

Proper 24 A  
Exodus 33:12-23  
October 22, 2023

*“The God Beyond Our Grasp”*  
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*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."*

*God said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."*

*And Moses said to God, "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 God 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," he 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."*

Have you ever heard the saying: “When the cat’s away, the mice will play?” Last week, we learned that while Moses was away, the people decided to play. They got restless in his absence and, wondering if God too had disappeared, they made a golden calf and worshipped it in God’s place. This didn’t go over well with God and it took a lot of pleading on Moses’ part to stay God’s hand from destroying the whole lot of them. In the wake of such a betrayal, God decided to renegotiate the terms of the divine relationship with the people. Moses wasn’t at all happy with the new arrangement. This morning’s text picks up as Moses begs God, once again, to reconsider.

In another shocking reversal, God agrees to all of Moses’ demands. Emboldened, Moses pushes his luck further. “Show me your glory,” he asks. God had been speaking with him through a cloud. Now, Moses wants to see God face to face. God explains that no mortal can see God’s face and live, but in a partial concession, God agrees to place Moses in a cave, cover him with God’s hand, and pass by while speaking God’s name: “I am that I am.” Then, God would uncover Moses and allow him to see God’s back.

Interesting to think about, isn’t it; actually seeing God? It’s rather hard for me to imagine. What could God look like, I wonder? Have you ever thought about it? Apparently, even Moses only got a glimpse of the divine backside!

Thinking about what God looks like, I’m reminded of an old fable. The 13<sup>th</sup> mystic poet Rumi tells it like this:

*Some [people] have an elephant to show.  
No-one here has seen an elephant.  
They bring it at night to a dark room.  
One by one, we go in the dark and come out  
saying how we experience the animal.  
One of us happens to touch the trunk.*

*A water-pipe kind of creature.  
Another, the ear. A very strong, always moving  
back and forth, fan-animal. Another, the leg.  
I find it still, like a column on a temple.  
Another touches the curved back.  
A leathery throne. Another, the cleverest,  
feels the tusk. A rounded sword made of porcelain.  
He is proud of his description.  
Each of us touches one place  
and understands the whole that way.  
The palm and the fingers feeling in the dark  
are how the senses explore the reality of the elephant.  
If each of us held a candle there,  
and if we went in together, we could see it.*

Now, please don't get me wrong—I'm not equating God to an elephant! But, I do think this fable beautifully illustrates how human attempts to define the divine are like so many hands feeling for God in the dark. At best, we may hope to experience a little of God for ourselves. Problems arise, however, when after seeing just the divine derriere or feeling only the elephant's tusk, we attempt to paint a picture of the whole. Further problems arise when we assume that our picture of the whole is normative for others. Consider the "holy" wars fought through the ages, some of the fires still raging today—each one a misguided attempt to force a particular conception of the divine upon others.

The truth is, our experiences of the holy are good, just as it was good for Moses to see God's back in our story from Exodus; just as it was good for all those experiencing the elephant in the dark to feel a trunk and an ear and a tail. But, like them, how much better is it for us to realize that we've only seen and experienced a tiny part of something much, much bigger? At the end of the day, God—the infinite, the divine, the holy, the transcendent—is not limited by our conceptions of them. Only *we* are. In fact, our conceptions of God can become like the Golden Calf of last week's reading, objects of our devotion and stand-ins for the divine.

The challenge for us is to remain humble in the face of that which is beyond the scope of our understanding and experience. The challenge for us is to keep reaching out with all the powers of our hearts and our minds to touch that which is beyond our grasp. The challenge for us is to admit that even our most vivid experiences of the holy barely brush the surface of that which is infinitely more. And so, our ideas about God should be held tenderly because they, like our faith, are meant to be in a state of constant transformation, constant growth, and we will never truly have the whole picture.

It's also good for us to remember that just because we won't ever see the whole, doesn't mean we can't catch glimpses. The 14<sup>th</sup> century German mystic, Meister Eckhart tells us:

*Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things. Every single creature is full of God and a book about God. Every creature is a word of God. If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature--even a caterpillar--I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature.*

Wise words, I think. May we too be open to seeing God in all things. May we continue to feel for God in the dark. And may we be candles for one another, illuminating more fully that which is truly divine – the God beyond our grasp. May it be so. Amen.