



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Lockett Currie

God's Promise and Presence

Sermon for 10-16-11

Scripture: Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:1-14

Nine year old Joey was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday school. "Well, Mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge and all the people walked across safely. Then he used his walkie-talkie to radio headquarters for reinforcements. They sent bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Israelites were saved." "Now, Joey is that really what your teacher taught you?" His mother asked. "Well, no, Mom. But if I told it the way the teacher did, you'd never believe it!"

Today I am going to focus on our Hebrew Scripture, the 33rd chapter of Exodus where we hear a dialogue between Moses and God. I have not been preaching on Exodus much so let me first catch you up on what has been going on in the last few chapters of Exodus.

After bringing the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, God had initiated a special relationship with them; he had called Moses to be their leader. Through Moses, God had given them the Ten Commandments¹ and instructions on building the tabernacle². God had even promised to dwell in the midst of the Israelites; and the tabernacle was to be a visible sign of that abiding presence of God³. God would be present with the people in a real and material way as they traveled through the wilderness.

The problem, of course, is that by the time we get to the current chapter, the

¹ Exodus 20

² Exodus 25-31

³ Exodus 25:81 29:45-46



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Lockett Currie

people have stumbled, badly. While Moses was up on the Mountain talking to God, the people got restless and asked Moses' brother Aaron to create for them a Golden Calf to worship. If you remember the commandments, you know that this was forbidden. God had told them that they were not to worship any graven images but only the one God. So after the Israelites betrayed their relationship with God, God was angry and changed his mind about the form of the relationship. God would still keep the covenant made with them at Sinai, but instead of going with them in the tabernacle, God would send an angel to be with them.

Moses was not satisfied with this arrangement. Moses wants to know for sure that God would be with him and his people. Moses believes that Israel's future survival and well-being depends on God's promise and presence. Moses must have certitude, and only God can tell him. What he wants to know is who God will send. Moses says to God, "You have been telling me, 'lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me" (v.12-the Message). Moses continues to remind God that Israel belongs to God and that God cannot escape responsibility for these people.

Moses always wants more from God. And he doesn't always listen very well. God has responded to Moses by saying in v. 14, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." As soon as God responds, Moses is at it again, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here." God again reassures Moses: "This thing which you have asked I will do, because you have found favor in my eyes and I do know you by name!"⁴ Moses believes that the only way others will know that the Israelites are God's special people is if God accompanies them. Finally Moses gets it and then asks for one more thing, "Show me your glory."

⁴Ex. 33:17



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

According to Walter Brueggemann glory is something like an overpowering light, ‘a shrouded magisterial presence.’ God refuses. God says that Moses has been given God’s name and all of God’s goodness and mercy. Goodness here means shalom and refers to the material blessings of creation. Yet God is not going to let Moses see his face. Now this can be confusing because in earlier chapters we are told that Moses and God are face to face in the tent. Progressive biblical scholars suggest that perhaps this reflects some internal problems in the final editing of this story. What God will allow is for Moses to stand on a rock, and when God’s glory passes by, God will put Moses in a cleft of the rock, cover him with his “hand,” and then take away the hand so that Moses can see God’s “back.” Interestingly enough the Bible never says that this encounter with Moses seeing God’s backside, ever does take place.

Well, enough of the replay of scripture—what does it all mean for us today? I’m going to develop two themes—the tension between self-giving and self-keeping in God and in us and the second theme is the meaning of God’s Presence.

Despite the intimacy and generosity of God, in the end God will not expose all that God is, nor give away all that God has. There are limitations on both accessibility and intimacy. We have seen in the scripture passage a God who is genuinely self-giving, fully attentive to the insistent petitions/prayers of Moses. In fact God extends God’s self in extreme ways in order to meet the needs and yearnings of Israel (and us) Brueggemann again says that we are most “god-like” when we too keep this tension. He believes, and you may have observed, that too much traditional Christianity has often been one-sidedly self-giving, it’s the kind of thing that often contributes to burnout and folks leaving church. It’s not exactly the



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

same as saying “No” when you are asked to do too much, but it’s similar. It’s both your physical time and also your emotional energy.

This example of God setting limitations on his accessibility is something to reflect on in terms of how women have traditionally been trained/conditioned to be ever giving of themselves in the family and to some extent in the working world. It takes great care to know where and how to set boundaries. Caregivers, regardless of gender, is another group where self-giving needs to be balanced with self-keeping.

Women have traditionally been conditioned to be giving of themselves, and it requires great care to know where and how to set boundaries. Brueggemann observes that God does just that when Moses asks to see God's glory: "God will not let even Moses crowd into the hidden core of God's own life." It’s okay to keep some things private. Brueggemann articulates the tension between traditional Christianity's lessons about self-giving and our culture's ideal about "the complete keeping of self.” We are called to imitate the God who is shown in this text, the God who both holds and gives away”.⁵ I encourage all of us to give some thought to how we balance self-giving, and an appropriate "keeping of self"?

For Moses, the Presence of God related to survival. Survival depends on Presence. Presence means the holy source of covenantal life in our midst. God made covenants with all of humanity; e.g. the rainbow meant that God would never again destroy the world and in turn the people would engage in ethical behavior. For the people of Israel, God promised them many descendants and a special land. In turn the Jews promised to be loyal to God, to teach their children the ways of righteousness, and to obey God’s commandments. So not only for the people of Israel but also for us followers of the Judaic/Christian tradition being able to know

⁵ Exodus in *The New Interpreter's Bible*



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

that God is with us, that there is no where we can escape from God's Presence is crucial. Moses in his talking to God gives us a good model. In general Christians are much meeker when making requests of God. Moses in the more familiar Jewish way prays with great hutzpah, with great insistence that God hear and pay attention to him. It's okay for us to pray that way. Moses wants to see God's face. One of my resources says, "The word for 'presence,' panim, literally means 'face.' A person's face tells us that the person is with us. It shines out with the person's love and concern."

There is no guarantee that what we want is what God will give us. I ask myself how does this fit with Jesus saying, ask in my name and you shall receive what you ask for. I'm glad I come from a theology where we don't have to have a literal interpretation of the Bible. It's more a Spirit of the Law rather than the letter of the Law. The thing that I believe with all of my heart is that God is always with us, even when it doesn't seem that way. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13, often times the seeing is dim and the knowledge is only in part, yet that is enough! God loves us and will always be there to comfort and guide us. God is also a mystery, a concept way beyond our ability to completely know—and that too is okay.

You often hear me talk about how we have the divine in us, made in the image and likeness of God. Remember as you leave this place that we are the human face of God. We are the ones that can look at others with a face that shines with love and concern for all we meet. Prayer is so important as it is through prayer that we can ask God to illuminate our path. It is through prayer that we can turn on the "spiritual electricity"⁶. Praying is the way to activate that shining. What a beautiful thought—to go from here and shine with God's glory and remember that

⁶ Julia Cameron's expression



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Lockett Currie

we don't have to pour out our whole self every day, all day. Even God has limitations on self-giving. Imitate our God and make this world a better place for all. Amen