

October 22, 2017
based on Exodus 33: 12-23, Moses in the Crevice of the Rock
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Good Morning! “Crevices, Glimpses and Moving On”

Today we pick up the Children of Israel story with this question--- Is there life after the calf? ---that is, after the Golden Calf that Aaron and the Children of Israel worshiped while Moses was up on Mt Sinai ---the story Teman Cooke preached on last Sunday.

Or asked another way - How does one move on after a crisis?

It seems to me that it must have been traumatic for Moses to come down the mountain to face his brother Aaron, the people and to take a look at the calf that spoiled his mountain top experience.

The Golden Calf event was more than just a bump in the road or just a hiccup in their journey to the Promised Land. The event developed into horrible killings and unbelievable chaos.

After such a crisis how could the journey continue? According to the story, Yahweh thought it was possible. Moses disagreed.

Yahweh told Moses, “**Go, leave** this place, (that is Mt. Sinai), you and the people **you brought** out of Egypt. **Go** up to the land flowing with milk and honey, **but I will not go up among you**, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

The people were devastated when Moses shared the news that Yahweh ordered them to move on but that Yahweh would not lead them. They mourned. They cried. How could they, foreigners in an unfamiliar place, totally dependent on Yahweh’s grocery store for food and water, courageously move on?

The writer portrays a hopeless situation. The reality was that the calf had cost them the **full presence of God** and that surely must have felt like abandonment. You see, God promised an angel would now lead the journey.

How can the human spirit deal with tragedies such as hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, fires, shootings? And when we experience death of friends, spouses, children, parents, relatives; disappointments from broken relationships, unresolved conflicts, and unfulfilled hopes and dreams; health issues, aging issues; how do we continue the journey?

Moses, the gritty, courageous leader chose not to passively say, "Whatever". How could he--- when he understood that his survival and the people's survival all depended on God's presence. Moses knew Yahweh had promised to lead them to that land flowing with milk and honey and he was not going to let God withdraw from that promise. So, he begs God for **God's full presence**, reminding God that it was **God's idea to leave Egypt and it was God's idea to choose him to be the leader**. Moses asked God a very practical question--- How will I know you are still 100% behind this journey unless you go with us?

God listened. God heard the question, and according to the story, responded with some amazing words: "I will do the very thing you asked; for you have found favor in my sight and I know you by name." The writer implies that Moses' determination to not let God off the hook seemed to be the reason that Yahweh listened.

As you know, this Hebrew understanding that God's mind can be changed raises for us some difficult questions such as how does God decide which pleas or prayers are listened to and which ones are ignored? (This question begs a sermon of its own).

Well, God seemed pleased with Moses' persistence, assuring him he is favored and known by name.

To be known is reassuring. I think the kindest, most reassuring words we hear spoken at CMCL are, "You are known and loved by God." We say these words over and over to the children; however, they are also meant for everyone who enters this space---You are known and loved by God.

Being known is the gift of friendship and compassion. Being known is grace.

Was being told he was known by God the assurance he needed to move on? No, **Moses was still not 100% satisfied.** He wanted **one more guarantee** that God's

presence would be fully restored to lead them as God had promised from the beginning. So he boldly demanded, “Show me your glory, I pray.”

Scholars feel the word “glory” refers to an awesome, shrouded, majestic presence of God, something like an overpowering light(1). An Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, understands Moses’ request this way: “Moses’ request for glory is to draw even closer, more dangerously, more intimately to the very core of God’s own self. In his request, Moses has reached the limit of what even he may ask in his venturesome courage. Yahweh takes Moses’ petition seriously, but will not grant the request. God will not let even Moses crowd in the hidden core of God’s own self.” (1)

Instead, as the story goes, God answers: “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy to whom I show mercy. **But you cannot see my face**, for no one shall see my face and live.”

Did God set a limit? Perhaps God was saying I know you Moses, but even you, the person I have chosen to lead this group of people, cannot enter my core self. No, Moses, you cannot enter into my glory.

But bless Moses, he strove, **he stretched for the limit**. And in that limit, Moses experienced God’s compassion and love.

Dare we stretch the limit? How can we discover the Compassionate God in the midst of disappointments, crises, pain and suffering?

Perhaps in our limited understanding of God, we simply say that God in God’s mercy offered to Moses a gentle, protective way to visibly see God’s glory—**not God’s face** but God’s back, with this compromise(1): “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 or crevice on 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.”

Moses was offered **a glimpse of God’s presence**. Not the face, not the full presence that Moses so courageously begged for, but simply a glimpse.

The Hebrew writers understood God to be both present with and separate from humankind. This unique story clearly shows the struggle to understand God as

intimate with humans, **but not fully disclosed** (2). We cannot see God, right? As John Spong writes, “We can only **see** the effects of God. We can **only see where God has been** (2).” And maybe that is all the reassurance necessary to live our lives just as it was enough for Moses to continue that scary, unknown journey in a messy, wild wilderness.

I love the words offered by Rabbi Joe Rapport from Louisville KY when he wrote, “This week’s special portion carries within it one of the most luminous and awe-inspiring images of all the Torah: Moses, cradled gently in the hand of God, emerges from the cleft of the rock to glimpse a sight of the Divine Presence just as the Glory of God passes by. This vision is one of the most unabashedly human representations of God as can be found anywhere in the Bible. God has a face, which Moses cannot see. God has a hand, which protects Moses until the moment when God’s shining Presence has passed by. And God has a back, which Moses glimpses momentarily, though we have precious little description of what this vision of “God from behind” may have looked like.” (3)

Like Moses, we live in a world of uncertainty, and as the saying goes, “Stuff happens.” We are forced to live with the results of climate change. We are forced to live with the results of the last Presidential election. We are forced to live with very few gun laws. Our country lives with great disparity in incomes, health access, adequate food and housing. **Life is not just or fair.** Somehow Moses understood that God was not the cause for their unfortunate happenings on their journey but, rather, **he understood that his survival and the people’s survival depended totally on God’s presence.** So with us, personally and communally.

How does this **story speak to** Community Building at CMCL?

I offer my understanding, which may be different from your understanding. That is, building community includes acknowledging failures, facing the issues with courage, and **being determined not to let go of God’s presence.** Together, we dare to affirm that God’s presence is our survival.

After Moses had that awesome experience in the crevice of the rock and caught that glimpse of God’s presence, he went back to the people and the journey continued. They must have caught whatever Moses caught from that experience.

We, too, have our crevice in the rock experiences, followed by glimpses of God's presence. We are known and loved by God. We commune with God and with each other. Today, we are challenged, as Moses modeled, to keep seeking God's face, to never give up, **because in God's grace and mercy we are offered the glimpses that propel us to journey on.** We can't give up. As Paul wrote in the famous Love chapter, I Corinthians 13, "For now we see through a glass darkly (just catching glimpses); but then face to face (that is our hope). Now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known." That is God's grace for the journey.

Like Moses, we are known and loved by God. Like Moses and his community, we move on. Like Moses and his community, we discover anew there is life after the Golden calf. "Cervices, Glimpses and Moving On."

Please turn to # 526 in the Worship Hymnal.

This morning Amanda led the children in singing a favorite childhood song. One of my favorite hymns, from perhaps middle school on, is this one, "In the Rifted Rock I'm resting, safely sheltered I abide." At that time, our church used the black Mennonite Church Hymnal that was published in 1927. How many of you remember singing from the black church hymnal? I was so disappointed when the red Mennonite Hymnal printed in 1969 did not include this hymn and then I was very pleased when the blue hymnal printed in 1992 included it once again. Now I wonder if it will be included in the 2020 hymnal.

There was something very comforting about these words. And I think another reason I liked the hymn was that in the 6th grade we needed to memorize Psalm 91, which begins this way---pardon the KJV language---"He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord: He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in Him will I trust. Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler and the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers and under his wings shalt thou trust."

The writer, Mary Dagworthy James, used the story of Moses in the crevice of the rock as the inspiration to write these lyrics.

Let's sing verses 1, 3, and 4. Before we sing, Stock Winestock will play the melody on his cello.

References:

- (1) Walter Bruggemann, "Exodus", *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, pp. 939-940.
- (2) John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, Chapter 4.
- (3) Rabbi Joe Rooks Rapport is Co-Senior rabbi with his wife Rabbi Gaylia R. Rooks at The Temple, Congregation Adath Israel Brith Shalom, in Louisville KY.