

God's Glorious 'Backside'

Exodus 33:12-23
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Several years ago now, when I was pastoring a congregation in Dallas, I got a call from a woman who wanted some information about the church, especially our worship services, and in particular, my sermons. After worshiping at a variety of churches, she expressed a concern that many of the preachers didn't really focus upon the Bible itself, but merely used scripture passages as a point of departure to get to the topic they wanted to talk about. In other words, the biblical text wasn't really directly addressed.

While we continued to visit, her concern got me thinking. My immediate interpretation of what she was sharing with me was that she might be looking for what many call a good "Bible church." Congregations that label themselves as a 'Bible church' tend to take the Bible literally. What typically happens in churches that approach the Bible as infallible and inerrant is that the primary focus is often placed on law rather than on grace. For those of you who know anything about John Calvin, and his influence on Reformed theology, our Presbyterian understanding of God should first and foremost be centered on the sovereignty and grace of God.

In sermons, a common tendency of preachers in more fundamentalist churches is to pull in as many different Bible verses as possible to emphasize their particular perspective, or to "prove" the point they are trying to make. That's why this practice has been labeled "proof-texting." A majority of those of us on the progressive side of the theological and biblical spectrum, however, believe that taking scripture passages out of context like this is a leading cause of what can be described, at the extreme, as Bible abuse.

In that phone conversation, the more the woman and I conversed, the more I realized that she *wasn't* looking for biblical literalism in sermons, but simply a place of worship that takes the Bible seriously. It caused me reflect upon how I use the scriptures in my sermons. So I responded to her that **while I take a more progressive approach to interpreting the Bible, I do indeed take the scriptures very, very seriously**, using them as the backbone in my preaching, at least the vast majority of the time. Evidently, according to her perspective, that was somewhat different from other progressive churches.

I am proud to admit that while we try not to get caught in the trap of taking the scriptures too literally or out of context, we do indeed address the written word in an in-depth and thoughtful manner, and hopefully with integrity.

We ended our conversation with confirming that our discussion was very enjoyable and informative for both of us. I recalled this conversation earlier this week as I was preparing for today's sermon. And I'm pleased that after these many years of preaching, that except for the occasional theme-based sermon, most of mine are indeed quite biblically-based.

This is perhaps a way-too-long introduction to get into the heart of today's sermon. But with our new adult church school class exploring the basics of Progressive Christianity I wanted to share this perspective and approach today as it pertains to the Bible and its relationship to preaching.

So in an intentional Bible study mode, let me put today's scripture passage from **Exodus 33**, a conversation between Moses and God, into its larger context before making some specific observations. Today's story follows the story of the golden calf, which I preached on a couple of months ago in a sermon about idolatry.

In one of the many climatic moments in that narrative, Moses shatters the stone tablets of the covenant, the Ten Commandments that he had brought down from the mountain. That dramatic act was as clear a symbol as one could find for the shattered union between God and his chosen people.

God tells Moses he will send an angel with them on their way 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." Remind me to do a sermon on "stiff-necked people" some time. So Moses has a long talk with God and convinces God to change his mind and accompany them anyway.

By the time we get to today's biblical text, there is an important theological movement by which the nation of Israel is forgiven and restored, by which the people pass from alienation to restoration, and the covenant remains intact. I would suggest that this is **a process that most of us experience in our own understanding of our relationship with God – a movement from alienation to forgiveness and restoration, a profound realization that the covenant between us and God is indeed intact.**

Perhaps the most important theme to emerge from this part of the biblical story is that **God is merciful and compassionate.** That revelation, then, should lead us to explore what implications that has for you and me? Basically, I think it means that **even when we, as children of God, break covenant with God, God remains in covenant with us – that God's presence goes with us always, now and into the future.** I cannot overemphasize what a tremendous source of hope that should be for you and I, as individuals and as a community of faith.

Another important biblical theme that is presented is that when seeking justice for wrongdoing on the one hand clashes with demonstrating compassion on the other hand, God sides with compassion.

Now comes the fun part of the passage, one that is filled with Hebrew humor. And oh what cut-ups those ancient Hebrews were. Unfortunately, this humor is lost in the English translation. We'll get to that in just a moment.

Having successfully received from God the promise of a continuing divine presence in the life of the people, Moses now requests confirmation that God is who God presents himself to be, and confirmation that he, Moses, is God's agent. So now that God has promised to be with Israel, God seals that promise by means of a theophany – a direct, in-person appearance of God.

The sequence of request and response is simple enough. Moses asks to be shown the Lord's "glory," and the Lord gives a three-part response:

- 1) God will make all God's "goodness" pass before Moses and make known God's name.

- 2) But Moses will not be allowed to see God's face, lest he die. (Never mind that earlier in v. 11, right before today's passage, it states, "Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend." This indeed appears to be a contradiction. Progressive biblical scholars suggest that perhaps this reflects some internal problems in the final editing of this story.)
- 3) God instructs Moses to stand on a rock, and when God's glory passes by, God will put Moses in a cleft of the rock, cover him with his "hand," and then take away the hand so that Moses can see God's "back."

Opting on the side of modesty, most English translations of the Bible simply render the Hebrew word used here as God's "**back**." Interestingly, the King James Version (from the early 1600's) is closer to the original Hebrew meaning when it talks about God's "**back parts**." In other words, God's "backside." This encounter between Moses and God is commented on in the book, *A New Christianity for a New World*, by retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong. Spong writes:

I do not think I have ever heard a sermon preached on that particular text in my entire life. I suspect it might be too difficult for a preacher not to titillate the congregation with references to the divine derriere.

But beneath this amusing level of literalness, the ancient writer was pointing to something far more profound than our literal minds could ever imagine: he was asserting the common human experience that mortal men and women can never see who God is but only where God has been. We see God's tracks. We visualize and experience God's effects, not God's being.

By the time we get to the end of this biblical tale, I think the primary point that is made is something that many of us find to be the case in our own journey of faith, especially at it pertains to spirituality. **It is often clearer and easier to see where God has been in our lives than where God currently is.** In other words, perhaps a majority of us best recognize God's loving presence and activity in our lives in retrospect and with hindsight.

As part of our own personal spiritual disciplines and practices are concerned, then, this should encourage us to **make time to reflect upon what's going on in our lives, to look for evidence of where God has been – especially in those moments of grace and comfort and joy.** Like Moses, instead of being able to see God face to face, we are more likely to see God's glorious backside, so to speak.

I encourage you to reflect upon this during the weeks ahead, and see if perhaps this isn't true in your own journey of faith. I know that keeping a journal has helped me, in the past, a great deal in this regard. So does simply spending a few moments before going to bed each night to pause and reflect back upon the events and feelings you had during the day, looking for evidence of God's presence and grace.

So let us go forth today remembering the promise of the covenant, that God's compassionate presence travels with us wherever we go. And **perhaps we will be blessed with the gift of looking upon God's glory, as God passes by.**

Amen.