

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for October 16, 2011
Lessons: Exodus 33:12-23 and Luke 20:45-47; 21:1-4

SEEING GOD'S GLORY IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

Moses intercedes for the idolatrous Israelites the LORD God has brought out of their slavery and hopelessness in Egypt. He pleads, first for the people's very lives – that God not destroy them in wrath – but then, also, for their new life as God's covenant people – that God not abandon them, leaving them to whatever fate life may hold for them without God. In all of this mediation, Moses is doing exactly what God wants him to do, even to siding with the guilty people against the justice and holiness of God. Moses argues for God's faithfulness to the covenant and compassion for the Israelites, God's own people. He argues for the integrity of God's name among the other peoples of the region, including the Egyptians. Why should they, Israel's former masters, scoff at the LORD for leading the slaves into the desert only to kill them there? What kind of God would Yahweh seem to other peoples if the whole episode of deliverance were to end so badly? Moses seems to use every argument he can think of to move God to a change of heart, and at each step toward reconciliation between God and the people of Israel, Moses succeeds: God agrees to put anger aside and spare the people, agrees to continue with them on their journey, agrees to swallow pride and remain their God in covenant with them.

Readers have long noticed that Moses does not quit even when he already seems to have won his case. He keeps pressing God for affirmation after affirmation, somewhat like the child who wants something so badly he keeps asking his parents, "Do you promise? Do you promise? Will you do it?" But much is at stake. God will not destroy the people. That's one step and a big one, but it's not enough. A benign God is not at all the same as a faithful, committed, loving God. A distant God who does no harm is not the same as a very present God who protects and sustains the people. Absent parents are not actively abusive, but neither are they present as the parents their children need.

[The LORD] said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And [Moses] said to [the LORD], "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here."

He's a hard man to convince, this Moses. Instead of taking "Yes" for an answer, he persists almost to the point of becoming annoying, but reconciliation is not a simple matter once and done, and, as we sang in our opening hymn, God is invisible and "silent as light."

So, the human question of, “How do we know God is with us?” is not answered by sight or proof but only by faith, and faith needs assurance. Moses does not want to know only that God will make the travel arrangements for the Israelites but that God’s “face” – God’s personal, attentive presence – will go with them on their way.¹ That’s the meaning of the benediction, “May the LORD make his face shine upon you . . . , may the LORD lift up his face to you . . .” – *may God’s personal and attentive, caring presence remain close to you as you journey along your life’s path, recognizing you always as God’s very own much-loved child.*² And God consents: “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” Then, however, the man really pushes it.

Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.”

That’s over the top, and I think the Bible wants us to know it’s over the top, even as we see also that Moses is very special to God. The distance must be maintained. There must be no idolatry in the covenant relationship between God and Israel, and idolatry does not require a statue. The real purpose of idolatry is make God accessible and manageable so that the religious human can assume divine power and protection. The intelligent idolater never believes the statue or image actually IS God but does imagine it guarantees access to God and God’s power to control life. The phrase, “in Jesus’ name,” is sometimes used idolatrously in prayer, as though the words themselves and not the humble, trusting commitment they are supposed to express, could magically make God answer the prayer by granting whatever is asked. At the burning bush, Moses was told, “Come no closer,” but then God reached out with the promise, “I will be with you.” Assurance? Yes, but assurance calls for trust, and trust prays, “Thy will be done.” Certitude? Never, because such certainty needs no trust but expects God to be on call, and without realizing it, prays in effect, “My will be done.”

Still, Moses is special to God, the man who speaks with God face to face, as friend to friend.³ So, God gives in, and the Bible finds images to express the closeness but maintain the distance, to show us how the human who has put his own life on the line for the sake of the people has thereby moved very near to God and, yes, to God’s glory, but remains a human who can never control God.

In my study of the shame affect as it interfaces with the Bible and biblical faith, I have searched for the opposite – the biblical opposite – of shame. Now we all know the opposite pole on the axis of our feelings is called pride. We live on that axis of shame and pride – of helplessness and power, of disgrace and prestige, of self-loathing and self-love. I have found the biblical opposite of shame to be *glory*, but I have also had to realize that glory is not all of one kind. Our human tendency is to see glory as splendor and majesty, but God sees otherwise. So, for the Bible, the most horrible act of God’s humiliation caused by loving people who would respond only with indifference or outright hostility – the crucifixion of

Jesus – is, in itself, in its self-giving love for the unworthy and ungrateful, the fullest revelation of God’s glory. God’s glory is revealed in shame accepted for the sake of love.

A sunrise or sunset can be beautiful beyond description or capture on film or canvas. A sunrise over Grand Canyon must be almost superlative in its splendor, but the tiny wildflower is also wondrous beyond measure. Yet, the glory of God is truly revealed in any such marvel of creation, great or small, only as we see God’s glory revealed in compassion and in humble trust. Otherwise, to the honest observer who does not simply filter out the unpleasant, nature displays both grandeur and carnage, beauty and gross ugliness, tenderness and terror. Nature is a hummingbird flitting from flower to flower but also a vulture feasting on rot.

Jesus points out to his disciples a simple truth likely to draw angry contempt from the well-off in our society – the truth that the poor widow has given more to God in two small coins than the wealthy who have contributed large sums from their excess. I think because we so fear poverty, we despise people who live in it. They embody human shame and degradation, just as Jesus embodied them fully on his cross. Jesus’ point is not that the poor should give all they have. The poor give too much already, and Jesus has just condemned those who display their piety while robbing widows. God does not demand the widow’s last two coins. The contrast Jesus makes is with those so wealthy they can give much without costing themselves anything and so enhance their own prestige and pride – their human glory.

Someone it seems recently asked, “What have the poor ever done for us?” What an amazing question! The poor built the transcontinental railroad, the great bridges, and the whole now-crumbling infrastructure of our nation just as surely as Hebrew slaves rebuilt a city for some majestic pharaoh and hauled the stones for the glorious pyramids. Human splendor and majesty come from the sweat of the poor. So do our comfort and convenience (and our relatively low prices). The poor make our clothing and pick our crops, care for our children, and fight our wars. We can dress nicely and eat well because people are kept poor. The world’s economies depend upon them no less today than the economy ancient Egypt or of the American South before our Civil War depended upon slaves. Jesus tells them, “How blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”⁴

We human beings see glory in all the wrong places. Big muscles rather than helping hands. Arrogance that is self-defensive and cruel rather than humility that shares its strength with people who have been humiliated. Savvy for making lots of money rather than wisdom that helps others get through life. The prestige of philanthropy rather than quiet sharing. Majesty, power, splendor – all images of glory that fail to reveal the real thing and that lead us astray. The Creator of the universe eagerly became the God of slaves, and Jesus gave

himself to wretched shame to become in person, in face, in very intimate presence, the true glory of God.

Jesus is not calling poverty a virtue, but he is showing us that we misunderstand what is truly shameful and what is glorious. The condition of the world's many, many very poor people is shameful, but the shame is not theirs. Comfort and convenience at the expense of others' misery are shameful. A tyrant may dress splendidly and live majestically, but the tyrant has no part in the glory of God, because God is glorified by compassion, humility, and self-giving love. Jesus, not Caesar, manifested the glory of God.

The impoverished widow puts her two financially insignificant coins into the basket without show (obviously, for what's to show?) and goes about the very hard, wearying, and painful business of living while poor. Hers is the kingdom of God. Amen.

Notes:

1. The word NRSV (like other versions) translates aptly as "presence" means literally "face."
2. Numbers 6:24-26.
3. Exodus 33:11.
4. Luke 6:20.