

THE GIFT OF GOD'S BACK

Texts: Exodus 33:12-23
Matthew 22:15-22

On an Internet website designed specifically for students who need to learn English as a second language, there is a link that takes one to a page that defines a long list of idioms that are employed in English. One such idiom is “to turn your back on”, which the site defines as “to ignore or forget someone or something, especially a friend who needs your help.” A fairly accurate rendering of this phrase if you pause to consider how we usually use it. If I were to turn my back on all of you now, or on a parishioner in need, or if someone else were to turn his/her back on a family member or friend, or if in a conversation any one of us were to physically turn our backs on another person, and refuse to speak to that person, the meaning would be quite clear. So we pretty much understand that turning one’s back on someone else is to be considered a negative action, a gesture of dismissal, of ignoring a relationship, in the extreme of pretending that someone, or some cause, or some need, doesn’t exist.

So how are we to interpret this strange passage from the Old Testament book of Exodus, where God refuses to show Moses the Divine face, but instead shows Moses the divine backside? It is a complicated passage, possessing several layers deep of centuries of editing, augmentation by different authors over time, and the employment of overlapping pieces of the conversation between God and Moses.

What can be discerned from this passage is its context and its conclusion, the latter of which suggests that God turning the divine back on Moses is both a good thing in this instance, and also a reinforcement of the boundaries that must necessarily exist between God and humanity.

The context is that God has been seriously angered by the Hebrews over the Golden Calf incident. The tablets of the Ten Commandments had scarcely been created when the people broke the very first one of those commandments, against the worship of idols. At the first testing of their faith, the Hebrews had slid backwards into their previous comfort zone of polytheism, and fashioned for themselves a substitute god.

God is so angry at this violation that the wholesale destruction of the people is the first prescribed remedy. And though Moses dissuades God from this radical step, the sin is not yet to go without harsh consequences being enforced by the Almighty. Thus God gives Moses and the people instructions to continue their journey to the Promised Land, but God will not go with them. In the early verses of this chapter in Exodus, the words of God are dripping with anger:

“Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people . . . if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you.” (Exodus 33:3-5)

This is where the passage for today picks up, as Moses tries now to persuade God not to desert the people. In order to understand the logic of these verses, one needs to recognize the extraordinarily close, almost “buddy” relationship that exists between God and Moses. Indeed, verse 11 of this chapter observes the fact that God used to speak to Moses as one would speak to a friend. Moses now exploits this relationship in order to once more change God’s mind and persuade the Lord to continue to be with the people on their journey.

Moses uses two basic tactics. First he employs a kind of self-deprecation. He says that he, Moses, would not be a persuasive substitute for God as leader of the people without God’s presence:

"If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight . . . unless you go with us?"

Next, Moses deftly appeals to God's behavioral consistency, suggesting that all God has done to identify the Hebrews as God's People, delivering them from Egypt, giving them laws, and thus identifying them to the rest of the world as distinct from everyone else as God's Chosen, all that would be lost if God deserted them now. God should be present with the people, Moses argues: "In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

Fortunately for the people, God once more consents to Moses' appeal, if nothing else for the sake of the relationship that exists between God and Moses.

But then, a strange and dangerous request comes forth from Moses. He says to God, "Show me your glory, I pray."

On the very morning of my sixteenth birthday, I arose early and my Dad and I drove to the driver's license examining station, where I passed my driving test and barely passed the written exam. When all that was done, and I carried out a brand new driver's license from the State of Missouri, my Dad rewarded me for that accomplishment by inviting me to take my first solo drive, to tour briefly around the streets of Independence, Missouri for 15 minutes or so, then come back and pick him up. Excited and proud, I got behind the wheel of our 1952 Kaiser, and drove away. But then, I did something very uncharacteristic, as I had been the soul of safety and prudence during the hours behind the wheel I had spent under the watchful eye of my father. I turned onto a four-lane thoroughfare, looked around carefully for any of Independence's finest, and I floored it. I got up to about 50 miles an hour and scared the bejabbers out of myself, quickly slowed down to below legal, then meekly and safely returned to collect my Dad and continue on to a lifetime from then on of being a religious observer of all traffic laws.

Why did I do such a thing? I think it may have been that first exhilarating taste of freedom. I just wanted to take my newly-minted independence out for a spin and see what it could do. I think this is precisely now what happens to Moses. He has just talked God Almighty out of two harsh judgments against the people, so now, perhaps a little giddy from the fruits of his camaraderie with the Divine, Moses decides to go for the brass ring, to push the envelope to its extreme, asking to be let in on God's secrets, to see fully God's resplendent being.

Ordinarily, such a brazen request from creature to Creator might have resulted in some rather harsh consequences. But God truly loves Moses, so God arranges things so that Moses' request can at least be partially granted. God says:

"I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."

And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; 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; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

So here is what has transpired in sequence: God allows Moses to behold God's goodness, proclaiming God's mercy and graciousness along the way. Then, God places a hand over Moses to protect Moses from God's face, then removes the hand after having passed by so that Moses see only God's departing back.

God has gifted Moses with what God gives to all the faithful: the ability to see clearly that part of God's nature which is goodness within the world and within individual lives. God also shared with Moses the Divine Name, "The Lord", or, in Hebrew *Yahweh*, which suggests, in true Hebrew naming tradition, a further clue into the nature of God, for *Yahweh* can be translated "I Am." God then declares God's own sovereignty in a unique way by saying: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." God is not just an angry God, a vindictive and jealous God, but God is a merciful God as well, a God of grace, and these are the personal characteristics God chooses to lift up for Moses, following God's gracious and merciful acts of forgiveness of the people for the transgression of the Golden Calf.

Finally, God shields Moses from seeing God's face, then allows Moses to behold God's back. This, too, is an act of protective love, rather than dismissal or the ignoring of the needs of a friend. For the Hebrew Scriptures declare on more than one occasion that humans cannot look upon God's face and live. Such a restriction implies that there is a natural distance that must be maintained between the human and the divine. To look upon someone's face is to look as fully as possible upon the fullness of that individual. To look into another person's eyes is an act of intimacy, an inappropriate and impossible exchange between creature and Creator.

This is a reality that is lifted up in today's Gospel Reading as Jesus, deflecting a malevolent attempt to trap him in his words, asks to see a Roman coin, and asks whose likeness, or whose face is on the coin. The answer is Caesar, whose image was imprinted on all Roman coinage, along with the words: "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest". Jesus then delivers the well-known response: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's", reinforcing the distinction between God and humanity: that God can never be fully known. Moreover, this passage reinforces the faith affirmation that our God transcends any other popular or self-made human celebrity, in that our God cannot be defined by human images forged onto economic coinage, or by political popularity, or tyrannical fiat. Rather, God's likeness is imprinted on each of us whom God loves, as declared in some of the first verses of our Bible: that we were created in the image of God.

Something of what can be known of God has been illustrated in the Exodus account: we can see God's goodness in the world, we can behold God's mercy, we can identify instances of God's grace. We can witness the ministry of Jesus and continue to see these qualities in the life of the One in whom we believe the fullness of God dwelt. We can look upon the beautiful and innocent face of a child about to be baptized, and behold the glow of love and pride of his parents, and see the goodness and love of God. We can hear the sound of the baptismal waters, and be reassured that the gift of Jesus Christ is still ours to see and receive.

To see God's face, that is, to fully know and comprehend God is, in the end, a nonsensical proposition. But today, and every time we encounter the living Presence of God in life as people of faith, we can see God's goodness. And even if we are unable to see God fully, we can at least see the love that God has left behind as God moves through the world and through our lives. In the baptism this morning of Max Spencer, we can once more enjoy the assurance for which Moses bargained with God: God's presence, which passes before us with goodness, mercy, and grace, and is moving ahead of us, guiding us, as God guided the Hebrews, into the land of Promise.

AMEN.