

Show me your glory, I pray

Exodus 33:12–23

Psalm 99

1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

Matthew 22:15–22

Text: Exodus 33:18

Moses said, ‘Show me your glory, I pray.’

Introduction

Have you ever had a vision in which you saw Jesus? Many people testify to just such an experience. In our skeptical era people are reluctant to speak about such experience and one of the privileges of being a minister is that I get to hear them. It is easy to be skeptical of such testimony; until you hear it from a close friend. A person very close to me testified that one night she saw Jesus standing at the foot of her bed. She had no sense that she should be afraid, she knew who it was, and she knew what he wanted even as he held his hand out to her. And, if can you imagine, in the midst of that visitation she had the temerity to say, “not yet.” It wasn’t long after that when she committed her life to Jesus Christ.

If, like me, you have never had such a vision, have you ever wished you did? I was sharing this story with a ministry colleague not long ago and we both admitted that we were a little bit jealous. It is not uncommon for those in pastoral ministry to hear the mocking voice of the evil one whispering during challenging times or in the dead of a sleepless night, “are you sure” and “what makes you so certain?” Whispers of doubt aren’t aimed only at ministers; the enemy is ever seeking to undermine the faith of believers. Believers sometimes crave an experience, a little extra something, because we think it will solidify faith.

‘Show me your glory, I pray.’ Moses prayed that prayer. Yes, Moses! Moses who saw the burning bush that was not consumed though on fire; who witnesses the plagues on Egypt and the release of Israel from slavery; who held out his staff and saw the Red Sea part and Israel escaped the Egyptian Army; who struck a rock with that staff and saw water gush out sufficient for the needs of Israel in the desert, etc., etc.—yes, that Moses. He still prayed, “Show me your glory.”

1. When we read this story of Moses’ prayer from the book of Exodus, we touched down in the midst of an ongoing story. It is always this way as we read sections of scripture. It is part of the grand narrative of God’s saving incursion into the world, first in his conversation with Israel and then in that Word that is Israel’s messiah, Jesus Christ. Drilling down further it is in the story of Moses and his relationship with God as the one who leads Israel to the freedom God purposed for his people. (My prayer is that you will be encouraged to (re) read the fuller story).

Moses and the children of Israel are at Mt. Sinai. Moses had been on the mountain and received the tablets with the ten commandments and came down the mountain only to discover the Israelites have constructed a golden calf and are worshipping it. This is when Moses throws the tablets and breaks them. (Exodus 32:19) In the aftermath God tells them to leave Sinai saying that he cannot go up among them. (Exodus 33:3) This is the context of Moses’ prayer of

intercession asking God to go with them. God promises to go, and Moses then prays this prayer perhaps seeking assurance, “Show me your glory, I pray.”

Biblically speaking, God’s goodness and God’s holiness are two angles of vision that touch on the same reality of God’s nature. When God said to Moses that he would make his goodness pass before him, God’s holiness is on display in all its glory. It sounds strange to us that God protects Moses in the cleft of the rock so that he is not consumed by the glory. We are told in scripture that sin cannot abide in the direct presence of God. Perhaps the brightness of this glory overwhelms life, such is its shock. We know from nature that a neutron star is so dense that a thimble full weighs more than the entire human population of the earth. The scripture declares God to be the creator of the neutron star. So how dense is God? If God bumped into you, it is obvious who would fall. I point out to you that God’s love for Moses and his people is such that he passes by sufficiently protecting Moses and Moses experiences the presence of God’s glory. It is immediately after this event that Moses carves two new stone tablets and God writes those ten words a second time.

When you read the New Testament it is essential to keep in mind that the authors are steeped in the stories of the Hebrew scriptures; stories like this one of Moses seeing God’s glory inform them as they write of Jesus; we look to these Hebrew scriptures for clues to what the New Testament authors mean. So when the Apostle John takes up the pen and writes of Jesus—“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. ...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory—one of the stories informing his meaning is when Moses saw God’s glory.

When the Apostle Matthew tells us in his story of Jesus’ infancy of how Joseph was instructed to take Mary as his wife and adopt the child in her as his own naming his Jesus, Matthew tells us this was to fulfill the prophetic word of Isaiah, “and they shall name him Emmanuel,”—and to make sure we all understand the meaning of that name Matthew adds—“which means ‘God is with us’”. Matthew begins his story with the same declaration John begins his; that Jesus is God come in the flesh.

In some respects what we call the incarnation—God coming among us as one of us in Jesus of Nazareth—finds parallels in this story of Moses hidden in the cleft of the rock. God comes among us is Jesus accommodating himself to our creaturely and fallen status—as the Apostle Paul noted, “he emptied himself, being found in human form”—such that when we look into the face of Jesus we see into the heart of God—we, like Moses, according to the gospel, behold his glory.

When we are at worship and hear the stories of Jesus read and proclaimed—in fact whenever we read the stories of Jesus in faith—we find the One about whom we read somehow looming before us in the power of his self-evidencing reality. As that happens and the Holy Spirit bears witness to our spirit of Jesus’ presence, we see his glory. There are times we may wish for a vision, yet faithfully, time upon time, our Lord stamps our hearts with his presence as we take up the narrative of his love traced in the pages of scripture.

There may be some for whom this is new and sounds strange and yet you sense something compelling you. The promise our Lord made when he sent out his disciples to preach the good news is this, “whoever listens to you listens to me.” Jesus is faithful and when the gospel is read and preached, he makes himself known.

2. I invite you to turn your attention with me to the story we read in Matthew’s gospel when he was asked the question regarding paying taxes. Again, we touch down in the midst of an ongoing story; a point in the story when the pace is picking up, so to speak. This event takes place in that last week of Jesus’ life. It is the Tuesday following the Sunday of that great procession of palms into Jerusalem. Jesus has been teaching in the temple where his authority has been questioned by the religious leadership.

Jesus tells them a story about two sons one who told his father he would go and work in the vineyard but didn’t go and the other who said no to his father but later relented and went and worked. Who did the father’s will, Jesus asked. He went on to tell a parable of tenants who refused to give the vineyard owner his rightful produce.

No doubt Jesus told other stories—Matthew gives us these two. He then notes that “when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.” It is in this context that the Pharisees plot to entrap Jesus with this question about taxes. So, they send their minions to ask the question hoping to disguise their intent and the Herodians to politically charge the question. The Herodians supported the Herod dynasty of kings and had a vested interest in the right of the Herod kings to collect taxes for Rome.

As I reread that story the last sentence stood out to me. “When they (the questioners) heard this (Jesus’ answer), they were amazed; and they left him and went away.” According to the gospel, when these questioners approach Jesus and put their question to him they are looking into the face of God. When Jesus answers they hear the heart of God.

When they approach Jesus, they begin with flattery as if to catch Jesus off guard. “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.” It is interesting to note that though they are being obsequious everything they said was true of Jesus. Matthew tells us they were amazed at Jesus’ answer. Even though he calls them out for their deceit he gives them a thoughtful answer. They aren’t amazed because Jesus didn’t fall into their trap—there would be people in the crowd who thought paying any tax to Rome was a betrayal of God.

It’s the line, ‘give to God the things that are God’s’, that stands out. Whose image is on the coin, and by implication, whose image is on you? Any faithful Jew hearing Jesus could only nod in agreement that serving God, giving yourself to God for you are made in his image, was utterly faithful to the scriptures and the faith stance that should inform your life, including even a discussion of paying taxes.

They were amazed and yet they left Jesus and went away. It appears that the animus towards Jesus so clouded their judgment, that though amazed by Jesus they still walked away. Why are

they so against him? We could surmise some reasons they might give, but was their animus justified? People today hold animus towards Jesus, or they are indifferent, but is it justified? I say this gently, should we not at least examine the reasons we give for such animus or indifference to see if it is justified before we walk away?

3. It was most likely early in 50 A.D. that the Apostle Paul left Philippi and came to the city of Thessalonica. Luke tells us that Paul spent three weeks proclaiming Jesus as Messiah in the Jewish synagogue; a number of Jews, gentile God-fearers, and prominent women became followers of Jesus. People who would hear Paul declare that Jesus is the manifest face of God. People who began to embrace the faith that to know Jesus is to know God.

The Thessalonian church soon experienced opposition from the Jewish quarter, culminating with an angry mob ransacking the house of Paul's host, Jason. (Acts 17:5-10) Jason and some other believers were hauled before city officials; the substance of the complaint against them was that they were harbouring known troublemakers and political subversives. Paul, Silas, and Timothy fled under the cover of darkness and made their way to Berea where Paul had a brief successful ministry. Troublemakers followed him there and he then came to Athens—but he longs to know how the Thessalonian believers are doing, so he sends Timothy back to find out. From Athens Paul comes to Corinth and it is there that Timothy catches up with him with the news that the Thessalonians were doing well.

This is the moment Paul picks up the pen and writes his first letter to them. You can hear the relief and joy that is in his voice. "We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Now what are the odds that the few believers that Paul has gathered together in Thessalonica would still be meeting and believing and labouring in love for one another especially when their founder had been run out of town as a political subversive? The dominating religious mood of the city of Thessalonica was animated by the cult of Emperor worship—something in which the Christians refused to participate making them suspect.

If the church were merely a human invention how long would our congregation last? If faith were merely a matter of human ability to believe something how long would you be reading the Bible or caring for each other out of a sense of obedience to God? The religious mood that dominates our culture is the worship of personal choice and to choose to serve God is not a choice highly regarded.

When Ronald Reagan's father-in-law Loyal Davis was dying Reagan wrote him a letter to encourage Loyal to trust himself to Jesus Christ. In that letter Reagan wrote this of Jesus: "It was a miracle that a young man of 30 years of age, without credentials as a scholar or priest had more impact on the world than all the teachers, scientists, emperors, generals, and admirals who ever lived, all put together. Either he was who he said he was or he was the greatest faker and charlatan whoever lived. But would a liar and faker suffer the death he did?"

'Show me your glory, I pray.' And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory. Amen