

“Backstage Pass”  
Exodus 33  
Gordon Wiersma 10/16/11

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson - Exodus 33:12-23

The particular story of Moses continues in the reading today. In the lection last Sunday was the incident of the golden calf, and Moses stands between God’s anger and the people of Israel. And some of that theme continues today as Moses is negotiating, reiterating with God, that God must remain with the people as they make their way to the promised land. And then we have this rather peculiar story of Moses asking to see God. Now before and after this passage, Moses is described as someone who sees God face to face – but today there is a definite emphasis that Moses cannot see the face of God or he will die! (that face to face line is in the lection next Sunday – so I’ll let Dr. Japinga deal with that).

The other thing is that when you look at this passage in the pew Bible and you see ‘the LORD’ with LORD in CAPS – that indicates that what is there in Hebrew is the holy name of God YHWH – it is Y H W H – but we don’t know precisely the vowels – we use Yahweh. It’s the name of God revealed to Moses back at the burning bush. But it always frustrates me that this is lost in translation – we hear LORD and don’t think much of it. So for this Sunday at least, I am going to read YHWH where it says YHWH...

**Exodus 33:12-23**

<sup>12</sup>Moses said to YHWH, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’<sup>13</sup> Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.”<sup>14</sup> God said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”<sup>15</sup> And Moses said to God, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here.<sup>16</sup> For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.” YHWH said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”<sup>18</sup> Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.”<sup>19</sup> And God said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, YHWH; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.<sup>20</sup> But,” God said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.”<sup>21</sup> And YHWH continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock;<sup>22</sup> and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by;<sup>23</sup> then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

I had a brief moment of being cool – about 25 years ago. It says something that I have to go back 25 years to find a moment of being cool – but that’s OK – better to have been cool for a moment than never too have been cool at all. The time I was cool was when I got to go backstage on the set of Saturday Night Live – yup, that’s pretty cool; although actually I was riding on the cool-ness coattails of the Rev. David Blauw – a member here at Hope Church, sitting right over there... But at the time I was an intern for David at Blawenburg Reformed Church in New Jersey, and David’s cousin was the manager for Randy Travis, a country singer quite popular around 1987. Randy Travis was the musical guest for Saturday Night Live in New York City, and David’s cousin got us backstage passes. It was pretty cool – got to meet Randy Travis – “hey Randy...I’m a friend of your manager’s cousin...”; then we saw Dana Carvey (he’s famous) – got my picture taken with him...saw Kathleen Turner and her entourage (she’s famous - she was the guest host). It was cool...but then we got stuck up in the balcony during the actual show, and so that was that– my 15 minutes moment of coolness was over. But I enjoyed it – backstage access – with the stars – knowing that the ordinary masses would be turned aside.

Alright – so as you hear about my Saturday Night Live experience, I bet that all of you are, like me, thinking: Exodus 33?! – right? No? Yes? To be sure, it is a rather unusual analogy, but think about it: isn’t this really Moses’ backstage pass that we are

hearing about here in Exodus 33? Moses gets insider access, goes behind the scenes, he gets to do something that the ordinary masses don't have clearance to do. It is a very interesting moment for Moses, and intriguing story for us, I think. It is, really, a very personal story about Moses – so we'll have to see how we make connections for us – but we have to start with Moses.

Moses has been through a lot – the Exodus and the desert and the commandments – then the golden calf and the debates with God about abandoning Israel or not. It is intriguing how in Exodus there comes this time when things boil down so narrowly to just God and Moses – things hinge so much on that relationship – the fate of Israel ... could you say the fate of salvation history?...it all hones in on this one person, Moses. Moses has been through a lot – and then after it all, it seems that crisis has been averted for the time being at least – and it just seems to me that Moses takes a moment to indulge himself. Moses says to God: 'show me your glory' – that is quite a request... but couldn't you say that just maybe this is Moses' cool moment? That Moses thinks it would be very cool to have this insider access to God? And maybe that he deserves it?

So then we're told of this fascinating exchange between Moses and God:

'Show me your glory', Moses says;

God says 'I will show you all my GOODNESS; and I'll remind you of my name-

YHWH - 'I am who I am'

'But', God says, 'you can't see my face, Moses - no one sees me and lives.'... 'So here's what I'll do: you stand over in that little cleft in the rocks there, and I'll pass by, and as I do, I'll cover you with my hand so you don't see my face, but then I'll take away my hand so you'll be able to see my back once I've passed.'

God says: 'I'll show you my backside, but not my face, Moses.'

It's very interesting, but is that all too strange and anthropomorphic for you? God's face and hands and back? Are we modern people too sophisticated for this story? Well, let's not be – you can take it as literally or figuratively as you wish, but it will still be true – it's a story revealing something about who God is and how we encounter God.

And here's one thing to listen for...an intriguing thing in this story, in the exchange between Moses and God: did you notice that when Moses asks to see God's glory, that God says 'I will show you my GOODNESS'...isn't that interesting? Moses says 'show me your glory'; God says 'I will make all my GOODNESS pass before you.' What should we make of that? Well, perhaps Moses was looking for something flashy, some backstage excitement. Moses wanted a glorious reassurance from God that God is the big, certain, absolutely all-powerful God - 'show me your glory, God!' That would be good – helpful. But God says instead, 'all my goodness will pass before you.'

OK – I think that is important – but then what does that mean? Well – it seems to me that what that could be about is that God is simply reminding Moses of what he has already

learned about God in this Exodus story. What has just happened? God has promised to stick with this people for whom Moses is pleading. God has just said 'my presence will go with you- with Moses and Israel to the promised land, and I will be there with them forever'. Which is to say that God is forgiving these people who have rebelled, God is promising his presence despite the absence of gratitude from these people; that God is keeping his promises for perpetuity, no matter what. Do you want to see God, Moses? God is seen ultimately in God's goodness, graciousness, mercy – in God's faithfulness. Don't you think that God might say to us, too - as a church, as Christians: 'don't get too wrapped up in glory – in needing to show your God is biggest and best; I'll show you something better than glory, look at my goodness. God's graciousness, mercy, faithfulness.

And there's something more yet about God's goodness – about how we see that – which is to wonder about another intriguing detail in this story: that whole thing about how God says to Moses – 'I will show you my back, but not my face' (gives a whole 'nother meaning to backstage pass – right?!) Well, what does that mean? Perhaps part of it is that what God expresses to Moses, and us, is that what can be seen of God is never all of God – not so much in that literal anthropomorphic sense, but the truth that what we can best see is where God has been, and what God has done – where God has passed by and where God is going.

How and where do we see God in this world? Not face to face, but seeing what God

does, where God has been and is, where grace and mercy and goodness and acceptance flow freely – which is not always or even often about glory – it is not in the glorious or glamorous things in this world, but it is about the good – the life-giving and gracious, the compassionate and abundant.

I was thinking about an event called Women's Service Day that happened about 10 days ago here at Hope Church. It wasn't a Hope Church event, but it's led by a Hope Church member, Lois Maassen, an Elder on our Consistory, and involves several Hope Church folks; and lots of women from our community who care about serving our community. They partnered with one of our sister churches, New Community/4<sup>th</sup> in renovating a home to become a community center and they collected items to bless the children and families of our community. It wasn't a Christian event officially – but it was Christian in the best sense – faithful people helping people to do good. And for me, I don't have to look too close to realize in that event that God has just passed by; perhaps right then and there you see God's backside because God is leading the way – not a very glamorous, glorious event, but it was good. Or I think of how every day here as a pastor, I know of situations where people are ill, suffering, in need – and they are cared for by this community of faith with care and prayer, support and love – and I realize God is there, has passed by and is leading to healing – nothing fancy or glorious, but good.

And I could certainly give all sorts of examples among us and around us, within us

and beyond us – but you can think of those...about seeing God in goodness. But more than just giving examples, what's most important is the truth of this story teaching, reminding ourselves how to look – that to see wherever mercy is shown, God is seen; wherever compassion is expressed, God has passed by; wherever commitment and love are valued, God has been revealed – and it is our faith that teaches us, allows us to see that goodness of God in countless ways in our lives. That is the back-sided and profound way God teaches us to see: to see God – to see God's goodness.

And just one last thing in this story – as God speaks of goodness, and seeing God's back – Moses is also reminded of the mystery of God's name – Y H W H – 'I am who I am' – a name that both reveals God and sets God always beyond our full grasp. Part of the truth always connected with that holy name of, revelation of, God, is that God can never be completely known or contained; we do not possess God's glory or goodness. We cannot make God our own personal god of convenience, following where we go. And with that humility clear in us, then there is also the gift that God IS constantly making God's self known – known in what God does and where God is going, leading us in faith. It is God's acts of goodness, of grace and mercy that show God to us and show us the way to go. And to see that, you don't need to be Moses and you don't even need to be cool. In Jesus Christ, we've already been given a backstage pass, and we see the goodness of God revealed for us and for the whole world. Thanks be to God. AMEN.