Holy Mountains

Exodus 33:12-23

Whitefish United Methodist Church

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- The Catholic monk Thomas Merton says, "the world is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time…the trouble is, we don't see it.
- Apparently Moses was concerned that the Israelites would not know if God was present or not in the part of their journey that was to come. And the truth is, Moses needed assurance as well. So Moses engaged in this extraordinary dialogue with God that we just heard.
- Doesn't it strike you that Moses has what our Jewish friends call "chutzpah" or a whole lot of nerve in his conversation with God? God seems to be rethinking God's participation in this whole grand experiment, too.
- You see, this amazing conversation takes place after the golden calf debacle and the smashing of the stone tablets by the rebellious children of God. It seems that both God and Moses are looking back and reflecting on all that has happened—the freeing of the Israelites from Egypt, the journey through the wilderness, and the promise of a land of their own. God, it seems, isn't even sure God likes these people anymore.
- One commentator says: "Maybe it was the rejection. Like they don't even seem that satisfied with the Lord, either. God is kind of scary and distant. God's not nearly as fun as the golden calf party. So God decides that God will not be going with them on the rest of the

journey; God will send an angel instead. And then Moses pleads with God, saying that was not the deal—*These are your people; an angel is not the same; the whole thing won't work if You don't come; the people want your Presence. I want your Presence.*

- And God gives in, although not 100%. "My presence will go," God tells Moses. Having gained some ground, Moses pushes further. He pleads again: "Show me your glory." It's as if he is saying to God: "Look, we've been through a lot and we are going to go through a lot more together, and I don't even know you that well. I don't even know what you look like. You are asking a lot of me, of the people, couldn't you just show me your face?"
- God's well-known reply is—No human can see my face and live. God offers another alternative to face-to-face. God will put Moses in the crag in the rock on the holy mountain, cover his face with God's hand, pass before him in all God's glory, and then remove God's hand in time for Moses to see God's back—the backside of God's glory.
- But what does that mean? Why does God do that? Is it that God doesn't want face-to-face intimacy? Perhaps, but I don't think so. I think God knows that we humans aren't really capable of seeing God's fullness all at once, but only in looking back, in seeing how God was at work in the world, in history, in the lives of God's people, in our lives.
- Think of it this way: stare at the sun directly and you go blind. But if you turn around and look in the light of the sun, you can see everything. To look God straight in the face, as Moses wants to do, is put ourselves in opposition to God, but to see God's back is to follow God and to look in the same direction.

- "Show me a sign, a neon sign, anything," a young woman said to God in a counseling session, when she wanted to know God's will in an agonizing decision. We say we want clear signs, and yet what if God's will were so obvious that we had no choice in the matter?
- What freedom would we have if we were coerced into belief?
- Yahweh, the name the Israelites used for God, tells Moses that God's face will remain forever hidden, for anyone who sees the face of God will not live. This statement is often cited as a universal description for the holy otherness and inaccessibility of God.
- And yet there are other texts, too, that whisper another vision: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God," (Matt. 5:8); or "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!" (John 14:9).
- That's where Jesus comes in. Thanks to God's mercy and grace, we CAN look upon the face of God in Jesus—God incarnate among us. Not only will we live when we see his face, but we are brought to even more abundant life, according to his promise.
- God agreed to bring the people into the promised land, and God pledged to dwell with them once again. And yet time after time in the history of God's people, we have felt God's absence more than God's presence.
- Anne LaMott, in her book "Plan B"—Further Thoughts on Faith," writes a wonderful essay called "Holy of Holies 101." She says she never meant to help start a Sunday school and did not have a speck of confidence that she could do so.
- There weren't many children in her church, except for her son Sam. Her church was located in a senior center while a new building was

being built. But one day, she could feel something tugging on her inside sleeve, which is the only place she ever hears from God, on the shirtsleeve of her heart. And yet she understood that God wanted her to start a Sunday school, even though she hadn't the faintest idea of how to do it or what to teach.

- So she and her friend did start a Sunday school. And at first it did not go well. On good days, only one child would leave in tears. On bad days, she could not imagine what Jesus had been thinking when he said "suffer the little children…to come to me."
- She writes: "Holiness has most often been revealed to me in the exquisite pun of the first syllable, in holes—in not enough help, in brokenness, in mess. High holy places, with ethereal sounds and stained glass, can massage my illusion of holiness, but in holes and lostness I can pick up the light of small ordinary progress, newly made moments flecked like pepper into the slog and disruptions."
- Over time, more children came to Sunday school, and teachers got better at it as well as the children. After awhile, her son Sam grew up along with the kids, and a youth group was formed. It became close-knit and loyal to one another.
- One recent day, the other teachers and Anne took the teenagers to the ocean. The kids went into the ocean. They yelped as the cold water covered them, and they splashed and screamed, and shoved one another a little more roughly than had been her dream for the day.
- She writes, "Still, as I watched them being cuffed by the breaking waves, submerged, missing for a moment, then reappearing spluttering and laughing, I thought of what this dream had taken: all

those times we teachers had had to ask for help, and had plugged away without knowing how or whether we were going to manage.

- And it had taken much more letting go and trusting than we had felt capable of. I remember getting knocked around in these waves when I was young," she writes, "and how it felt when grown-ups picked you up and tossed you into the air or the water, exciting and scary all at once, and you knew you would always be caught."
- And now I, your pastor, say: "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could live like that, too?" Knowing that we might be buffeted by the waves of life, that we might feel like we are drowning sometimes, and yet knowing that we will always be caught by God.
- And lest you think I am seriously out of touch with reality, let me assure you that I know that it sure doesn't feel as if God always catches us. On the contrary, we feel that God has dropped us with a big splat.
- Even when we think we have faith, something or someone happens along to tell us that we are wrong. I remember walking into a nursing home and meeting a loving daughter in the hall outside her mother's room. When she saw me, tears sprang to her eyes.
- "I'm so worried about mother," she said. "She isn't doing well, and I am afraid. I have prayed and prayed, and I have faith in God, but I don't want to lose her yet. And one of my friends told me that God might take mother because my faith isn't strong enough."
- It was all I could do to contain my anger and frustration at anyone who would say something like that to a worried friend in the name of God. As I sat and talked with this faithful daughter, I remembered what it felt like for me when my sister lay slowly dying, leaving her

nine-year daughter an orphan, and I wondered "where are you God? Are my prayers just not getting through to you?"

- Now, years later, as I prayed with another woman who was asking the same questions, I spoke from my own experience.
- We don't know how God will appear in our lives, and sometimes we don't know until much later that and how God was there in the midst of our grief and crisis. I do know, like Anne Lamott, that God often appears most often in the broken places, in the holes, and that we don't see how God fills them until much later.
- Speaking of holes, that reminds me of fishing holes. Thank you, Hannah, for giving me your copy of David James Duncan's The River Why. I have been rereading parts of it, and amazingly enough, it has bailed me out of several situations, not the least of them this sermon.
- If you haven't read this wonderful book, put it on your list. It's the story of Gus, a young man who is fishing prodigy-son of an aristocratic father who is overbearing and demanding. Gus takes off to a cabin in the Oregon woods and runs into a string of characters that help him come to himself, his true self.
- When Gus decides one night, after a particularly compelling encounter with an old guy named Nick, to go out for a walk along the river, he finds: "When my steps grew loose and my breathing easy, the glimmering began again; but when I'd make a stab at the thing that caused it, try to name it or even to guess its nature, then glimmering abruptly stopped. So I called it Nameless.
- What was it in Nick's story, what was it in the image of hook and hand that set me off inside? What had it been in the pine knot that set Bill Bob off? I didn't know. All I knew is that I had set out walking

in the dark of the night, without destination, and with no more cause than a glimpse of a stream flashing secrets.

- What in a scarred palm could cast such a spell? [Nick had a scar on his palm that had intrigued Gus throughout their time together.] Who cast it? I didn't know. But I felt that the one I called Nameless was trying to speak to me—had long been trying.
- And his "words" were silent, spoken in a language of images: the drowned fisherman, the pine knot, the 'why' in the river, old Thomas, Eddy in the alder, the scar in the palm—these were the signposts marking both my inner and outer journey.
- They were not much like the usual sacred signs—but fishing was hardly an orthodox faith…And these things had been given as gifts—like rain, like rivers—unlooked for, unasked for: I had to follow the signs I had been given, as rivers follow valleys, as spring follows winter, as leaves turn and salmon spawn and geese fly south in October.
- I couldn't trade the trail these images blazed for me for a straight and narrow way—not when the water's ways, meandering and free flowing, had always been my love."
- The River Why was written in 1983, and it has served as secular bible to fly-fisherpeople, environmentalists, and outdoor-lovers for a long time. In just the past few years, though, David James Duncan "came out" to his fans as a confessed Christian, though he doesn't like organized religion much at all. After giving it up for a long time in reaction to his fundamentalist upbringing, he began to identify Nameless as Jesus overtly. It shocked (and to be honest dismayed) his many followers.

- For Duncan, it was only in looking back that he could see Christ at work in his life despite the pain that he had experienced through church. I wonder if Duncan has ever heard these words from Thomas Merton, who asks God:
- "How shall we begin to know You (God) are if we do not begin ourselves to be something of what You are?" "We receive enlightenment only in proportion as we give ourselves more and more completely to God by humble submission and love. We do not first see, then act: we act, then see…And that is why the one who waits to see clearly, before he will believe, never starts on the journey."
- This is the season of autumn—a time of surrender and letting go—a time to begin a vigil of trust. The trust comes not only in knowing that spring will come again, but in believing and living because we know that being vulnerable, empty, and dependent on God is sometimes what it takes to know God's presence.
- You need not go to any holy mountain to see or know God. Hear these words from Meister Eckhart, another great mystic, who said, "Be as sure of it as you are that God lives: at the least good deed done here in this world, the least bit of good will, the least good desire, God laughs and plays."
- Trust that God's compassionate and playful nature will be known and will go with you at all times—not just in the mountaintops or the trout streams, but in the deep darkness of your life as well. Let Christ be the face of God for you—and live! Amen.

Sources:

David James Duncan, The River Why, Sierra Club Books, 1983

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Anne LaMott, Plan B—Thoughts on Faith.

Martha Greene, "Speak Up, God" *The Christian Century*, Oct. 8, 2002.