

Exodus 33:12-23 The Image and Glory of God  
October 22, 2023

The readings for the day have presented two ideas for our consideration; the image of God, and the glory of God.

In the gospel reading, we find Jesus in Jerusalem at Passover, involved in various contentious conversations. Opponents attempted to catch him in words. One of the attempts involved the question of paying taxes to Caesar. He manages both to evade the trap *and* make a larger point about a universal truth.

Asking for a coin, and enquiring about the image on it, which is of Caesar, he tells them to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. He is, of course, referring to the second commandment, against graven images. To Jesus and his people, a depiction of a human being on a coin was a graven image.

Jesus also tells those who question him to give to God that which belongs to God. He refers to the great theological poetic narrative of creation in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis which says that human beings have been created in God's image. The Image of God would become one of the main features of Christian theology, or the Christian doctrine of humanity. Not only is human nature marked by sin, but also the divine image. We devote ourselves to God, because we belong to God.

In the Old Testament story, we find Moses, in the aftermath of the golden calf incident, after he had smashed the original Ten Commandments on the rocks. The golden calf *was also* a graven image. The people had broken one of the commandments before they even had received them.

The people had been subjugated by their neighbors to the southwest, and they had been miraculously liberated. They began a journey through the wilderness that was dangerous and hostile, not only because the terrain and environment was rough, but also because many of the people they met along the way opposed them.

The transition proved difficult. The people lacked a reasonable understanding of what was happening. They behaved erratically, immature, rudderless. They proved hard to lead, as illustrated by the incident at the foot of the mountain with the golden calf.

At one and the same time, they were united with, and separated from, God. The way the story is told rings true, not only as the history of Israel, but as the story of all peoples in the world, not only then but also now. This story is the human story, which still plays itself out among us. Created by God in God's likeness; yet estranged from God and caught in cycles of faithlessness that seem never-ending.

Among the discoveries of the Israelite faith is the notion that God is a, "being," a person with whom a relationship is possible. I am not sure how we are to

take the idea of having been made in the divine image, but I would be willing to bet that at least part of it has to do with being persons, capable of relationships.

In those days Moses had come into the habit of pitching a tent outside the camp for the people. It was a place where anyone, “enquiring of the Lord,” could go. Later it would be associated with the tabernacle, the place of God’s presence, and even later the Temple, the place at which sacrifices were offered, and the Glory of God dwelled. In the beginning it was called, “the Tent of Meeting.” A place of relationship with God. The story says that the Lord would speak with Moses as with a friend.

In the middle of the crisis, Moses, went into this tent. Under every religion are a few foundational convictions; belief in God, and in certain aspects of God’s nature; strong and mighty, caring and kind, patient and forgiving, faithful, true. And those aspects are meant to characterize as well, human life. Sooner or later, especially in the wilderness, one wants to be assured that it *is* real.

Though there is a conversation, it comes down to one request; Moses wanted to see God’s glory. Moses wanted an experience of God that couldn’t be doubted.

Back on the mountain Moses is hidden in the cleft of the rock, and shaded from the magnificence of God’s presence. He is allowed to see the glory only after it has passed by.

The story reveals that there maybe *is* no such experience that *can’t* be doubted. Moses was not allowed direct vision, but covered, shaded, “through a glass darkly,” like it is for everyone else. The faith of Israel, and certainly our faith, is founded on the, “conviction of unseen things.”

For all the characteristics of organized religion, with which in our time some people have become disenchanted; its buildings and programs, all the ministries, its membership rolls, the hospitals and universities, the radio and television programs, and the myriads of differences from one expression to the next, in the end it is something small that we all want, simply to know if the reality behind it, at the heart of it, is true.

Faith in that which *can* be doubted, has the potential to be the strongest faith of all, simply because it must overcome the doubt. So in the end the incident with the golden calf became only a hitch-in-the-get-along of Israel, but not the end of it. It was a bump in the road. Moses went back up on the mountain to receive new tablets and the journey went forward.

One of the journey’s biggest ironies is that for all Moses had done to liberate the Israelites from captivity and lead them through the wilderness and give to them a law by which they could live, he himself would not be allowed to enter into the land.

There are many hitches-in-the-get-along of our lives. Some have to do with personal situations of various kinds, others have to do with the larger world context. We are encouraged to face the bumps in the road with fortitude; a courage in the face of adversity, no matter the source or the intensity of the adversity. We look to Jesus, not only the author and finisher of our faith, but also our example. When he was faced with opposition, he forged ahead to the cross which was his destiny.

Bearing the Image of God that we bear, he demonstrated also the glory of God which has been seen in the cross. Let us consider again *this cross*, for the *cross* reveals the divine glory.

In a world so characterized by strife and conflict, with problems to face that seem intractable and unsolvable, filled with sadness and anxiety and anger and fear, with scenes of suffering that reflect the human inability to realize a better world, a better justice, a better peace; we gaze once again on God's glory, not shaded by God's hand as it was for Moses in the cleft of the rock, but shown forth fully and directly.

And let us be reminded again of resurrection, which presents the divine victory, which is our victory and our hope. And because of God's grace we do not falter, but remain true to the victory, no matter our failures or those of our neighbors and friends.

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