

The Glory Cloud
Matthew 9:2-8 and Exodus 34:27-35
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When David was not quite a year old and Emily was 3 ½, my family moved to England for a 3-year assignment with the Air Force. I loved England and loved the opportunity to live overseas, so in many ways this was an idyllic time for us. But one thing that was not idyllic was communicating with family and friends back home. Even with two preschoolers, I handwrote letters regularly because we only called the States once a week—and paid a dollar a minute for the privilege.

That was, of course, before personal computers, cell phones and the Apple revolution. Today, our experience would be completely different, as those of you who have family around the world know. Skype, FaceTime and similar apps have made it possible to see people across town or half-way around the globe as we speak with them. It has transformed parents' ability to stay in touch with their kids away at college, grandparents' opportunities to live hundreds or thousands of miles from their grandchildren, yet still see them take their first step, or play in a band concert. And family life is not the only place technology is keeping us connected.

Just last month I saw a segment on PBS about the huge number of master's degrees that are now being earned via online classrooms. And in the business arena, virtual meetings have become increasingly popular because they save time and money while offering flexibility in location and timing. Conferencing with colleagues around the world in real time is now a routine occurrence that once seemed possible only in sci-fi movies.

Steve Manicor of bigIDEASblog questions whether web conferences and virtual meetings can replace the value of face-to-face contact. Manicor cites a *Forbes* magazine study involving more than 750 businesses that revealed that face-to-face, in-person meetings go deeper than webinars and virtual events. In fact, 80 percent of executives said they prefer personal contact because they believe that in-person meetings are better for achieving almost every business objective including persuasion, leadership, engagement, inspiration, decision-making, accountability, brainstorming and strategy. And, what's true for these business executives is also true for the rest of us. Virtual face time is certainly better than no face time at all, and I would love to have had it when I was

in Europe, but we'd still prefer to be with those we love rather than looking at them through a screen.

If ever there was an instance where we see the impact of a face-to-face encounter verses a virtual one, it is in Exodus 34. Moses, as we know, did not have a remote experience of God. Responding to God's invitation, Moses makes yet another of his many ascents up Mount Sinai. As he had done before the golden calf incident, he is again with the Lord for 40 days and nights, this time for a meeting so intense that Moses fasts for the entire duration. Two critical issues will be settled during these 40 days. God will re-write the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone, an action made necessary when Moses furiously smashed the original tablets after finding the Hebrews dancing around the golden calf. And second, the covenant between God and people will be re-established. At the end of the 40 days, Moses will return to the Hebrews' camp with the new tablets where he'll gather the people together and in his own face-to-face encounter will use his considerable leadership skills to persuade, engage and inspire the people to put their apostasy behind them and make good on their pledge to be covenant people.

It's hard to imagine how different the outcome might have been if God and Moses had tried to work through the aftermath of Israel's sin from a distance. Instead, we see their commitment to personal encounter, and if God and Moses felt it was important, doesn't that also speak to us about the importance of taking time to build a relationship with God? Moses didn't just phone it in with God, even though meeting with God—then and now—is not easy. It's often not convenient. Moses' numerous climbs up the mountain were no picnic, especially not on 80-something year old knees. He could have asked God to send him a theophany or an angel, to save him the trip, but he doesn't. He hobbles up the mountain and goes without food or water so he can get close to God. He listens intently to what God says, and he takes notes.

Fortunately, we don't have to climb mountains to encounter God, but we do have to devote time for it just as Moses did. Prayer, studying Scripture, serving one another and our community, meeting God in worship and at the table—it all takes commitment and effort and time. All of these practices put us in personal contact with God and keep us open “to the presence, the power and the possibility of God,” to use Walter Brueggemann's phrase.

Marina Abramovic is a Serbian performance artist who in 2010 staged a three-month exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. All day, every day, she sat at a table in the museum's atrium, in what she described as a

“square of light.” Members of the audience were invited to join her, one at a time, at the opposite end of the table. There was no talking, no touching and no overt communication of any kind.

Her goal, she said, was “to achieve a luminous state of being and then transmit it.” She literally wanted to sit there and give off light. While she didn’t achieve the shining face of Moses, she did make a compassionate and loving connection with many of the people sitting across from her in silence, some of whom were moved to tears. Too often, we think of being with God, particularly in prayer, as a one-way conversation in which we pour out our laundry list of needs and wants to God. What kind of relationship might be possible if we simply took the time to sit with God, silently, in deep communion and meditation?

If we follow Moses’ example to spend dedicated time with God, then like Moses, we can and should expect our relationship with God to change us. Moses is so impacted that his face glows because he has been talking with God. His face reflects God’s own shining. After all, the glory of God is often described as a devouring fire or a pure, dazzling light. Again, Walter Brueggemann’s observation is apt. “After this meeting, Moses is no ordinary person, for he has entered deeply into God’s own life.”

After Moses sees the fire of God’s glory, he has to put on a veil because his face has become so radiant. After the shepherds of Bethlehem see the glory of the Lord, they have to search for the newborn Messiah and then tell others about him. After the disciples see the glory of Jesus in the transfiguration, they have a new understanding of his connection to God. After the first Christians see the glory of God at Pentecost, they go out to the world to spread the good news of his grace, truth and love, even at the cost of their own lives. When we see the glory of God up close and personal, we are going to be different.

Transformation happens when we enter deeply into God’s life. We become more compassionate, loving, forgiving and truthful. Our actions serve others instead of ourselves, and our decisions are driven more by what is right than by what gets us ahead. At work, home, school and in the community, the people around us begin to see evidence that we are living more faithfully as Christ’s followers, that we are living and reflecting the light of his glory. Even if they can’t name what accounts for the difference, they know something has changed.

The third message from the mountain is this: Reach out to everyone, even those who are not easy to love or to like. One of the attractions of virtual meetings

is that we can keep our distance from people who annoy us. But Moses knows the value of face-to-face meetings, even with the rebellious and stiff-necked people of Israel.

This is always harder than it looks and harder than we think it's going to be. Naturally, we want to get close to the people we love—parents prefer to see their children in person rather than through Skype or FaceTime. At the same time, most of us are glad to keep our distance from people we don't like or respect. Virtual meetings with those folks are the best kind.

But Moses gets close to all the people of Israel, again and again, even those who instigated and participated in the golden calf apostasy. This is the right thing to do. How much better might our political life be if Republicans and Democrats sat down at a table together and had conversations? How much healthier might our society be if people of opposing viewpoints would talk to each other in person rather than snarl and snipe at one another over the internet? “Rachel Maddow, please pass the salt.” “Here you go, Glenn Beck.” It's hard to hate each other when you're sharing your story and a meal together.

This is equally true in the church. How much more effective as an instrument of the gospel might we be if we dealt honestly, kindly and forthrightly with our misunderstandings and disagreements? That requires courage and vulnerability to both speak and hear the truth from one another, but the alternative is that we are agents of darkness rather than beacons of light.

Moses's story sends one final message: Keep moving, both up and down the mountain. Moses doesn't only talk to God nor does he only talk with the people. His actions suggest that we hold together both worship and work, prayer and participation in the life of the community. If we focus only on God, we'll miss out on the important mission of serving a world in need. If we focus only on people, we'll miss the glory of God that brings inspiration and hope into the middle of human life and gives us the power to live as reflections of God's glory.

Technology is a fact of modern life. The question is how we make use of the myriad technologies at our disposal yet also preserve the value of face-to-face contact. Moses challenges us to take time to build relationships with God and with each other, and to expect to be changed by these relationships. The prophet pushes us to reach out to everyone, not hide behind technology when encounters get difficult. And he reminds us to keep moving up and down the mountain that runs

from the human to the divine. On this World Communion Sunday, there is no better time to encounter God face-to-face than right now and no better place than at the table. God is here, ready to meet you. Amen.