

THE HIND OF GLORY
EXODUS 33:12-23
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC
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We pick up right where we left off. Continue to listen for the word, recorded in Exodus 33, verses 17-23.

¹⁵And [Moses] said to [God], “If your presence will not go, do not bring us up from here. ¹⁶ 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.” ¹⁷The Lord said to Moses, “I will also do this thing that you have asked, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” ¹⁸ Moses said, “Please show me your glory.” ¹⁹ And [God] said, “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. ²⁰ But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live.” ²¹ And the Lord continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, ²² 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; ²³ then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.”

*The Word of the Lord, **thanks be to God.***

“I AM who I am” called the voice from the burning bush. “I have heard the pleas of my people. And I will lead you out.”

Through the trials of the plagues and the passover, in the pillar of fire that led the people through the mighty Red Sea, through the giving of the law, and their time in the wilderness God had been *visibly* present among the Hebrews: a pillar of fire and a cloud of smoke leading them forward.

But then, only a chapter before the text you’ve just heard, there was the debacle of the Golden Calf. Moses was away and the cloud covered the mountain. Without the presence of the fire at their camp, the people found themselves crafting a god of their own creation. With Aaron’s help, they melted all their gold and worshipped the towering opulent cow. It must have radiated in the sun, reflected light and warmth. For a few short hours in the beaming desert, the Golden Calf seemed nothing short of divine.

Much has happened since Moses’ came screaming down the mountain to see for the idolatrous calf. God, the one who freely chose the Hebrews way back in Genesis, who rescued them from the hand of Pharaoh and brought them out of their oppression has, as a result of their

foolishness, removed the sign of the Divine Presence. The fiery pillar, an assurance of God's constancy, was snuffed out.

Without the Presence or their calf, the Israelites are left in the dark. And in the dark they assume that God had abandoned them. They mourned the loss as one would the death of a friend. Judging from the interaction with Moses, I think we can say that God was mourning too.

Due West Hardware was the kind of old-school shop where everything was everywhere. Boxes of nails and screws lined the aisles and the shelving seemed to extend to the heavens. At the very back, near where my grandfather R. D. McDill kept the peanuts roasting on the furnace, was a bulk supply of Hershey's chocolate bars, perpetually in stock. Now every time I visited Due West I put in at least one shift — ensuring labels faced forward, emptying the Coke machine of change on the hour, diligently shaking the paint cans, and doing other thankless (and frankly unasked for) tasks. For my labor my grandfather paid me with a Hershey bar. But I was a scrupulous worker and felt my worth more rightly equated to two Hershey bars. Or, on an especially productive day, three. Really, when you think about it, the work could be judged priceless, no chocolate left behind.

But even as a child I knew that throwing away more than one wrapper would betray my self-serving generosity. So I'd hide empty wrappers throughout the store...Down goes one, deep in a box of nails...or underneath the spray paint cans, or maybe behind the flashlights. R. D. must've noticed the declining inventory but I was quick enough not to get caught, always on the edge of his vision, lingering a beat too long and then dashing away, like a lost thought on the tip of your tongue.

Back in the wilderness camp Moses was assured that the land of milk and honey was still within reach. At the beginning of chapter 33 God tells Moses that the course has not changed. The problem was that God, inclined to righteous judgment in the face of such disobedience, would no longer lead the way.

"I will not go up among you," the Lord tells Moses, "I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people." God's judgment is white hot. And while God is faithful, God does not wish to destroy those stubborn, wandering Hebrews.

What happens next is incredible—Moses fights with God. The man who struggled to speak to Pharaoh, who tried to talk himself out of this whole exodus thing from the jump, offers a remarkable protest against God's plan. Moses remembered God's fidelity, he knew that God had chosen this people to be unique in the world. Moses knows that God's presence — a consuming

fire — is also a balm, a witness to God's grace that will draw in those who catch a glimpse. And, perhaps most importantly, he knows that the people would not go forward without a visible sign of God's presence.

When we pick up today's text, Moses is demanding that God go with the people into the promised land. It is audacious and risky. and it pays off. God concedes. So Moses, buoyed up and perhaps over-confident, goes a step further. "*Show me your glory*" (the word means weightiness in Hebrew).

Moses doesn't want another pillar of fire. He wants the fullness of divinity. Moses wants *all* of God. He is done with veils and shadows, he wants certainty and exclusivity. Moses wants to *grasp God and hold on*, a quick fix for fledgling faith.

We may not have experienced those first signs in the wilderness but it seems to me that we find ourselves in a spot strikingly similar to the Hebrews. Though they take different forms — the idolatry of security, of allegiance to one tribe over one another, one ideology over another — our glimmering calves call us forward. Like the calf, in the encroaching dusk they also lose their shine. Divorced from certainty unmoored by the darkness, and stripped of assurance we, like the Hebrews, fell the weight of grief, as if God has left us alone in a world of wolves.

So we demand God's unmistakable presence. We demand that God tend to us, to our needs and to our desires, and to what we want right now, and right here.

Where is God, the church cries, as the horrors of history erode our confidence in humanity? Where is God in the petty injustice of day-to-day living, when human beings have no welcome and no place to lie their heads; where is God when politics clouds our view of one another, when we allow principle to preempt people?

Standing in the shadow of *our own* failures we echo the wandering Israelites: where is God?!

We want the fire in *our* tents, the pillar in *our* camps. We want the Presence and the Power, mighty before us. We want the wizard behind the curtain, the ace in the hole.

Moses wanted all of God, forgetting that the light of revelation was also the uncontrollable flame of divine freedom. Moses forgot — or chose to ignore — that no one could contain God or constrain God. Moses forgot that God had work to do beyond the wilderness. *Show me your glory!* Moses demands in a moment of un-self-aware self-righteousness. But Moses doesn't win this one.

God will not give the soon-to-be Israelites the fulness of glory. Instead, God offers *goodness*. God shields Moses and by proxy the people. God shows the divine willingness to cover their shame and guilt, to judge them as the covenant beloved rather than the architects of idols. God protects us from God. In shielding us from the blinding light of divinity, God reveals a desire for hard-fought faith over blind coercion, lived discipleship over lifeless dogma.

God makes goodness pass by Moses,

Stuck in the crag of the rock, God covers Moses's eyes like a parent shielding a child from the blinding force of an eclipsing sun. And when it's safe, when God has passed and the cool shadow hangs over the mountain, God lifts his palm and Moses sees the place the Lord has been. Moses catches a trace of unmistakable goodness and a portion of Presence. Moses finds himself staring squarely at God's hind.

Moses and the people imagined themselves abandoned by the Divine. As it turns out they were standing in the shadow of God's protective Love. Love that willed life. Love that was calling them forward, making a path even in darkness, even in the craggiest stone. Love that *is light and emirates light*, which is altogether different from lifeless self-made idols.

Love, the challenge to *follow the God who, if we're looking right, will offer a glimpse of his hind*.

If we expect to see God in this broken world then I suggest we start looking beyond golden idols and easy, bright faith. I suggest we look also beyond paralyzing despair. Look beyond your tents and your camps, beyond what you think you know of God.

Instead look for God up ahead. Catch a glimpse of the holy hind in the jagged places of this world, in the rugged crags of life. Look to the edges of society, where basic rights are denied, where the poor have been made a pawn in a political game, where apathy has eclipsed hope. Follow God *all the way* to the foot of the cross. There, even in the darkness, you will find a trace, a hint of the divine presence, of the God who suffers with us and for us, the God who illumines all our darkness. There you will catch God's backside. Lingering a beat longer than you might expect, and continuing along the way...like a memory on the tip of your tongue, one you can only follow to fully understand.

When my grandfather died his children inventoried Due West Hardware. I was told that you could see where I had been, that you could feel my presence among a trail of ancient hidden chocolate wrappers. It was like an archeological dig, two layers of wood nails and a light bed of Hershey's wrappers, three layers further and a clumped up remnant. I wasn't there but it wasn't

difficult to find me. It's the very same way I can, feel my grandfather whenever I set foot on those warped floor boards. It turns out that sometimes we see better in the shade and the shadow than in the fire.

Now don't get me wrong, we will experience God as fire, as undeniable sign, and a mighty presence. We will experience God in the light of the upcoming holidays and the twinkling glimmer of having eaten too much and had our jolly fill of family and friends and festivity. But more often God passes before us in the cool of a merciful shadow, hiding his face from our failures and pressing us forward. Giving us a measure of glory, not its totality. A trace we cannot help but follow all the way to the Kingdom on earth.

This is our final sermon in the series on the Exodus. Congratulations! You made it. Next week, Christ the King Sunday, is the last Sunday of the Christian year. We are preparing to prepare for the flickering light of Advent, ready to meet the God who dwells among us, whose presence we celebrate in the manger, and whose hind we follow from Bethlehem to the empty tomb.

Here's how I'd like you to remember the Exodus series, since Ben has given me its final word. We are faithful to God only when we *follow*, which is not always easy for folks like us. The God who rescued Israel from the heel of Pharaoh has stayed faithful to us despite our catastrophic and mundane failings, despite *our* attempts to lead, to bend the world to *our* will, to seek *our* good. God has not and will not let us go. But God will not leave us in our comfortable camps either. God is showing us the divine hind. If we are faithful to its trace, we are *always* following.

The God of the fire and the shadow has come not to dazzle us with pillars of smoke and parted seas but to walk out ahead of us, to make a path so that broken people might find their way into a broken world. Through crags and pains and wildernesses and desserts, all the way to this Table, where death bespeaks life, sinners find favor, and wine pours out with Presence. And then out into the world, where we've still got work to do.

Where God will be God, merciful and gracious, and we will find rest and shade. *Amen.*