Oct. 22, 2023

Exodus 33:12-23

Matthew 22:15-22

A friend and colleague of mine, I’m not sure how serious he was being, noted in Lectionary Group that with today’s scriptures we get both the back end and the front end of God. We get Moses in the cleft of the rock, covered until God passes by, and only able to look upon God’s glory after God passes. Then, as Jesus bests the Pharisees and the Herodians in a debate that’s meant to trap him into betraying either the religion or the state he has us thinking on God’s face by noting instead the face of Caesar on a coin that should be given back to Caesar. So, we get the back and the front, and honestly, I’m not sure how much to really make of that. Except, I like holding both passages together and thinking of them in the same service because I hear them both speaking important parts of a common message for us today.

The dialogue with Moses is one I think we can all relate to. It happens, of course, after the burning bush, and the plagues, and the parting of the Red Sea, and the mana from heaven, and the giving of the Commandments, and water from the rock, and all kinds of divine happenings. Yet, nonetheless, it is a vulnerable time of wilderness wandering, full of uncertainties and anxieties about God’s presence and God’s plans and God’s capacity to execute those plans. Here in chapter 33 God tells Moses it is time! “Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – a land flowing with milk and honey.” But, then God hints that God might not be so readily available as they go, (because the people, after all are a “stiff necked” people,) and that’s when Moses puts the breaks on.

“If you’re not going to go, then don’t even send us. What’s the point of all of this if you aren’t going to be there?” God says, “Okay, okay, I’ll be there. You’ve found favor in my sight; I know you by name, and I’m free to have mercy even on a stiff necked people.” But, Moses wants more than promises, more than words and assurances. “Show me your glory,” he says.

And, that, I think, is where we can relate. “Show up and make yourself known, God. If you want me to trust in you, I need to know that you’re near. If I’m really going to be a person of faith, if I’m really going to live to serve and love you, if I’m really going to give myself to you, I need the assurance of your power, your goodness, your presence. I need to see your glory.”

The passage makes clear a couple of points. The first is that God does show up. God gives Moses what he needs in order to continue with the task to which he’s been called. But, the other point, the one that feels a bit more pronounced to me this time around with the passage, is that God is also invested in limiting the revelation. The limitation is presented as if it is for Moses’ own good. “To see God’s face is to die.” But, maybe it’s also the confession that to claim knowledge of the infinite can be a destructive kind of folly for human beings. It’s the confession that to seek a God who isn’t beyond human knowing, who isn’t unimaginable transcendence and eternal beauty and mystery, is to seek something less than God. It is to begin the unfortunate process of making God in our own image, which never brings us to a more expansive, more gracious, and more sacred place.

This God who in God’s otherness is free to be merciful to whomever God wants – free from human rules and limits – will also remain partially hidden to us as long as God continues to be committed to manifesting in the lowly places of the world. As long as we have a God of the manger and the cross, a God for the hungry and marginalized, a God of mercy and forgiveness, a God whose way is to give “self” rather than seek “self,” we who are not that way by nature or training, will be surprised by this God’s manifestations in the world.

Yet, these same things that mask God for us are also the very things that give us hope. It is God’s beyondness that makes God worth following when human capacities are exhausted, and it is God’s will to enter the brokenness that makes our own transformations possible.

I have a friend and minister colleague whose life and career fell apart due to addiction. We were discussing our gospel passage last week. “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” Jesus’ words are brilliant here because they avoid an impossible trap, but more so because they force us to think about what exactly it is that we have that belongs to God. What might we give to God?

The answer is reflected in the little prayer that we all said earlier. I say it everyday as part of my routine. “My Lord and my God, take from me everything that distances me from you. My Lord and my God, give me everything that brings me closer to you. My Lord and my God, detach me from myself to give my all to you.” What is God’s? The Christian answer is: all that we have and all that we are.

We say it every Sunday when we ask God to receive our worship and our lives, but we’re especially attentive to it in our eucharistic liturgies. Here are words from my friend’s tradition: “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living, sacrifice unto thee.” (We have our own version without all the “thee’s,” and we lack all the smells and bells of their liturgical tradition, but still, we offer the same thing.)

My friend shared how good it is, after finding such grace in and through recovery, to no longer have to cross his fingers when saying those words. In the midst of addiction he couldn’t pray that prayer without feeling like a liar. And yet, as we thought about it together we thought how good the news is that God sees those crossed fingers, God sees our brokenness, God sees our hypocrisies and inconsistencies, God sees all that we might hide along with all of which we are proud, and God receives it. Even more, God asks for it. It’s not just the good stuff; it’s all the stuff.

I’m reminded of that story for “The Spirituality of Imperfection.” A man says, “I needed to change. I knew it and so did everyone else. They all told me – my partner, my friends, my family. But, as hard as I tried, I couldn’t change. And then, along came God, and God said, ‘I love you just as you are. Even if you never change I will always love you.’ And with that, everything changed and I began to change too.”

“Who’s image is stamped on that coin,” Jesus asks? The question he doesn’t ask, but the one that comes to mind nonetheless is, “Who’s image is stamped on you?” “In whose image are you made?” I think it is part of the beautiful mystery of God that when we return to God what is God’s, God receives it all with an abiding and eternally generous love, so that in the process we find ourselves getting back a fuller and truer version of what we’ve given. And, that’s not just good news for us. It’s good news for a world that that is crying out for a bit of glory.