

Exodus 33:12-23

The Cleft of the Rock

“Now show me your glory.” This is the question Moses put to God. What a question it is? It comes in the middle of an interesting set of interchanges between God and Moses.

When Moses was on the mountain receiving the 10 Commandments, it was made known to him what the people were doing. He had been advocating for the people, praying they be forgiven, at one point asking that his own name be removed from the Book of Life if no forgiveness is found for the people.

When he came down from the mountain with the stone tablets in his arms and saw the golden calf with the Israelites dancing around it, he became angry and dashed the tablets on the rocks.

Moses was caught between his own anger and God’s at the willfulness of the people. Though God relents and forgives, the instructions for Moses are to lead the people into the Promised Land and are accompanied by this statement, “I will send an angel with you . . . ,” God says, “but I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people, and I might destroy you on the way.”

At this, Moses once again advocates on the people’s behalf, arguing the futility of turning a nation of slaves into a free people if God is not with them all the way.

And, once again, God relents and decides to go along after all. Then comes Moses’ question. It is a different question, not so much on the people’s behalf, but negotiating for himself. “Show me your glory.”

One is reminded of the blind man Jesus met on the road from Jericho who cried out to him as he made his way to Jerusalem for the Passover at which he would be crucified, his blindness a metaphor for the lack of understanding on the part of those who have physical sight. “What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked. The reply, “I want to see.”

In the middle of all this drama, Moses wants to see “the glory of God,” or as much of it as he can see without being consumed.

The Human Story

By and large, people are still “stiff-necked.” The expression is a reference to human stubbornness, never in short supply. It conjures the image of a horse stiffening against the pull of the reins, refusing to be led. As times change, things stay the same. Human character remains corrupted by sin.

There cannot be mutual presence because the presence of God means also the glory of God which is not only a blinding light as it was for Paul but also a consuming flame that destroys what it encounters.

The story of Israel is, of course, the story of humanity. It confronts us with our own relationship with God; our own stubbornness, our own desire to see God's glory.

When we see unchecked greed, expressions of anger and resentment, or fear, which is anxiety with an object, we know that in their essential character, people have not changed.

Yet when we see excellence, anything worthy of praise, we are reminded that we are stamped with God's Image as well. We grieve and we celebrate alternately because we, like Moses, see the bad, long for the good, and desire God's presence, and before we are done, would put down what we are doing to see the glory of God.

The Glory

Regardless of how one sees the Christian vision; one might be concerned with personal faith and devotion, or evangelism, or social justice, or with purity, a concern for right doctrines and practices in the faith; most Christians seek transformation just as Moses did when he led the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to freedom.

There are many frustrations along the way. Success of is continually met with the stubbornness of the people. People are endlessly stiff-necked. The world is basically untransformed.

No matter how much is achieved, it never seems to be enough. There is no human purity pure enough. There is no human justice just enough. There is no adequate transformation to prevent or withstand a return to idolatry.

Sooner or later, all efforts to affect change become dry and small, especially when they are made for their own sakes, devoid of the desire to see the transcendent.

Conversely, when the glory of God is sought; and when the miracle happens, there is no better purity, no better justice, no better transformation, which is only valuable, only possible even, if God is in it.

The foundation of Christian effort is a relationship with God that involves the question of Moses . . . , the desire to know God in a way that leaves us transfigured:

Radiant with joy
Content whatever the circumstances
At peace inwardly
Filled with gratitude
Amazement and praise

Admittedly, this desire for the sublime, the transcendent, to see God's glory, is sometimes forgotten by the faithful in their zeal. But here in Exodus we see that it was not forgotten by Moses.

In John

In the introduction to the Gospel of John, there are allusions to this encounter between Moses and God.

“The Word became flesh and dwelled among us,” referring to Jesus, of course. “We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth through Jesus Christ. No one has seen God, but the one and only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.”

And Jesus is the crucified one, and the picture is always before us in the New Testament. The cross is not the back side of God’s glory but the fulness of it.

In whatever vision of Christ by grace they have been allowed to see, believers have seen God’s glory too, always dimmed by the limitations in our capacity to behold the spectacular, always protected from seeing more than we are able to take in.

The vision has made an impression like it did on Moses when he went back up on the mountain and found the experience he sought, and when he came down with the tablets to replace the ones he had dashed upon the rocks, we are told he had to veil his face because the reflection on it was too much to behold.

Is there really any doubt that something like that expression, the light on Moses’ face, is at the heart of whatever efforts to engage the world. People may stiffen their necks at the arguments about truth or attempts to impact behavior, but the reflection of God’s glory on the faces of the faithful will stop them in their tracks and make them take notice.

Will we dare ask for it?

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