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Pentecost Proper 24A
Peace, Seattle
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Exodus 33:12-23

THE BACKSIDE OF GOD

Sometimes, when you enter a Bible story mid-stream, it's hard to get your bearings, and that's what's going on in our first lesson from Exodus 33.

God and Moses have been having an ongoing discussion about what the relationship between God and God's people Israel—ought to look like and whether the marriage will last—or bite the dust. And in today's text we enter that conversation mid-sentence. So, what's the context?

When we go back a few chapters, we find out that after the big celebration marking Israel's escape from Egypt across the Red Sea, the relationship between God & people starts heading south quickly.

Oh, the people promised to be faithful to God all right; promised to follow God's lead. EVERYTHING THE LORD HAS COMMANDED, WE WILL DO, they'd told Moses.

But it wasn't long before the reality of living in community under wilderness conditions began ripping holes in their promises.

- They complain to Moses about the lack of water, God provides water
- They tell Moses their going to starve in that godforsaken desert, and God provides manna and meat.
- No sooner does God provide for them when they find something else to complain about.
- Like the family vacation that looked good on paper but became the trip from hell, this wilderness journey toward an ambiguous "promised land" begins to look like a huge bust—and Moses finds himself caught in the middle.
- The people take out their frustration on Moses, and Moses, as the mediator, does his best to talk God out of frying them all right then and there.
- Not a good scene.

To crown it all, (you might recall last week), when Moses heads up Mt. Sinai to talk with God and doesn't show his face for 40 days, the people decided that just maybe he isn't going to come back at all, and that they'd better hedge their bets.

So they collect all the gold they can find, draft Aaron into forging a calf idol modeled—get this—after an Egyptian god, and do their darnest to cram God back into a form they can see, can manage and can worship on their own terms.

"IF THE LORD'S NOT COMING AND MOSES IS GONE, WE'LL FIND A SUBSTITUTE," they say.

Their substitute? A golden statue. What's ours?

If God is absent, we'll make do… make our own god; something we can get our hands on, something we can touch, something that'll help us cope, or escape our wilderness for a little while.

When Moses finally comes down out the clouds after six weeks, stone tablets in hand, the sight of the people worshipping that calf causes him to break the stone tablets of the covenant.

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Which brings us to today's reading—yet another episode of the ongoing conversation/argument/dialog between God and Moses about the fate of God's chosen people.

But there's a key verse omitted from our reading, a verse that gives us the true context of their conversation: verse 3 of the chapter, where God tells Moses to go on ahead with the people to the promised land:

> Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; the land I promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, says the LORD, "but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."

God, you see, has had it up to here with this stiff-necked people, and is quite convinced they would not survive the desert journey if things keep going the way they've been going.

What's Moses to do? He's between a rock and a hard place.

To paraphrase the prophet:

- "You give me monumental responsibility, but you leave me guessing as to how to accomplish it. You say that I've found favor in your sight, but I feel very vulnerable.
- You call us your chosen people, your precious possession. How am I, how are we, going to know you care about us unless you stay with us and se the journey through?
- You say that you'll send your angel to go with us, but if you yourself aren't coming, then don't send us, 'cause I don't want to go alone!"[1]

God, I need you! I need you to stick with us! I need you to show up!

Ever been there? I have… I am.

We want, we need, a God who will go with us. That's what Moses wants; that's what he needs, he and his people, and that's what he prays. It's a matter of life and death after all.

And so Moses keeps pushing until, finally, he gets the answer he's been pleading for all along (vs 17), and the LORD says, OK MOSES, I'LL DO IT—I'M IN FOR THE DURATION.

When God shifts from NO to YES, something in Moses shifts, too, and now he wants to go deeper.

SHOW ME YOUR GLORY LORD—GIVE ME A GLIMPSE OF YOUR ESSENCE, ALLOW ME TO SEE YOUR VERY SOUL! An audacious request, even for Moses.

And God says,

> MOSES, EVEN YOU COULDN'T SURVIVE A FACE TO FACE ENCOUNTER WITH ME, BUT I TELL YOU WHAT…THERE'S A PLACE, THIS GAP BETWEEN THE ROCKS, AND IF YOU HIDE YOURSELF THERE, AFTER MY GLORY PASSES BY, I'LL TAKE AWAY MY HAND, AND YOU WILL SEE MY BACKSIDE.

[1] Timothy Hare. *Feasting on the Word.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011)

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In her amazing book Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Anne Dillard, who catalogs encounters with the Divine presence that's so subtly and yet powerfully manifested in the natural world, compares her revelations to this scene from Exodus. She writes:[2]

> "Just a glimpse, Moses: a clift in the rock here, a mountaintop there, and the rest is denial and longing. You have to stalk everything. Everything scatters and gathers; everything comes and goes…you have to stalk the spirit too.
>
> …The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit's one home…Go up into the gaps. If you can find them… Stalk the gaps."

Moses' ultimate request, to see God's glory, is a reminder to us all that the most precious gift we are given is the gift of God's very self. Ultimately, that's what we're after. And in Jesus, that's where we land.

> And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:14)

"We had thought of God," Simon Tugwell writes, "as the dispenser of all the good things we would possibly desire; but in a very real sense, God has nothing to give at all except himself."[3]

When Jesus comes into the flesh, God's whole self, frontside, backside, inside and outside comes into view.

Of course, the world could scarcely believe it. That God would go that far, give that much, pour himself out so completely. But that's what happened.

Instead of consuming us along the way God offers himself to be consumed; joins us in our desert, pouring out his life so we might have life.

We need God to show up. And God has, in Jesus. And through him, through the water that claims us at the font and the meal that feeds us today, God shows up in us, too.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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[2] Annie Dillard. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Row, 1974) pages 204, 205, 268, 269.
[3] Simon Tugwell, *Prayer: Living with God* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1975), 124, 127. Quoted by Timothy Hare in *Feasting on the Word.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011)