

Nine weeks ago we embarked on a journey together through the Book of Exodus. We heard the Israelites crying out to God for help. And then, in the midst of a holocaust, God and a group of strong, brave women conspire together to save a little boy. We saw that child, Moses, grown up and wrestling with his call at a burning bush, and then confronting Pharaoh's power on behalf of God's people. We saw them cross the Red Sea and celebrate their freedom. And along the way (over these past two months) we have seen complaining and anxiety met time and again with God's fidelity and gifts of water and manna and Torah and tabernacle.

Today our journey through this narrative comes to an end, even though there are six more chapters beyond where we read today. Not much more happens, however. The Israelites continue "to journey by stages" into Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy. At the end of the thirty-ninth chapter of Exodus they are only one year into that forty-year sojourn through the Sinai Desert: one down with thirty-nine more to go!

When we left the Israelites last weekend we found them in the midst of a crisis brought on by doubt, anger, and panic. They chose to substitute an available god of their own making for the sovereign God who had brought them out of Egypt. That could have been the end of the story. God could have said, "you know what...you really are way too stiff-necked a people for me to deal with. I'm going to find some smarter people, some less frightened people, some people made of stronger stuff than you whiners....The END!" Eleven months or so in and God cuts God's losses.

But it doesn't happen that way. Moses intervenes, and his prayer shows a lot of *chutzpah*. He wants to know that God is going to stay with them. He wants to know that they have a future. He wants to know that the Covenant is for the long-haul. And God goes "all in." This crisis of identity for Israel is met, in short, with God's forgiveness and God's presence. That is good news because the covenant is not contingent upon Israel getting it right all the time, but on God's faithfulness and steadfast love and mercy.

So as we heard today, Moses needs to know that is for real. He needs to know doubt and anger and panic will not get the last word because he's been around these people long enough to know it is not the last time they'll feel that way. And God responds by making his presence known, but with limits. It's not a face-to-face encounter—such an encounter would be too much. Rather, Moses gets to see God's backside. And in the process, God says four things to Moses:

- I will make all my goodness pass before you.
- I will proclaim before you my name, Yahweh.
- I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious.
- I will show mercy upon whom I will show mercy.

Sometimes as a pastor I find myself in conversations with people for whom belief in God does not come easily. I choose that word "belief" carefully, because for me belief is not the same as faith. *Belief is a matter of the head*, I think. And too many people get stuck there. Does God exist or not? And if God exists, how can I know that? Faith, however, is not primarily a matter of intellect. That doesn't mean it is anti-intellectual; we are called to love God, after all, not only with all of our hearts but with all of our minds as well.

But faith begins as a matter of the heart—or maybe more accurately, a matter of the gut. *Faith is about trust.* It's about our ability to show courage in the face of our fears; it's about our willingness to “let go and let God.” Now it's admittedly rather difficult to “let God” if you are stuck on the question of whether or not God even exists. I wish I had an easy answer for that one. Clearly there are times in the Bible that speak of God's absence, and when God is absent it is hard to believe. One wonders if the Covenant has been broken—during times like the exile, for example. But mostly the Bible doesn't spend a lot of ink trying to prove the existence of God, because it assumes that God exists. The primary concern in the Bible is with faith, not belief. It's not about proving the existence of God but about asking people to be more faithful to the true God. In the New Testament, that's about grasping Jesus' true identity (“you are the Christ, the Son of God”) and taking up our crosses and following him.

Moses uses the word “know” over and over again in today's reading, but what Moses wants to know is not about whether or not God exists—at this point that is a given. What Moses wants to know is whether or not God is really in this for the long haul. Moses wants to know if God is committed to staying in this relationship—this Covenant—with Israel. He is looking for a renewal of the Promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And he gets that.

So God says to Moses, “I will make my goodness pass before you.” I take that to mean that we cannot see God face-to-face but we can see *signs of God's presence* if we know how to look. And those signs are all around us. The autumn leaves in their spectacular array of colors testify to God's goodness. That's what the psalmist says: heaven and earth declare the glory of God. (Psalm 19:1) There are signs of God's goodness all around us: the birth of a child, or a song that brings a tear to our eyes or a smile to our faces. Or a meal shared with good friends. Or a hug that conveys an outward and visible sign of reconciliation: two people who had become estranged from each other embrace and forgive.

I am fully aware that all of those things can happen with or without our *belief* in God. And I know that none of these signs of goodness *prove* the existence of God. More than that, I have observed that sometimes unbelievers seem to have more faith than believers, which may sound paradoxical but I think it is true. I know atheists who truly do see those signs of goodness and celebrate beauty and love. And I know people who are resolute in their belief that God exists, and yet fail to celebrate the goodness and joy of life.

But faith that is grim and judgmental and lifeless is in fact not faith at all—not genuine faith. But for those who do believe, these signs of goodness, of joy and peace and shalom and wonder and hope all point us to God. They are markers along the way; signposts, if you will, that sustain us for the long road that lies before us. For believer and non-believer alike, it is easy to miss these signs in our panic and anger and doubt. It is too easy to give in to the opposite of faith, which is despair. Even in a concentration camp, however, there are signs that life is beautiful. Even when the road that lies before us as far as we can see is a dangerous road, we do not lose heart because we know that God goes with us. *One year down, and thirty-nine to go.* But if God goes with us, then we'll make it...

If I showed you god it would never be God: it would be a golden calf. If I can touch it and see it and feel it, then it is at best a symbol of God's presence—an outward and visible sign. But it is not God, because the living, sovereign God we worship refuses to be boxed in and domesticated by us. So that leads to God's second statement—a reiteration of what he told Moses at the burning bush way back in

August. God's name—YHWH—literally means something like, "I am who I am," or "I will be who I will be." I have a friend who after studying this text decided she hated God's answer. "Why can't God just give us a name?" she asked. And I tried to explain that any other name wouldn't be God—it would be something short of God and therefore always in danger of becoming a golden calf. God isn't Joe or Bobby or Sue. And even the name of Jesus—the name that for Christians is above all other names—the name to which every knee will bend, cannot be used to limit God the Holy Trinity and therefore does not capture the fullness of God's interior life as Creator, Christ, and Spirit. So God gives us a name, but it's a name that says, "don't make me too small!" My name is "I will be whom I will be..." And finally, God says, in effect: let me worry about being God so that you can focus on dealing with your own stuff. The core of God's being is God's steadfast love and mercy. Too many churches forget that and substitute their own golden calf—preaching a vindictive God who is constantly judging us and even more so those upon whom we project our fears. God refuses, however, to allow that grace and mercy to be limited by our lack of imagination. God will not be manipulated into showing *us* grace and mercy while smiting our enemies. It is God's very essence to be gracious and merciful; but it is also God's own freedom to shower those attributes wherever God chooses. We should be assured there is enough grace and enough mercy and enough love—even for us sinners.

That leads me to one final comment before we leave Exodus behind—at least for another three years. The downside for a Christian pastor in spending so much time on Old Testament texts is that it may not always be obvious what this has to do with Jesus, and therefore with us as his disciples. For me, however, it is crucial that we remember that Jesus was born and raised a Jew, not an Episcopalian or a Roman Catholic or a Southern Baptist. This Exodus narrative shaped him. When he went to Sunday School he was learning about Moses and the Passover, not reading about himself in John's Gospel or receiving Eucharist instruction. That is a statement of the obvious, but it amazes me how easily Christians can forget it if we are not careful. So I think it is worthwhile to explore this narrative because it is narrative that Jesus builds on and without it we really do not fully understand who he was or what he was about. To be formed as Christians, we need to understand Jesus the Jew.

When we take the time to deepen our understanding of a Book like Exodus we increase our Biblical and theological vocabularies so that in fact when we get to the Gospels and Jesus is driven into the wilderness for forty days and nights we have a deeper grasp of what is going on. When he feeds the five thousand with bread and we remember the miracle of the manna in the wilderness our understanding is deeper and when he takes that matzo bread on the last night of his life and recalls the Exodus story with his friends and then breaks the bread and blesses it and shares it, I think we have ways to move beyond the old fights about how Christ is present in the Eucharist if we remember first and foremost what he was actually doing in that Upper Room.

One year down, thirty nine to go. Faith is a journey and the Book of Exodus isn't the last word. But I pray that the time we have spent with this ancient story continues to shape us, and strengthen us, as the journey continues by stages.