

Sermon – Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 24A)

Scripture Texts: Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *The way of faith is one of vulnerability, in which there are not often clear directions given in advance. However, we are regularly able to look back and see God's provision – and God joins us in the vulnerability, making ways where we can see none.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. "Unless you go with us"
 - a. Moses' persistent & urgent request
 - i. Have you ever had someone surprise you by agreeing more easily than you expect? It's a classic scene, where you keep arguing your case even after they agree, because you're unable to register they have agreed.
 - ii. It kind of sounds like that is happening here between God and Moses...
 - b. Context
 - i. God has brought them out of Egypt, and to Mt. Sinai, where they have received the law (and rebelled!). God is trying to help them know who God is and who they are – questions we do well to keep asking even today.
 - ii. Now, though, it's time for them to move on. They can't live in the desert forever. They need something more...they need God to fulfill the promises made to bring them to a new land where they can live and thrive.
 - iii. God has told Moses to lead the people, and that an angel will be sent to guide them. But, God won't go with them – because (according to the text) the people are stiff necked and God might destroy them out of frustration.
 - c. God chooses vulnerability
 - i. It is pretty safe for God to be the god of the mountain and the desert. Here, pilgrims can come to encounter God in awe and wonder. But it is more dangerous to go with the people to be their God – to let them represent God. In doing so, there is much less control...there is a kind of vulnerability for God to go with the people and commit further to them, especially when they've shown themselves to be so prone to idolatry.
 - ii. This vulnerability is what Moses asks of God, whether he knows it or not. And, God agrees more readily than Moses expects. Perhaps God wasn't all that hesitant to go with them after all?
 - iii. Instead, perhaps God is seeking, through this encounter, to help the people recognize their reliance on God, and God's faithfulness to go with them and to provide for their needs.
2. Our vulnerability
 - a. We have some of the same reliance on God – the need for God to go with us!

- i. There are ways in which our world is starting to feel more and more like a desert, where it is hard to survive (much less to thrive).
 - ii. Costs keep rising, often much faster than incomes or other means of providing. We've seen communities and communal safety nets have frayed, and many are falling apart.
 - iii. This is a time when it is easy to see that we need God's presence & provision. It is a time for us to say, like Moses, unless you go with us, we're not sure how we are able to move forward.
 - b. But what does that presence and provision look like?
 - i. We'd like God to be very clear and easy to see – to have a clear plan and path forward from where we are to a place of greater health and wholeness. But, the reality of faith is that God doesn't usually provide simple signposts and obvious directions.
 - ii. I think that might be what is going on in the second part of today's Exodus passage. After God has agreed to go with Moses and the people, Moses is even more daring: he asks to see God's glory.
 - iii. And God's response is so interesting: "I will make my goodness pass before you...but, you cannot see my face." There have been all kinds of interpretations, with some suggesting that this is about the holiness of God being too great for us mortals. And, maybe? But I don't find that very satisfying or encouraging...
 - iv. Instead, I am grateful for a favorite novel (*The Children of God*, by Mary Doria Russell), which suggests a temporal reading. According to this reading, we cannot see God in advance (from the front), but only in hindsight. We get to see where God has been, and to know God by what God has done – who God has revealed Godself to be.
 - v. How often in your life have difficult circumstances, when you have struggled to understand where God is (or why God would allow this to happen!), made more sense in hindsight? How often have you been able to see, looking back, that you received the grace you needed in the moment of greatest need?
 - c. We live in a tension.
 - i. If that is true, and it seems to me to be true, then we live in a bit of tension. We need God, and we have the promise of God to go with us.
 - ii. However, we often don't get to have a clear path or directions for what that looks like. Instead, understanding usually comes after-the-fact, when we are better able to see where God has been, and how God has been providing for us.
 - iii. This is not always an easy tension to hold, but this is the vulnerability that comes with faith. God may become vulnerable by committing to human beings, but there is an even greater vulnerability for those of us who would follow God.
- 3. The way of Jesus
 - a. Seeing the glory and face of God
 - i. In our world, this arrangement of vulnerability makes sense – it is ordinary and expected that the more important or the more powerful party faces less vulnerability, while the less important or less powerful lives with more vulnerability.
 - ii. But the good news of Jesus is that God does not work in the ordinary & expected ways. Instead, God takes on our vulnerability in Jesus, studying into attention in which we live.

- iii. In the time of Moses, it may have been true that no one can see the face of God and live. But, in Jesus, we are invited to see the face of God and to live. In the gospel of John (chapter 10), Jesus says “I have come that you might have life, and have it abundantly”.
- b. We don’t have to hide or live in fear
 - i. There is, I think, something missing in the image of Moses, crouching in an alcove on the mountain, watching in fear as God passes by. A cleft in the rock can be a simple crevice or hiding place, but it can also be much more than that.
 - ii. A cleft in a wall of rock can also be an opening – a passage through an otherwise solid barrier.
 - iii. Look to Jesus to see that God does go with us, even into the shadow of death. More, God opens a way forward where none can be seen by us. In the cross and resurrection, Jesus opens away through death itself.
- c. Our Stewardship theme – “unless you go with us...”
 - i. We face many challenges, but God is more ready to go with us than we can imagine.
 - ii. The path of faith may not always be easy to see, especially in advance
 - iii. But, in Jesus, God shares our vulnerability and transforms our weaknesses into strengths.

Amen.