

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
God's Presence
 Exodus 33:12 – 17

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I invite you to suspend your thoughts and travel back in time with me, *all the way back* to the time of Moses. God has delivered his people through Moses, an elderly, stammering, *reluctant* leader. God has *miraculously split* the waters of the Red Sea, for his people to cross in safety and their enemies to be swallowed up by the waters. God has led them to Mt. Sinai, and has called Moses up the mountain to give him the law.

But Moses has been up on the mountain for so long, chatting it up with God, that the people have gathered around his brother, Aaron, encouraging him to fashion gods for them who will go before them to the Promised Land. “As for [the] fellow Moses who brought [them] out of Egypt, [they] don’t know what has happened to him” (Ex 32:1b). Aaron responds by telling them to “take off the gold earrings that [their] wives, [their] sons and [their] daughters are wearing, and bring them to [him]” (Ex 32:2).

All the people bring their jewelry to Aaron, and he fashions a golden calf, saying, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt” (Ex 32:4b). Aaron builds an altar in front of the calf, and they sacrifice, present fellowship offerings, and have a party.

Meanwhile, Moses is still on the mountain, and God tells him that he needs to leave, because the people have become corrupt. God tells Moses that he will destroy his people in his anger and instead, make *Moses* into a great nation. But Moses intercedes on the people’s behalf, so that God might protect God’s honor and be faithful to his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Israel. “The LORD [relents] and [does] not bring on his people the disaster he [has] threatened” (Ex 32:14).

Moses goes down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant law, but when *he* sees the “calf and the dancing, his anger [burns] and he [throws] the tablets...breaking them to pieces...And he [takes] the calf...and [burns] it in the fire; then he [grinds] it to powder, [scatters] it on the water and [makes] the Israelites drink it” (Ex 32:19 – 20). Moses calls all who are for the LORD to come to him. He tells them that the LORD commands each man to kill everyone else with the sword. (Interestingly enough, we *don’t* find God telling Moses this command *anywhere* in Exodus.) Yet, with Moses’ command, 3,000 are slain that day.

Fast forward a few verses, and in chapter 33, the LORD has another conversation with Moses. He tells Moses to leave, to go to the land God promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He will send an angel before them, to drive out their enemies. But *God* will not go with them, because they are a stubborn people, and he might destroy them on the way.

Fast forward a few more verses, and Moses pitches a tent to meet with God. A cloud descends, and the LORD meets Moses.

Moses decides to give God a piece of his mind. God’s plan is *unacceptable*. God has chosen this people and promised them land, but how in the *world* can they be God’s people if God’s presence doesn’t go with them? In *The Message* paraphrase, Moses says, “Look, you tell me, ‘Lead this people,’ but you don’t let me know whom you’re going to send with me. You tell me, ‘I know you well and you are special to me.’ If I am so special to you, let me in on your

plans. That way, I will continue being special to you. Don't forget, this is *your* people, your responsibility."¹

And God concedes...but just a bit. Lutheran professor, Kathryn Schifferdecker, suggests that our translation is a little too generous. In the NIV, Exodus 33:14 says, "The LORD replied, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.'" Except the *Hebrew* doesn't include "with you." So what God *actually* says is, "My Presence will go, and I will give you rest." *This* is "why Moses isn't willing to let the argument end. [*This*] is why he keeps pushing God." Like a dog with a bone, "Moses insists that God be explicit with God's promises."²

Moses tells God that God's presence is *critical* to this entire venture! He says, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (Ex 33:15 – 16).

These bargaining prayers are *fascinating*! And I'm curious how *you're* reacting to Moses. Raise your hand if you think Moses is too bold. Raise your hand if you're impressed by Moses, and wish your prayer life looked like this. Raise your hand if your prayer life *does* look like this.

Moses is *not* afraid to scratch and claw, and God *rewards* him for it! God promises his presence as they journey on, because he is *pleased* with Moses and knows Moses by name.

But Moses isn't finished. As Schifferdecker writes, "It's no small thing to persuade the Creator of the universe to change his mind, so Moses pushes his luck just a bit further."³ He tells God to show him his glory.

Now this was where *I* thought Moses went too far. A little selfish, maybe. Pushy. Out of line. Annoying. He gets what he wants, and *that* isn't enough. He demands *more* from God. But the *longer* I puzzled over this passage, the more *impressed* I became with Moses. Moses already *has* conversations with God, as one speaks with a friend (Ex 33:11). Then, he pushes God and *bargains* with him. He is not satisfied to get to the land of milk and honey, the land of every person's desire, without God. He *needs* God's presence, and desires *true intimacy* with God.

Moses speaks with God as with a friend, and he wants to *see* him too. In a truly incredible response, God *doesn't* say that Moses is asking for too much. He *wants* to show himself to Moses, but he *can't* fully, not without Moses dying. But he *can* show Moses his back. So all of his goodness passes by Moses, he tells him his name (which is an incredible expression of vulnerability), and Moses sees God's back.

What if you and I had *this* kind of expectation, *this* kind of confidence, when we prayed? What if you and I longed for the presence of God more than *anything else in the world*?

Perhaps for some of us, the Christian life has seemed more like an agreement to a set of beliefs, and then acting as the kindest person you know – mental assent and behavior modification. There's nothing much personal about it. You pay your dues, and hope that God pays attention. The final goal being that one day, you will go to heaven, whatever *that* means.

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Exodus 33:12 – 13.

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-29/commentary-on-exodus-3312-23-2>

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-29/commentary-on-exodus-3312-23-2>

It is no *wonder* that the church is in decline in the United States! If all it is is mental assent and behavior modification, and many of the people a part of this “club” are the *worst* behaved you can find? *Who* would want to be a part of that! *Not* me!

But the wonderful thing, is that the invitation of Scripture is something quite different from that! We hear of Abraham, who hears the voice of God at the age of 74, calling him to go – just go to the land God shows him. We hear of Moses, an elderly man, who speaks with God as with a friend. David, a handsome man with a whole lot of baggage, who is a man after God’s own heart. Mary, a girl who has found favor with God, and becomes the mother of God! We hear of Jesus, her Son, who is completely God and completely human, who lives and dies for the salvation of all people! And before he returns to the Father, he promises the Holy Spirit, who will be with his people and guide them into all truth.

Throughout Scripture, we hear stories of *relationship*, *not* mental assent and behavior modification! We hear stories of God, continually finding a way to be with God’s people, not because they are worthy, but because he desires *relationship*. He continues to find a way to be with his people, because he *loves* what he has created! He loves *you*, and desires a *relationship* with *you*!

So what does that look like? It means speaking with God, as with a friend. Being honest. Listening. Waiting. Finding out what God’s like. Asking questions. Expressing all the feelings – anger, joy, sadness, humiliation, boredom, hope. Wanting even *greater* intimacy. Being *shaped* by your relationship, and becoming more *fully* yourself.

It takes quite a bit of courage to open yourself up like this, to make yourself vulnerable to God. As individualistic Americans, we have so little experience opening ourselves to vulnerable relationship with one another; it’s no *wonder* it’s difficult to imagine how to do this with God!

Sixteen years ago, I studied abroad in Lithuania, at a small international school. I can’t remember what precipitated the comment, but a student from Moldova said to me, “You Americans think you don’t need *anyone*.” To which I replied, “I don’t!” And I *meant* it! I felt like I was an independent person who could take care of myself. I made it all the way to Lithuania, for goodness’ sake!

But as I continued to think over this conversation, I realized that not only was my statement *untrue*; it wasn’t *healthy*. *No one* is meant to go this life alone, to be an island. You and I were created to be in relationship with one another and with God.

Relationship. That’s why this upcoming transition won’t be easy for me. Though I deeply believe that God is calling me to enter a new season, it won’t feel as simple as turning the page of a book. It will require a *lot* more processing than that. Being a pastor of a congregation is not an exchange of goods and ideas. It is more like becoming a part of one another’s family and humbly growing out of that relationship with one another. It is a recognition of each person’s role in the Body of Christ, to fulfilling our calling, as we follow the Master Shepherd.

This transition is a reminder of how much you have shaped me and opened me in even greater ways to the love of God. I am thankful for the relationship we have formed, and thankful for how these very *human* relationships open us to the love of God.

And I am confident in this, “that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6). Amen!