

## **“A TALE OF PARADOX”**

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

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It's been a couple of years since I took my first biblical Hebrew class. And on the first day, the professor came in and made this announcement: “friends, let me remind you that when we gather as we do today, we're creating a community around the sacred text. We're reading the scripture exactly as it's meant to be read – within a community composed of individuals from different contexts, with diverse experiences. There is something holy that takes place when we do this.” By week four I realized that these sentences were not so much a ‘welcome to class’ kind of announcement, but rather a meditation of sorts. They were the liturgy with which he opened every class for a year. Most weeks, this repetitive opening irritated me. All I was trying to do was remember the alphabet or my list of vocab words for the test that was about to be administered. We were a long way off from the practice of “reading” the text. We were still learning about syntax and root words and verbs...

But at some point, we did begin to *read* the text. We started with the story of Jonah and moved through the narrative of Joseph and his brothers. And the following year we continued on with archaic texts, and after spending nearly an hour one afternoon debating which word we thought was the author's intent – I realized what was happening. We were reading scripture the way it was intended to be read and reflected on – in community, among individuals where experiences and perspectives enrich the ambiguity of the biblical witness.

The Exodus text we read today is like many texts in the Hebrew Bible. It is not exactly linear – it has moments of ambiguity – there is not a singular or “right” way to interpret what's happening. In fact, there is a multiplicity of ways we could approach these verses...

We could examine it critically from a historical perspective. If we did that, we'd likely notice some inconsistencies. For example, the dialogue between Moses and God in Exodus 33:12-23 bears no reference to the verses just proceeding it where God promises an angel will go before the people. And there's no attempt to reconcile the Mosaic tradition of tent meeting with God, Moses and God speaking face to face as friends with no threat of danger in seeing the face of the divine.

We could also approach the text linguistically...If we did that, we would examine the use of *yada*, the Hebrew verb “to know,” which is used three times in Moses' first petition. We could discuss the implications of God's response to Moses, “My presence will go with you.” The Hebrew translates a little bit differently than the text is often interpreted. The Hebrew reads, “And God said MY FACE will go and give rest to you.” The face of God is not intended to be translated here as some kind of miraculous or sacramental or mystical device. “Face of God” refers to the active presence of God. Moses is asking for God to take a dynamic interest in the people of Israel, and requesting that God take action

in light of that interest.

But the question of the ancient text almost always comes back to how God speaks to us presently, in our current contexts, through scripture. In what ways do we resonate with this story, today? What truth is important for us to hear?

I'm drawn to the problem of the hidden God in this text, a theme that has consistently intrigued theologians and created tension for the people of God. While this sermon isn't about the problem of evil, it's important to notice that scripture bears witness to the struggle of suffering – and the God who appears to be invisible in the midst of distress. Later on, we'll divert our attention very briefly to the book of Job as we look for examples of human response toward the seeming absence of God's presence in moments of suffering.

To review the Exodus text: Moses speaks two times in these verses – both speeches are a request for assurance. Moses needs to know something concretely.

Theologically, the story of Israel has moved from the crisis of existence to the crisis of God's continuing presence. Israel's very existence is viable *only* on the condition of God's presence. And so Moses asks for assurance. He asks to know; he asks to be shown.

God responds, affirming the divine presence – “My presence will go with you.” And Moses pushes further – he reiterates twice that the promise must not be between Moses and God – it must also involve the people of Israel. Twice he reminds God of the divine responsibility toward the people. The insistence of Moses emphasizes the fact that the people of Israel are unique only because of God's covenant with them. Again, God promises to do what Moses requests. *And then Moses asks to see the glory of God* – what Moses is given in terms of presence seems never to be enough.

God responds by telling Moses that he cannot see the face of God – that no one can see the face of God and live. For some reason, at this particular moment in the narrative, God limits divine self-disclosure. God's counter-offer involves passing all the goodness of the Lord before Moses, hidden in a cleft of the rock, covered by the hand of God. And only when the Divine has passed, will Moses be allowed to see the back of God. The text is not interested in harmonizing whatever has previously been written about Moses seeing the face of God – and *that* discrepancy (that God can be both visible and hidden), highlights what I think is important for us to see in the text. *The struggle for the presence of God is complicated.*

It's why we find ourselves so conflicted when we talk about the God who is both immanent and transcendent. It's not supposed to be simple. The tension between where the Divine appears to be present and where the Divine appears to be absent is exactly where we most need to find God.

This is not something we encounter only today; Where was God in the stories of Hagar, Tamar, and the unnamed concubine in the Hebrew scripture? Where was God during the

Holocaust, or Apartheid? And those are just the stories of human anguish. Where is God as species become endangered and extinct? Where is God as the well-being of the earth becomes more and more uncertain?

More troubling, if we're honest – we must ask not only “Where was and is God?” but, “Is God complicit in these tragedies?” and even more frightening, “What if God is the cause?”

Simone Weil writes that the hiddenness of God is most powerfully apparent in the faces of whole groups and histories of marginalized and oppressed peoples – the suffering of all those ‘others’ whom the grand narrative of modernity has too often set aside as non-peoples, non-events, non-memories, non-history. And this is where we'll be diverted for a moment toward another story of suffering in the Hebrew Bible. In Chapter 16, verses 19-21, Job calls upon a mediator to act as a witness to and against God. The protest of Job is a legitimate cry of anguish and a sense of abandonment. How can there be any other honest response in the midst of affliction or fear than to struggle with God? Struggle can be a deeply religious act – not only valid but actually necessary for holistic faith. Wrestling with and against God expresses tension with the hiddenness of God. Moses' struggle with God to promise and reveal divine presence is humanity's struggle with the hidden God.

The Christ of liberation theology is imbedded in this struggle of the invisible and suffering. If the hidden presence of God is masked for the powerful and the wealthy, there's an attentiveness to the hidden God for those who are on the underside – the oppressed, the poor, and the marginalized. We who are privileged ought to consider what it would mean to stand in solidarity with the victims and dispossessed of history as a prerequisite for contact with the hidden God and the crucified Christ.

In the Exodus story, God is not entirely hidden. Moses will have to be satisfied with seeing where God has already passed, and the people of Israel with the results of God – rather than with the face of God.

What does it mean that we often see only where God has been? That God's glory seems always to be in retrospect?

Martin Luther appealed to Exodus 33 in his theology of the hidden God. For Luther, God's partial revelation to Moses is profound. God is revealed in the places where it seems God ought not be. In frailty, in suffering, in the humanness of Christ – the revelation of God comes to us unexpectedly. Logic, reason, and academia do not appreciate this. At some point, the presence of God demands faith. Belief in a God that is wholly other and transcendent – a God whose glory cannot be looked upon, and simultaneously, a God who is born into human history as a baby in a manger, wholly dependent on those around him for survival.

Would we have recognized the presence of God, had we been there? Would we have recognized God's presence among a displaced people as they wandered in the

wilderness? Would we have recognized the presence of God in the human ordinariness of Bethlehem?

The mystics have something to teach us about paying attention to the presence of God – where it’s hidden, where we think it ought not be found. In dirt, in hazelnuts – God in all things and all things in God.

I secretly hated playing hide and seek when I was a little girl. My younger sister loved it, and my mom had no problems indulging her delight in playing the game. So I went along with it, but I can remember my anxiety level rising higher and higher until, for some reason or another, the game was called off and one of us declared the “best seeker” or the “best hider.” I hated it because even as a child, my mind had difficulties reconciling that what I couldn’t see was still present. I was always worried that when I couldn’t find someone after a few minutes of searching, that they had literally disappeared. I couldn’t stop my mind from panicking over feeling abandoned, or how I would define myself if my mother and sister weren’t present. Who was I, if not my mother’s daughter and Holly’s big sister? Yes, I was an over-anxious child. But my feelings were not unlike those of Moses and the people of Israel – fearful of being abandoned, needing tangible evidence of presence. I wish I could tell you that I do better with paradox now – that I know God is present even when God seems hidden. But frankly, I don’t. My personality might be predisposed to being particularly troubled by paradox, but I think it’s a bit more universal than that. The struggle with the hidden God is an ultimately human act – it engages spirituality and faith, and it unites us as we seek the Divine together.

Today, may we wrestle with the active presence of the Divine. May we be unafraid to pay attention to the hidden God, allowing ourselves to be surprised and even healed by the places we find God. When we are unable to experience the presence of God, may faith carry us through the wilderness – may we be satisfied with seeing where God’s glory has passed.

My Hebrew professor would say that whatever this text has revealed to us, today – we ought to hold it lightly, with open hands. Grateful that when the people of God gather around the Biblical witness with ears to hear and eyes to see, we often glimpse something of the divine, if only for a moment.

## **Benediction**

May the God who met with Moses in intimate friendship, be with you today.

May the transcendent God who is utterly other than we are, provide you hope.

May the immanent Christ who entered human history in the most fragile and ordinary form, be present among you.

May you have courage to see God where you think God is absent.

May we be unafraid to struggle with the difficulties of the hidden God.

May we have faith to hold the paradox of God.

May we be blessed with the presence of the Divine.

Amen.