



October 19, 2014 St. George's Maple Ridge

Exodus 33:12-23

Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight.' Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour 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."

The LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name." Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." And he 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. But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; 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; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

Matthew 22:15-22

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor,

or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

I was raised in a family that didn't have much to do with the Church, and so unlike Moses in our first reading who wants to see the glory of God, unlike the Pharisees in our Gospel from Matthew who want to nail down how God works, I hardly ever heard the word God mentioned. Growing up I never wondered about what God looked like or how God operated. That was until one autumn night my father asked me, his teenage daughter, to go for a walk.

We lived in the suburbs, so we walked right in the street under bright streetlights that obscured any view of the heavens above. But that night as we turned onto a street that led into a new subdivision, we found ourselves in enough darkness to be able to see not only the brightest stars in the night sky but the barest suggestion of the clouds of stars behind them. Upon seeing this, my father stopped, pointed up toward them and said: "When you look at all of these stars, you just *have* to believe that somebody, somewhere created them."

I was dumbstruck and mystified. "What is he talking about?" I thought to myself. "And why is he telling me this?"

But things change; things always change given enough time.

For a mere ten years later as a young married woman with a firstborn child diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, a mere ten years later as a new Christian and a new Anglican, I would not have deflected a comment such as the one my father made that night, because I was in a difficult place and actually needed to have a conversation with someone about what this God of ours looks like and how this God of ours operates. In our first lesson for today we get a look at someone else in a difficult place wrestling with what God looks like and how God operates.

In this passage, Moses already has led the people of Israel out of their slavery in Egypt and into the Sinai desert. He has already gone up on the mountain and has brought down the Ten Commandments down to his people. However, something else has also happened. Upon returning to the people, he has discovered that in that they have grown weary of their relationship to a God they cannot see, they have created a golden calf to worship.

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And you and I know how the story goes. Upon seeing this, Moses takes the tablets of the commandments, throws them to the ground and breaks them, and then stomps back up the mountain to talk to God.

‘Look,’ he says to God, ‘I need something more from you that reassures me that you’re with me and that I’m on the right track.’ And so ‘show me your ways,’ he says to God, ‘and show me your glory. I need to see it.’

And this is what God says to him: ‘Here’s what I can do....I will make all my goodness pass before you, but you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.’”

And then God tells Moses that he will put him in the cleft of a rock and will cover him with his own hand until he, God, passes by. God will then take his hand away so that Moses will see God’s back, leaving his face forever a mystery, forever something Moses and you and I will seek.

In other words, God will travel with us and we will even get to see some of who God is along the way, but we will never arrive at the certainty of seeing the face of God. And we will especially not get to see the face of God during the times when we are most desperate for answers, most in need of certitude about who God is and how God operates.

Even Jesus in our Gospel for today, the one who we believe is the face of God, even our Jesus seems to be playing hard to get today. In our passage the Pharisees are trying to trip Jesus up by asking him whether they should pay taxes or not. Rather than give them a straight answer, he asks them to bring him a coin and to tell him whose image, whose face, appears on that coin. They do so and tell him it is the emperors’ image upon the coin, to which Jesus responds “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s,” meaning perhaps that all things belong to God and that, therefore, God’s claims on us cannot be limited in the way that the emperor’s claims can.

And so what if the certainty we seek, the certainty we think we need about who God is and how God operates, what if the certainty we seek is the very thing that will in fact limit or even kill the dynamism of our relationship with the Holy One? And what if the certainty we seek is the very thing that will undercut the humanity of our relationship with each other? You and I have seen this happen, haven’t we? We have seen how anyone who is certain about who God is and how God operates can be a kind of menace to others—can easily slip into a “God is on my side” or “God is on our side” kind of mentality that is used as a cudgel against another individual or against an entire people.

Likewise in our own spiritual lives it seems that the yearning to see the face of God is oftentimes healthier than believing we have it in our sights with absolute certainty because with this comes a sense that we are right about things.

I wonder this morning, then, where in your life you need to let go of certainty about God or of the certainty that you are right about something? Where in your life could you use a little doubt in that often what we see and know is no more than the back of God or the figure of a Jesus who speaks in parables that confound more than they elucidate.

And also, where in this parish does there need to be some movement from certainty or rightness to holding things with more of an open hand, to living into the uncertainty that can come in our journey with a God who is bigger than we can ever imagine and whose calls us to love more than being right.

Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, a man who lived in a part of the world that has felt the destructive effects of certainty about God and about politics, writes this little poem that for me applies both to the political and to the spiritual life. It's about the deadliness of being right and the life-giving effect of doubt and love on "the place where we are right."

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the Spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plough.

And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.

A special thanks to The Rev. Samuel Lloyd who gave me the idea of connecting Yehuda Amichai's poem with the God in the Book of Exodus whose face we are not allowed to see.