

**“I’ll Help You”**  
**Exodus 33:12-23**  
**Sermon #75**  
**21st Sunday After Pentecost**  
**33rd Sunday in the COVID-19 Pandemic**  
**10.25.20**

**Exodus 33:12-23 CEB**

12 Moses said to the Lord, “Look, you’ve been telling me, ‘Lead these people forward.’ But you haven’t told me whom you will send with me. Yet you’ve assured me, ‘I know you by name and think highly of you.’ 13 Now if you do think highly of me, show me your ways so that I may know you and so that you may really approve of me. Remember too that this nation is your people.”

14 The Lord replied, “I’ll go myself, and I’ll help you.”

15 Moses replied, “If you won’t go yourself, don’t make us leave here. 16 Because how will anyone know that we have your special approval, both I and your people, unless

you go with us? Only that distinguishes us, me and your people, from every other people on the earth.”

17 The Lord said to Moses, “I’ll do exactly what you’ve asked because you have my special approval, and I know you by name.”

18 Moses said, “Please show me your glorious presence.”

19 The Lord said, “I’ll make all my goodness pass in front of you, and I’ll proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord.’ I will be kind to whomever I wish to be kind, and I will have compassion to whomever I wish to be compassionate. 20 But,” the Lord said, “you can’t see my face because no one can see me and live.” 21 The Lord said, “Here is a place near me where you will stand beside the rock. 22 As my glorious presence passes by, I’ll set you in a gap in the

rock, and I'll cover you with my hand until I've passed by.

23 Then I'll take away my hand, and you will see my back, but my face won't be visible."

The Word of the LORD. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I can't imagine the stress Moses is under. He's had to converse with God Almighty the Maker of Heaven and Earth *and* deal with the Hebrews. He's had to mediate,

lead, follow, obey, plead, defend, push back, teach, and question.

Today's scripture occurs just after the Israelites made their golden statue. Moses questions Aaron as to why he allowed God's chosen people to do such a heinous act to melt down their gold and make a statue to a dead god. Of course, Aaron blames the Israelites in Exodus 32:22 by calling them "out of control". As if Aaron couldn't have at least done his job to help lead the people by reminding the people of the boundaries God has set up to create a healthy relationship between themselves, creation, and God.

Today's scripture also occurs after a period of purifying. Just like when a controlled fire consumes parts of a forest, it's to promote healthy growth. And I won't mince words, there are some troubling events leading up to our verses today. Members from the Tribe of Levi are sent by God to wipe out some of their family members and friends by the sword all because of what happened with the golden calf.

Now, I don't want to lose sight of Exodus 33:12-23, but as we have gone through Exodus, some stories have been skipped and they at least need to be mentioned. Yet, I think there is a theme that connects the people's rebellion of making a golden calf to the twelve verses of Moses' encounter with God. People need some sort of visual

reminder of God's presence in their lives. Let's face it, like our ancient ancestors in Exodus, we need constant reminding of God's gracious presence in our lives. And even Moses needs it, too.

Exodus 33:12-23 can be divided into two equal parts. In verses 12-17, it is about God's decision to constantly dwell with Israel.<sup>1</sup> Moses has this unique relationship with God and this man is doing what he does best: Mediate. He is pleading with God. Moses realizes that he and he alone cannot lead the people. God leads and Moses follows, along with Israel. And notice that Moses makes sure to include the people in this conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> Terence E. Fretheim. *Exodus*. John Knox Press: Atlanta, GA, 1991. p.298.

*Now if you do think highly of me, show me your ways so that I may know you and so that you may really approve of me. Remember too that this nation is your people.*

Of course, Moses is not merely asking for a Cloud by day or a Fire by night to lead the people. Moses is not asking for a Divine Messenger. He is asking for more. And God agrees. "I'll go myself, and I'll help you."

This anxious leader of an anxious people keeps pressing the issue. Moses still isn't sure about what God has said because, you know.....God is mysterious and God will respond to questions with bizarre responses such as "I Am Who I Am" or "I Am has sent you". Moses is

determined to make sure the Israelites are indeed included in this promise. If these people are to be set apart from the other nations, then there needs to be some definitive sign and that sign is God's presence among the people. For if God doesn't dwell with the Hebrews, then how will anyone know they have God's special approval?

Then, out of love and grace, God responds in verse 17:

*I'll do exactly what you've asked because you have my special approval, and I know you by name.*

God is not going to let these people out of God's sight and presence. God is reassuring Moses of this special



relationship not only with Moses, but with the people of Israel!

But, there is something more to this story. Right at verse 18, the second equal half of the passage begins. Moses demands to see God's glorious presence right at that moment and this is where God turns the table on Moses. God demonstrates how much our human minds cannot comprehend God. God promises to allow Moses to see the back of God's glory because no one, including Moses, can see God's face and live. It's impossible! God is mysterious. God is beyond anything we can imagine. Our flesh cannot stand in front of such glory because it's too much! We cannot see God and live!

Yes, God grants Moses his request to be in his presence and to dwell with Israel. But, God has to pass by Moses, shielding his eyes to protect him, yet allowing him to see the back once the LORD is in front of him.

There's nothing wrong when we ask God for some sort of comfort or sign as we are being led through the unknown. I do it about 65 times a day because I'm human and have not mastered the divine, even though that's apparently one of my degrees. We all ask for some sort of peace as we make a difficult decision or we ask for the Spirit to open the doors that need to be opened and to close the doors that need to be closed. But, as today's verses tell us, God

will do it the way God wants to do it because God is I AM. God is the one who causes to be what comes into existence. God will respond, but maybe not in the way we want and it may be an answer we would rather not have. But, God is leading us forward. Like Moses, we are seeing the backside of God as we navigate through 2020.

Maybe the backside of God is somewhat hidden behind the fog. Maybe we think we are groping our way through the dark while we are blindfolded surrounded by two ditches on either side of us, which is how I've come to describe the last seven months of my life. Yet, come to think of it, maybe God is protecting us by putting us on God's back like some animals do to get their young out of

harm's way. We still see the back and only the back because the reality may overwhelm us. But, God is navigating us through the uncertainty that has consumed our lives.

Beloved, there is nothing that can separate us from God's loving presence. Yet, God is always up to something new. God didn't abandon Moses and the Israelites and God certainly hasn't abandoned us.

I'm more certain now than ever that despite the turmoil that plagues us every day-the pandemic, hyper partisanship, domestic terrorism by Neo-Nazis, and endless war-God's presence is right here in front of us

leading us. In God's presence, there is no room for the spirit of fear, but there is infinite room for the spirit of courage as we are led forth during our own wilderness journey.

Siblings in Christ, believe this Good News!

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.