all my goodness pass before you, but you cannot see my face, for no human can see me and live." And after that, in one of the great tender moments of scripture, God directs Moses to stand close by, and God places Moses in the cleft of a rock, and covers Moses with God's hand, and when all of God has passed by, only then did God remove the protecting hand so that Moses might for an instant see God's retreating back.

I love this story. It is, in fact, one of a handful of passages in scripture that I cling to in the difficult times of my life. And there are two reasons for this. The first of these is Moses's argument with God. This is not the first time Moses has questioned God's judgment, nor will it be the last time; and from the evidence of the text, Moses feels entirely free to challenge God, to confront God, to argue long and hard within the context of that relationship. Now, I don't know about the rest of you. Maybe it was just the 1950s, maybe it was my church, maybe it was just because Episcopalians are excessively well-behaved, but I grew up thinking it was the Christian thing to do to quietly, passively believe all that happened was God's will. It was my job as a person of God to graciously accept whatever happened. Not until I reached theological school

did anyone tell me that there is a long and important tradition of questioning God in the Bible. It's not just Moses we're talking about here, but also Elijah, Jonah, Hosea, the psalmist, and Paul in his back-handed way. There's even Jeremiah who shook his fist at God, he was so distressed. These great saints and prophets of the scripture, they not only questioned and challenged God, they also just plain ranted at God. They whined; they sniveled; they came before God holding back not one iota of their anger, their doubt, or their despair. Don't you find that comforting? I do.

As people of faith, we claim that God is good, that God is loving, that God cares for us all together and each of us individually. Those are the claims of our faith. And yet, we live our lives, and there are always events, large and small, that make us come to question God's wisdom, or God's power, or God's love, or sometimes whether God really is. How can we not ever question, if we are thinking people? There is no argument that makes the equation of a good and loving God and a broken and hurting world end up neat and tidy. Well, actually there are many arguments, but none of them are convincing. And so we who care about God, we who practice our faith day to day, it's important for us to know that the great ones of God who went before us, they had their problems with God, too. Therefore it is to be expected, it is utterly normal and not a bad thing that as part of our theological life we will have times when all we have to say to God, to give to God, is anger or confusion or pain or doubt, or argument. It's to be expected and it's not bad.

And the reason we need to hear this, I think, is that when we have questions, when we have doubts, when we are angry at God, for many of us, our first impulse is to hide. In our well-brought-up way, we think that unless we can come before God with eloquent words and piously elevated thoughts, then maybe it's better to stay away, to say nothing at all. But that's not true. I remember years ago, when my father was dying, and I was really angry at God, a good friend and colleague of mine, a wonderful Irish nun, asked me how my prayer life was. I looked at her as if she was nuts. "What prayer life?" I asked her. "I really don't have anything nice to say to God these days." "Who said anything about nice," she challenged me. "If all you have to give to God is your anger or your pain, then that's your prayer." I remained unconvinced. She smiled at me. "What? You really think God's not tough enough to stand up to Liz Oettinger's anger or questions?" Well, when she put it that way.... so, over the next days and weeks, I let go and offered my angry, untidy, questioning, impious self to God, and called it prayer. Even in my bewilderment and fear, I knew that I was standing in a long and venerable tradition of the would-be people of God—being real with God, offering God what was most urgent rather than most pleasant.

So the first reason I love this text is that it gives my questions and doubts and arguments with God a framework of legitimacy. The second has to do with perspective. When Moses argues from his heart with God, the relationship between God and Moses reaches a new level of intimacy, and out of that sense of closeness, Moses presumes to ask God to reveal Godself fully to him. In response we see this carefully drawn picture of God sheltering Moses behind God's hand and then giving him the briefest of glances at God's retreating back through the sliver of an opening in the rock. Perhaps in part because of our anthropomorphic images of God—parent, judge, friend—we often fall into the trap of thinking that God is essentially like us, just a bigger, better version of us. And so it follows that if God were just kinder or more self-giving or we

were somehow better, then we would be able to see God whole; then we could understand God and God's ways. But God is God, and we—even the most intelligent or faithful or theologically mature of us—we are God's creatures. We simply can't see all of God; we can't understand God, not because God would play games with us, but because we lack the capacity. We're just not made to be able to perceive God other than in hints and guesses and all-too-partial glimpses of God's retreating back.

Although it can be frustrating or angering or painful not to see and understand God better, there is for me a comfort in revising my perspective, in accepting the partialness of our possible knowledge of God. This is not a case where if we just were smarter or holier or worked harder, everything would fall into place. Moses is the one person in scripture who spoke with God as a friend. If he couldn't see more than the small, the partial, and the obscured of God, then neither can we.

And so the question before us becomes, "Is what we can know and can see enough?" Is there enough sustenance in the hints and guesses, the small views of God's love and substance that we are able to see to carry us through our journeys?. For Moses it was enough. And for Elijah. It was enough for Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Peter, the Rock of the church. It was even enough for Jeremiah, though I doubt he ever quit shaking his fist at God from time to time. I don't expect God wanted him to.

We can't know all of God, but God has given us the freedom always to come to God with our questions, our anger, our pain, our arguments, all of ourselves. And when we do that, what we are promised in return is to be held close by God's side, and tenderly shown whatever can be shown us in love and fidelity and trust. I have to be honest here. Some days, it doesn't work for me, but most of the time, most days, it is enough. Thanks be to God. Amen.