

A Sermon for Covenant

Exodus 33:12-23

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The lectionary text today tells of the time God passed by Moses so closely that the only way Moses could survive was if God covered him in the cleft of a rock with his palm. Moses got so close to God, he was in danger of dropping dead. I made the comment in a sermon I preached yesterday that “worship does not happen when we make abstract attempts at addressing a vague and far-off divinity. Worship occurs when we remember and recite the concrete ways in which our God has engaged humanity—a God so close up it’s a wonder our skin doesn’t burn away when we pray.” And when I read about Moses’ encounter with God on the rock, I can’t help but think, what if that was what worship meant to us—a sacred event where we bravely abandon ourselves to the fiery nearness of God, such that we must rely fully on God’s gracious protection if we are to survive such a close-up encounter?

(Personally, I could stop right there and mull on that alone. Some of you probably wouldn’t mind a two-minute sermon; unfortunately, I feel obligated to preach a whole sermon, so we’ll keep going . . .)

It’s always important when we study Scripture to take into account the whole context. We should always read the larger story—what comes before a passage and what comes after. In today’s story, this is particularly true because we’d miss out on some really key things if we didn’t start at the beginning. You’ll remember that last week, the Israelites worshipped the Golden Calf, and God was so distraught because of the betrayal that he was ready to wipe them out. Moses courageously intervened, and God relented from bringing disaster.

That’s where we ended the story last week, but if we were to keep reading chapter 32, we would discover that while God did choose to relent, the events following the Golden Calf are not at all neat and tidy. Moses goes down the mountain and sees the sight for himself, and he loses it. He tells the faithful remnant to take up their swords against the idolaters. A bunch of people die. The Lord brings a scourging upon the people though the details are unclear. God didn’t destroy them all, but what *did* happen wasn’t pretty. By chapter 33, things are bit of a mess around camp. The people are grieving and scared. I imagine Moses is exhausted, confused, frustrated, discouraged. By the time Moses prays, he is desperate and needy, lonely and wounded. He needs reassurance.

Meanwhile, YHWH is enduring his own struggle. As Walter Brueggemann describes the scene, “One can sense a profound tension concerning Yahweh’s way with Israel. Through the episode of the calf, that relationship has lost whatever innocence it may have had. Now Yahweh’s will for the relationship is characteristically qualified by the awareness that Israel has betrayed Yahweh. That is an irreversible reality that will endlessly haunt both parties.”¹ In vv.1-5, we see God wrestling with how to move forward after such treachery. He decides the people will continue on to the Promised Land; however, he will not stay among them like before. He says, “I

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 937.

will *not* go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way. . . . If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you.” God recognized that his wounds are too deep—he cannot risk being among the people because it would endanger their very lives. After God declares he *won’t* be with them, you can see why Moses sounds so desperate for God’s presence in our passage today.

But before we return to Moses’ request for God’s presence, there’s one more section of the story to cover. In vv.7-11, we hear about the Tent of Meeting, the tent Moses pitches outside the camp, where he goes to meet God. Interestingly, v.11 reports, “The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.”

It would seem that this face-to-face interaction stands in direct contrast to what happens a few verses later, in the story I just read, where Moses can only see the back of God because no one can see God’s face and live, where God had to cover Moses in the cleft of a rock with his palm. If we hadn’t read the whole story, we wouldn’t have even seen the contradiction. Now that we’ve heard the whole story, suddenly we know the questions to ask. Why can Moses meet God face-to-face in v.11, but by the end of the chapter, it is reported that such an encounter is impossible?

There are many varying interpretations that try to deal with this apparent contradiction. If we are honest, the Hebrew writers simply were not concerned with logic in the same way we are today, post-Enlightenment. They had a different way of viewing the world, but that doesn’t mean their way of talking about God was somehow ignorant, or unenlightened, or incorrect. It just means we twenty-first century readers have to work a bit harder to get around our own mental blocks.

Let’s review what we have so far: First, God promises to still help the Israelites arrive in the Promised Land, but God must keep his distance to protect the people from his wrath. *God is fierce, big, transcendent, holy*. Second, we get a glimpse into the Tent of Meeting where it is said God meets with Moses face to face, like a friend. *God is intimate, close, personal*. Third, Moses asks to see God’s glory. *In one way, the Lord agrees*, allowing his goodness to pass by Moses in what in a highly intimate, sacred moment. *In another way, the Lord denies Moses’ request* because he will not let him see his face—Moses must hide in a rock and peer only at God’s back. This is for *Moses’* protection—we are told he could not see the face of God and live.

One scholar writes, “Clearly the tradition is not concerned to harmonize all these assertions. It is enough to notice that the struggle for and with God’s presence is complicated and hard fought. It admits of and requires a diversity of articulations, none of which can alone say all that must be said.”² It seems to me that the story is about *both* the nearness of God that greets us as friend *and* the intense and mysterious holiness of God that is strong enough to endanger us.

We’ve already mentioned that when studying Scripture, we must pay attention to context. Another important piece to studying Scripture is learning to embrace the tension we find there. The more we read, we slowly learn how to hold the tension in our hearts. Some things look like a complete contradiction on the outside—so our tendency to read the parts we like, and pretend the other parts aren’t there. But the truth normally lies in the tension. The Hebrews were okay with

² Brueggemann, 970.

that. They understood the reality of God lies in the middle, that we have to learn to sit with tension because no single, one-sided articulation about God will do.

I think I had a revelation about the nature of God the other day walking TV. Nate and I don't watch much television, but lately we are really into this TV show called Criminal Minds, a show about the Behavioral Analysis Unit of the FBI. The BAU team uses psychological profiling to catch criminals—particularly serial killers. I can't officially recommend this show to you as your pastor because I admit it can be a bit bloody. But there are many episodes that really get Nate and I talking theology—we wrestle with the nature of evil, the complexity of justice, etc.

The most moving episode I've seen thus far is when the team studies a serial killing couple—a husband and wife team—who have already been caught and are on death row. In fact, Sarah Jean and her husband are days away from their execution when the FBI agents show up to study their case. The whole community is excited about the upcoming execution—after multiple brutal murders and over a decade of waiting, the town is ready to see justice served. Several clips show signs people have displayed, saying things like “Rot in hell, Sarah Jean.” The husband of the killing team comes across as vulgar and repulsive, arrogant and creepy. But when you meet Sarah Jean, there is something unique about her. The more she talks, you almost like her despite the fact that you know what she did, and by the very end, her character comes across nearly saint-like. The story is that Sarah Jean and her husband killed a series of teenage girls, and then Sarah Jean murdered her own small son, Riley, so that her husband and her would not be impeded if they needed to escape. But as the show unfolds, the FBI team starts doubting Sarah Jean's involvement in any of the murders, despite the fact that she confessed in court to killing her son, despite that fact that she has never attempted to deny her part in the slaughter of the girls. However, Riley's body was never found, and clue after clue begin to point to Sarah Jean's innocence and that perhaps Riley is still alive somewhere. So why hasn't Sarah Jean attempted to defend herself all these years? The team begins to put the pieces together—Sarah Jean rescued her son years ago from his brutal father by secretly finding an adoptive family—she lied about killing him so that the father would never find him. Sarah Jean had nothing to do with the killing of the girls either—she didn't know what was going on until the arrest and the court case. The FBI team starts racing, they have to collect enough evidence to save Sarah Jean before her execution date. They talk to Sarah Jean—if you just tell us where Riley is, you could go free . . . Sarah Jean refuses to talk. The team is baffled. They know she's innocent of all charges. You feel baffled watching it—you don't want her to die. She's a good person; a sweet person; a strangely saintly person. Then you realize, the reason Sarah Jean won't let anyone know about Riley is because she never wants Riley to find out who and what his father was. He has a happy, successful life being loved by another family, and she is determined to preserve that, no matter what the cost to her own life. You're not even sure if you agree with her decision because it's not fair that she should die, that her son will never know her . . . but she made her decision years ago and you can't help but admire her courage.

I was profoundly struck by the sacrificial actions of Riley's mom—not so much that she would give up her life for her son, but that she was willing to make that level of sacrifice without anyone knowing the truth about her. Sacrifice is easier if someone is going to make a hero out of you for it. I thought of Jesus sacrificing his life for us—willing to take the risk that no one would believe his story, that he could go down in history as a lunatic and rebel. I thought about how our

society is so into telling our secrets to psychologists—which can be really good and healthy—and how we feel a need to have someone with whom we hold nothing back, but yet, the need for *telling* about ourselves is somehow only one side to the story of what it means to be human. On the other side, something profound occurs when we get in touch with a core piece of ourselves, such that we know who we are and how we will live whether anyone else knows or understands it at all.

We talk about the church being a community of sharing, where we bear one another's burdens, and I think that is true and important. But the idea of sharing with one another also stands in tension with the fact that sometimes there are secrets worth keeping—maybe not to protect yourself, maybe to protect others. God chooses self-disclosure time and time again in Scripture. The Bible is full of stories about close-up, face-to-face, and intimate collisions with the Almighty. But the Bible also reveals that in some ways, God must keep his distance in order to keep us safe. There are boundaries and limits to God's self-giving. God chooses to whom he shows mercy, establishing God's self as independent from the whims of people. In other words, God cannot be manipulated. One scholar says it this way: "God holds in unending tension self-giving and the self-reserve that makes self-giving possible. God is endlessly at work in this tension . . . Derivatively, there is in this tension a model for humanness. The keeping of self belongs in tension with the giving of self. To fall out on either side is to destroy the prospect of a serious relation. We are most "God-like" when this tension is kept visible and operative. This text suggests that neither posture by itself will bring us to full humanness. We are called to imitate the God who is shown in this text, the God who both holds and gives away."³ This isn't the type of tension we can sort out in a single sermon. *We keep learning* of the intimate nearness and distant holiness of God all our lives long, and we only really learn it by experiencing God ourselves.

We've noted today that we must learn as we read Scripture to take into account the whole context, and we must learn how to sit with the tension we read, because it is in the tension where the Truth of Life finds us. *As we read our own lives*—as we process our stories, as we face ethical dilemmas, as we struggle with the gap between selfless generosity and healthy boundaries—we must learn to take into account the whole context of what's going on—in our lives, in our world. We must learn to sit with the tension we find in our own circumstances, because it is *in the tension* that we will find the way forward and catch glimpses of the God who is dangerously near. Amen.

³ Brueggemann, 970.