

Seeking God's Face
Psalm 103:8-13 and Exodus 33:1-6, 12-23
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As Exodus chapter 32 comes to a close, the egregious golden calf debacle is over in the sense that the object itself has been ground to dust, but the severity of the consequences of Israel's idolatry is still unknown. Today we discover part of the answer.

Chapter 33 opens with God sending the Israelites away from Mt. Sinai. The \$64,000 question is, will God go with them? Related to that is the question of whether or not God will fulfill the covenant promises. The answer is positive in some respects. In spite of all that has happened, God will remain true to three recalled pledges: God will give the people the land; God will drive out its inhabitants; and God will send a "messenger" to guide Israel on the way.

God has been deeply offended by the people's behavior, but despite his disappointment and anger, God chooses to be gracious. The Lord's presence with the Israelites at this point could mean their destruction, and by choosing to send a proxy, God is acting with restraint, which means Israel will have a future.

As we saw a couple of weeks ago, God's directive to build the tabernacle is, in effect, God's decision to move the divine dwelling from Sinai to a portable sanctuary that moves constantly with the people, a "portable Sinai." God's instruction that the Hebrews leave the mountain without the tabernacle yet built means that God's dwelling will remain on the mountain rather than in the midst of the people. That does not mean that God will be totally absent from them, any more than God was absent prior to Sinai. God will continue to lead Israel and will prepare the land for them, but God will not dwell among them.

Yet, God leaves the future open. By exercising divine restraint, there is still hope for Israel's restoration. This scene has the feel of those times as parents when we send a child to his/her room for a time-out, both so they can reflect on what they've done but also so we as parents can cool down and not over-react. In one final detail of this scene, God commands the people to remove their jewelry and the festival dress they were wearing in their revelry around the golden idol. What they had taken from the Egyptians is now taken from them.

As God and Moses continue to talk about this “stiff-necked people,” one aspect of their discussion that I find humorous is how each of them has moments of wanting to make these redeemed slaves the responsibility of the other. When the golden calf apostasy begins, God tells Moses, “*your people* have acted perversely,” as if God is taking no responsibility for these slaves he saved. But Moses is having none of it. As he implores God on behalf of the people, he says to God, “why does your anger burn against *your people* whom *you* brought out of Egypt?” (32:7, 11) It continues in chapter 33 when God speaks about Israel as “the people whom Moses brought up out of Egypt.” Again, it reminds me of one parent saying to another, “take *your child* and deal with this.” It is another small detail that speaks volumes about the intimate relationship between God and Moses.

Moses now draws on that intimacy as he starts another round of interceding for the Hebrews. Moses charges God to remember God’s own words. God has told Moses to lead this people but has not told him how; surely God can’t expect Moses to do it by himself. This is a not too subtle hint to God to decide whether he will accompany Israel or not. Moses then reiterates that these are God’s people.

God responds, telling Moses of God’s plans. The divine presence *will* go with Moses which sounds like good news except that it still doesn’t tell Moses what commitment the Lord is making. Is God going with Moses as an individual or with the entire community? Nor is it clear what is intended by the divine presence—is in, in fact, a *dwelling* presence? Moses presses the point. Moses wants to be sure that the people are included in God’s promise of presence, for Moses knows that only with God’s constant, dwelling presence among them are they distinctive among the nations. If God is not to go, then there is no point for the people to continue on this journey. Without God’s dwelling presence, this will be a lost venture, leaving Israel with no future of consequence. They would not be without God’s presence altogether, but their special place in God’s design for the world would no longer be assured.

God’s response finally relieves some of the tension that has built up. God agrees to do everything Moses has asked. God will be a constant, dwelling presence with the people. The reason? God knows Moses by name and Moses has found favor with God. It is Moses’ own standing with God that persuades God to travel with the entire nation. Once again, we see a God who is responsive to what his human partner has to say, who takes our contributions seriously.

With a directness we have come to expect, Moses now makes another request of God: “Show me your glory.” For Moses, glory refers to the presence of God no longer enveloped by the cloud or the fire. This is a request to see God’s very self. Moses wants to be assured that God will dwell with the people in all the divine fullness without it leading to their death.

God grants Moses’ request only in part, because human beings cannot see God and live; but God also redirects the question. Instead of speaking of glory, God’s speaks of goodness which takes the matter beyond a tangible manifestation to a statement about what kind of God this is that Moses is in relationship with. What will serve as a more genuine sign to Moses is not some direct view of God but a specific indication of the good character of this one who has revealed the divine name. After all, even a direct view of God does not necessarily say much about God’s character. God could be a monster. Another way to put it is that any seeing that is granted to Moses needs to be accompanied by a *knowing* if it is to be truly revelatory of who God is and what God is about. It is more important to know what *kind* of God this is than to *see* this God.

All of God’s goodness will pass in front of Moses, and the name Yahweh will be proclaimed to him, so Moses must pay attention to what he hears as well as to what he sees. We are prone to make what we see of higher value, but here God redefines divine glory to include a proclamation—the speaking of God’s name is simultaneously a speaking of God’s goodness and character. In fact, Moses will see only in part but hears God’s voice directly.

God’s own hand is used to prevent Moses from seeing God’s face. After God passes by, God removes the hand so that Moses will see God’s back, which interestingly enough, would also be what one would see of a God who is leading the people on their journeys.

OT theologian Terence Freitham points out that the text does not say that God cannot be seen. Rather it assumes that God can be seen, but that one cannot live if this happens. The issue is a matter of life for the human being, not God’s visibility. Nowhere is it suggested that God is being protected or shielded or that God’s sovereignty would be compromised by being seen. God expresses no displeasure with Moses’ request. Still, Moses has no claim on such a divine revelation. That God allows Moses a vision at all is a demonstration of God’s mercy and graciousness.

We are a visual culture. Rare is the person who does not spend a lot of time looking at a screen of one variety or another, whether for work, family life or pleasure. I think that biases us towards a belief that if we could only see God, it would be so much easier to believe. Seeing God would remove a major obstacle that unbelievers cite—that it is folly to trust in what one cannot see and prove. But, we seldom think about the fact that to see God would compromise our human freedom. For God to be fully present, in unadulterated divine power and glory, would be coercive; faith would be turned into sight, and humanity could not help but believe. To preserve our free will, God's presence cannot be obvious; there must be an element of ambiguity, such that choosing not to believe remains a possibility. A sense of God's mystery must be preserved. Even for Moses, there is an essential mystery in confronting God.

What Moses asks to see is God's glory. In this instance, God's glory *is* his goodness. It is not God's power, majesty or awesomeness that will pass by Moses, but God's goodness. And Moses already has seen a lot of that. God has mercifully sustained his people in Egypt. That's God's goodness. God has dramatically delivered them from their captors. That's God's goodness. God has graciously provided for them in the wilderness and protected them. That's God's goodness. God has lovingly entered into a covenant with his people at Sinai. That's God's goodness. God has wisely given them instructions by which they can best order their lives. That's God's goodness. God has just agreed, at Moses' urging, to accompany the people in their remaining wilderness travels. That's God's goodness. Commenting on the difference between seeing God's face and seeing God's goodness, one theologian has said, "You can have a spiritual experience that is very exciting and yet is contentless. Or you can gain an insight into the character of the Eternal that will change you forever."

Have you had that kind of experience of God's character that leaves you changed forever? If you haven't, the problem is not that you haven't been to the mountaintop and seen God. It's that God's goodness is surrounding you, and you're looking right past it. I make a lot of invitations from this pulpit, but today I want to issue a challenge. I challenge you to take some time this week to name the goodness of God that you are personally experiencing right now in your life. There's the big stuff, of course—family, friends, work, health, education, freedom. But, don't forget what is more easily overlooked—grocery store shelves that are stocked with food, indoor plumbing, the ability to hear or walk a mile, antibiotics, rainfall, reading glasses, pumpkins and changing leaves. Don't forget the people who have impacted you and the people you have had an impact on. And especially

don't forget to reflect deeply on God's work in your heart and soul. You, too, have been redeemed by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You, too, have been called as God's own beloved people, family members of the God of the universe. You, too, have been given the gifts of covenant, law and scripture. God meets you in bread and wine, gives you work to do in the kingdom, and grants you spiritual gifts that build up the body of Christ. Friends! You are surrounded by God's glory and goodness. You can't draw a single breath without taking it in. That's how near to you God is. Open your eyes and see God. He knows your name, and he's looking right at you with eyes full of acceptance and love. Amen.