

*Sermon: Seeing Glory*

Jill R. Russell

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Texts: Exodus 33.12-33;  
Psalm 99;  
1 Thessalonians 1.1-10;  
Matthew 22.15-22

When you have an important message to share with someone there is simply no substitute for face to face conversation. How many marriage proposals come via email or text message? It's true for the scary moments as well as the joyful. We need to see the people who claim to love us - the ones who make promises to us. It is hard to trust that someone is really there for you if you cannot look into their eyes and see the depth of their love and commitment to you.

That was the heart of the matter last week in the story we read from Exodus about the golden calf. The Israelites got tired of waiting for Moses. They wondered whether he would ever return. The pillar of smoke, the sign of God's presence, was nowhere to be seen. How could they trust that God was still with them? Moses was beginning to feel some of that fear himself. In the chapter between last week and this week's passages, Moses pleads with God to go with them.

This section of Exodus (chapters 32-34) feels rather disjointed as you read it. It is probably the result of several strands of tradition being woven into the story we have before us today. At moments God seems intimately present to Moses - speaking face to face. And then in almost the same breath God insists on keeping some distance from them and refuses to go with them any further. At certain points Moses has incredible sway with God; arguing successfully to prevent God from destroying the people for their betrayal with the golden calf. Then suddenly God asserts this divine freedom and refuses to be pinned down by Moses. Even after God promises to let them continue on the journey to the Promised Land, Moses can't seem to trust that God has truly forgiven them. God insists at several points that God knows Moses by name and that Moses has found favor in

God's sight. Somehow that is not enough for Moses. He presses God further asking to see God's glory.

It's an interesting exchange in our passage today.<sup>1</sup> It's a bold request from Moses but also a very human one. As I mentioned before, when relationships are at a crossroad and you want to know someone's intentions, looking them in the eye is the best way to really know where you stand. So Moses asks to see God's glory. But seeing God in all of God's glory is not what Moses needs. Terrence Fretheim in his commentary on the text makes the claim that what Moses really needs is to discover the character of God more than he needs some direct view of God.<sup>2</sup> When Moses asks to see God's glory, God makes the promise: "I will cause my goodness to pass in front of you."<sup>3</sup> Somehow this whole encounter is dangerous. Moses is set into the crook of a rock and God puts a hand over Moses' eyes as the glory passes by allowing Moses only the briefest of glimpses at God's back.

This is an odd image for us to consider. We are not accustomed to thinking about God as having a body. There are not many instances in scripture where human beings speak face to face with God in such a way. We once discussed this passage in the clergy association when I was serving a church in Metuchen, NJ. One of the rabbis said that her interpretation was that human beings most often see God's glory and understand God's goodness only in retrospect. For whatever reason we tend not to see God's presence or understand what God is doing when life is right in front of us. I think she is right but what I want to know is why?

Why can we not see God's glory when it is in front of us – when it is on the horizon and heading in our direction? Two aspects of being human come to mind. The first is that we tend to see what we expect to see. This happens all the time when I am writing. My mind moves faster than my fingers and I leave out important words. Even when I edit I often miss it because my brain fills in the missing words where it expects to see them. They've done studies on this. We do it not only with our own writing but

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<sup>1</sup> This reflection on God's presence and glory was influenced by the work of Terrence E. Fretheim in his commentary on Exodus in the *Interpretation* series (Louisville: John Knox Press, pgs. 296-301).

<sup>2</sup> Freitheim, pg.299.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 33.19

when we read books as well. Our brain expects to see something and believes that it does even though it is not there. If this was only true in linguistics it would be one thing, but we do the very same thing in our relationships and in our spiritual lives as well. We hold certain expectations for what is possible for us and for the people around us. Those expectations place incredible limits on what can happen in our life. One of the reason we don't see God's glory is because we don't expect to see God's glory. We keep our eyes so focused on the limitations in our lives and the frustrations of our circumstances and we don't believe anything different is possible.

The second aspect of human nature that can limit our capacity to see the glory of God is the tendency we have to resist change - even change that is good for us. WB Cannon, in the late 1920s, was the first one to describe homeostasis in systems. The theory is that the system... whether it is a cell in our bodies or an organization like a church...the system maintains itself through a complex set of reactions to keep things stable. In interim circles, we used to talk a lot about the way in which we see this operating in churches. A powerful person who creates conflict on a regular basis leaves the church. You think "great - now things will be more peaceful around here" only to discover that someone else begins to act in precisely the same way. The system has come to rely on this pattern of behavior to feel stable and normal.

This may sound like a rather long-winded tangent here but think about how these two phenomena may function when it comes to our ability to see God's glory and goodness in our lives. I've known a number of people over the years who seem to have a hard time letting go of struggle. I can remember one man who was chronically unemployed. He lived in crisis mode most of the time. People tried to help him. Opportunities would open up but he wouldn't take advantage of them. People trying to help him would get so frustrated asking "how could he not see what God was providing for him?" Or sometimes he would take advantage of the help offered him but something would go wrong and he would find himself without a job again. There seemed to be this powerful force that conspired against the new life he was trying to find.

Today is Peace with Justice Sunday on our liturgical calendar, and I was thinking how pernicious the force of homeostasis is in our world. You talk to people who work on issues of poverty, hunger, or domestic violence and they will tell how difficult it is to create deep, sustainable change. We pray and we work and we long for a world where peace and justice is the norm and yet so much seems to conspire against these efforts. It sure would be nice if God's glory and goodness would make an appearance!

For some reason, God moves in the shadows and around the edges and never directly. It's frustrating but I suspect God does this for a very important reason. God does this in order to preserve our freedom. If God were visibly present than human beings could do nothing BUT believe.<sup>4</sup> The mysterious ways God moves in the world make it possible for us to choose whether we will believe or whether we won't...whether we will look with eyes of faith to discover the movement of God's goodness before us or whether we will fall into cynicism and fear believing that we are alone in the world.

The believers to whom Paul writes in the book of Thessalonians are among those who choose faith. In fact, in the face of persecution when many would believe that God was no where to be seen - their faith was so evident that Paul didn't even need to speak about it - their faith was so well known. If Paul were writing to Hope church today, I don't know how many of us he would describe in that way. Some of us can claim to have a faith that rock solid every moment of our life. But others of us cannot. The good news is that we don't have to have perfect faith. If I take anything from this cycle of stories through the book of Exodus it is that God remains faithful even when God's people falter.

Throughout the book of Exodus Moses vacillates between resisting God's call to stepping forward in faith. He moves from moments of genuine courage and trust to bouts of anger and frustration. Sometimes he stands in awe of God and sometimes he wrestles with God because seeing the glory of God is not always easy. If this sounds at all familiar in your life of faith, know that you are in good company. But more than that know that God has a promise for you today. Whether you have faith like the church

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<sup>4</sup> Freitheim, pg. 301.

from Thesalonians or whether you find yourself wrestling with God like Moses: know that you have found favor in God's sight. Know that God knows you by name. And even if you can only see it in retrospect, know that God's goodness will pass before you, and behind you, and all around you.

Thanks be to God!