

Exodus 33:12-23
October 18, 2020

God's Glory

I was in the cleft of a rock once. It was high in the Rocky Mountains on a back packing trip . . . then as soon as it came, it passed, and we went on as if nothing happened.

Moses and the people of Israel were out in the wilderness. They had been delivered from captivity in Egypt by the miracle at the sea. They had received the 10 Commandments from up high on the mountain. They had complained about lack of provisions and exhibited the remarkable ability to act as if utterly amazed by a miracle on one day, and then as if nothing happened the next.

The Life of the World

The wilderness image is one of the bible's metaphors of the spiritual life. Earthly life is a wilderness journey, which means, away from home in a dangerous place. There is much to tend to, everyday concerns about food and clothing and shelter, doing the chores, raising the children. There are many troubles, and much pain. There is no place one can go to escape.

It is, however, a beautiful wilderness. Earthly life is also a paradise journey. There is much to enjoy, many pleasures to experience. It is very easy to become pre-occupied with earthly life and to go long periods of time, without noticing God. It sometimes happens that the wilderness becomes home, so that people no

longer know they are even in a wilderness, not really desiring to go anywhere better.

Since the time of Peter and Paul Christians have fallen to the temptation to become too attached to their wilderness and earthly paradise home.

There are some issues that can't be escaped. Mortality for one. We did not choose our lives, and cannot flee death. Sin is another, the moral demand, that we give account for what we have done and how we have lived with what we have been given. And there is the question of the meaning of it all. The spiritual life is a journey even for those whose geography is not transitional. Life can be all-encompassing, exhausting, and discouraging, unless we can be carried along by what we have seen of God's glory.

The Cleft of the Rock

In the reading from Exodus, we find an indication that for Moses, the real destination was not Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey, but a place of God's presence, where the impossible happens, that is, a place where God's glory is beheld and survived.

It is hard to imagine that Moses had not gotten to a place in his journey where he needed a glimpse of such a place. He was in the wilderness and he would die there. His time had not yet come and there was yet work to be done. He wanted to see God.

God's response to the audacious request was to mercifully accommodate Moses, by hiding him in the cleft of the rock, as the great hymn sings, and passing by, allowing Moses to see the fading glory, just enough to pull him through.

How do we, in modern times, or what some now call post-modern times, speak of this aspect of the spiritual life? How do we speak of seeking God? And how do we speak of it now, with the collection of troubles that are facing us and everyone else?

I am sure that pandemic life seems a little like a desert. And even though we can more easily endure it with Face-time and Zoom, and emails and twitter, or whatever form of technology one uses; telephones, television, etc., we still find the isolation hard, not being around other people as much and being anxious about it when we are. Maybe that can serve as a way of engaging the metaphor of the wilderness. But there is something else going on with Moses here in the Book of Exodus.

To be sure, he is in a dangerous place far from home and civilization, but he is not asking to be set free of it. He *wants to see God* in it. Any paradise is a desert; any city crowded with people, is a desert if God is absent from it. And any wilderness is a paradise if it is aflame with God's presence.

Cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural places, wildernesses themselves; they are none of them the point. The point is not that God is absent from them or

absent in some places and present in others. Our theology teaches that God is omnipresent, everywhere.

The point is that when we are excessively caught up in earthly concerns we come to *feel* as if God is absent, and that makes life a desert no matter where we are. The Bible hammers the point over and over, "Seek God and live," and, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind, " and, "count yourselves dead to sin, alive to God."

Our Gospel reading this morning makes the same case. Jesus is in dialogue with leaders of the Jewish people about paying taxes and has given us the great little epitaph, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God, what belongs to God." It is ordinarily seen as either a religious liberty text or a stewardship text or a citizenship text.

Sometimes in trying to affirm its secondary points; pay your taxes, practice your faith, give your offerings; we forget to hear the much more basic claim upon us.

You bear God's image, which means, you belong to God. Freely give yourself to God. Sooner or later, no matter where one is, no matter at what stage of life's journey, one can only be healthy if one stops and has the same conversation Moses had with God, and asks to see the Presence. It is the only way to live in paradise, which is our temporary home, it is the only way to live in the wilderness and survive the storm.

There are many times and many ways that God places us in the cleft of the rock, and passes by so that we can catch a glimpse of the Glory, let it not be said that we acted as though nothing had happened. Amen.

Genesis 33:12-23

Moses said to the Lord, “You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, ‘I know you by name and you have found favor with me.’ If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people.”

The Lord replied, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” Then Moses said to him, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. 16 How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” And the Lord said to Moses, “I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.” Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.” And the Lord said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” Then the Lord said, “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”

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