

Seeing the Back Side of God

Exodus 33:12-23 Moses said to the Lord, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.” The Lord said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And the Lord continued, “See, 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 of 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.”

The year is 1940. You are living in a small, nearly abandoned town in Burgundy just a few short miles from the demarcation line dividing German occupied France from the rest of the country in the early years of the war. The sun has set and you’ve settled into your bed. Then you hear a scratching sound on your door. You go to open it- standing at the door with terror in their eyes is a couple with two small children. The woman holds an infant in her arms. Their clothes are ragged. The children’s bony arms tell you they haven’t eaten for a long, long time. The man stammers what you had already guessed: “*Wir sind Juden*”. (We are Jews.) You have a choice to make- if you send them away, you are sure they won’t last the week. Yet, if you invite them in- you might not last the night. What do you do?

If you are 25 year old Roger Schutz-Marsauche, who would become known to all the world as Brother Roger, you know you really don’t have a choice. You know you have to let them in no matter the consequences. Indeed, you know this is why you moved from your native

Switzerland to this dangerous corner of the world in the first place- to manifest the light of Christ in a land hidden beneath the shadow of hate and death.

People shake their heads when they find out what Roger is doing. I mean it's one thing to stick your neck out for someone you know and believe in. It's one thing to give to someone who shares your beliefs and values. Most of us tend to give our time and money, for instance, to causes we agree with and support. But Roger- he was putting his life on the line for people who did not share his beliefs, and did not reflect his culture. He was risking his life for people the rest of the world didn't see as worth saving.

We find Moses is in a similar spot this morning. Now when you just hear it, our text this morning sounds a lot like the one from last week. We start out with with Moses arguing with God. Right before the part we read God tells Moses that God has decided not to travel with the people as they head to Canaan. After the golden calf incident, God explains- it just wouldn't be good for either of them. The Israelites would continue to be stiff necked, God says, and God would just want to consume them. So, in a kind of theological "it's not you, it's me" moment, God tells Moses- instead of going I think it's best if I just send an angel instead.

And Moses does again what we saw him do last week- he fights back. The people have betrayed him. His own brother stabs him in the back. And now God abandons him? It's like Moses here is...um....uh....yeah, no. This is not happening. Moses says first of all God, you tell me to bring this people up, but you haven't given me any help. Second of all, you said you know me and I've found favor in your sight- well, if this is favor, I'd hate to see rejection. If I've found favor in your sight, then show me your ways- show me how this is going to work out.

And oh by the way, God, if that is your real name, these are still your people, you know. Do you remember that?

Pretty hot stuff from Moses. And immediately, you get the feeling that God back pedals here. God responds: “Ok, ok, my presence will go with you- and I will give you rest.” And then you realize just how over the edge Moses really is, because even at this he talks back: “Yeah, God, well you better. Because if your presence doesn’t go with us, then don’t carry us up from here, because what’s the point?” And God again caves and says, “Moses. Moses. Breathe, Moses. I will do the very thing you have asked. You have found favor in my sight and I know you by name.” You get the feeling here that God is like whatever it takes to shut this guy up, already!

And all this- it sounds like the argument from last week, doesn’t it? Where Moses and God are on the mountain top, and God is giving Moses the law, and you find out that, “Meanwhile, back at the ranch” everything has gone to hell and a handbasket, and God tells Moses he better get out of there because he’s going to destroy the people and start over. Only Moses stands up to God, remember? And Moses actually argues God into calming down. It just sounds like the same thing.

Only it isn’t. Not by a long shot. These scenes are completely, 100% different. What makes them different? One happens BC- before calf, and one happens after- and it makes all the difference in the world. The first time Moses defends the people- they are worth defending. Hey, maybe they’re not perfect, but they’re basically good. They left Egypt, they followed Moses, they worshipped God in the desert. They were the people of God- they were the good guys.

But after the golden calf- when the people forgot about Moses, turned their back on God, and just did whatever they pleased...well not so much. They aren't the good guys anymore and there's no pretending otherwise. Moses knew it. When he came down that mountain- he broke those commandments into pieces with his own hands. In this really weird abusive parent scene he crushed the golden calf and mixed it with water and made everybody drink it- like those sitcom episodes where the parents catch a kid smoking and then make him smoke until he's sick. Moses is just flat disgusted with these people- they aren't worth saving, they aren't worth leading, they aren't worth defending.

Except here- here, at the moment when God is ready to throw in the towel- Moses says wait. Moses speaks up for us, speaks up for the people. And not because they're good, not because he's just willing to overlook their brokenness. No, they are covered in shame and there's no denying it. The sole basis of Moses' argument here is that God can't leave them, not because they're worthy- because they aren't- but because they are God's people. "Remember, Moses says to God- they are your people. I know you want to throw them through a plate glass window right now, but- they are your people. And you can't forget that."

A couple of weeks ago, a man named Troy Davis was executed by the state of Georgia. Allegedly, he killed an off duty police officer, although 7 out of 9 of the witnesses recanted their testimony, and the evidence didn't support the verdict. Now, I don't know whether he was guilty or not, but thousands upon thousands believed him to be innocent. Incredible people like Bishop Tutu, Former President Jimmy Carter, and Pope Benedict all spoke up in his defense. It's easy to defend an innocent man.

But do you know, another man was executed the exact same night as Troy Davis in Texas. Only you didn't hear about this guy- no crowds showed up to protest his death. Because no one doubted Lawrence Brewer's guilt. Brewer was a white supremacist and was convicted for the infamous death of James Byrd, a black man Brewer killed by dragging him to death behind his pick up truck. There were no crowds, no media showed up. No one questioned the evidence. He was proud of what he did. It's one thing to defend the innocent, anyone'll do that. It's entirely another matter to speak up for the guilty.

Except one man did. While the world was silent, one lone man showed up in Texas to protest Brewer's death. A 68 year old black man, a civil rights activist named Dick Gregory fasted for a day and a half and held up a sign outside the Huntsville Prison in the piney woods of Texas reading: "Thou Shalt Not Kill." A black man protesting the death of a white supremacist. It's easy to stand up for the innocent. It's Gospel to stand up for the guilty.¹

What drives people like this- Dick Gregory, Brother Roger, Moses? What enables them to see past the guilt to the child of God underneath? I don't know, but I think it's that they are able to perceive what the writer of Exodus calls the backside of God, the hard-to-see parts of God. Moses wanted to see all of God's glory- he wanted God to be easy to see, obvious. But while God agreed to all of Moses' demands- God did not agree to this last one. God drew near to Moses, but then shoves him into the cleft of a rock covering him with a mighty hand. And the only thing Moses gets to see is the faint afterglow of God's presence just as it's disappearing. It would be easy to miss. But Moses doesn't miss it. He sees it- sees the back side of God- just as he was able to see that in spite of screw up after screw up, after marring God's image in

¹ I'm grateful to my colleague The Rev. Adam Grosch for this connection between Troy Davis, Lawrence Brewer, and Dick Gregory and for the line: "It's easy to stand up for the innocent. It's Gospel to stand up for the guilty."

themselves nearly entirely- the people didn't efface God's image completely. They were still God's people- whether they, or God, liked it or not.

On a frozen winter's night, over 100,000 young people crowded into to the Taize community to worship and hear Brother Roger speak. Brother Roger preferred silence to preaching, but that night he preached words that have been remembered ever since. He told this crowd that it's so hard for us to see God- so hard. But that even a glimpse of the back side of God, even the desire for a glimpse is enough. He said: "We can sense hardly anything of God's presence. And yet it is enough to have the desire to welcome God's love for a flame to be kindled, little by little, in the secret recesses of our being. Animated by the Holy Spirit, this flame of love can be quite faint, and yet it keeps burning. And the Holy Spirit stirs us up and is at work within us, reorienting the depths of our being, preparing us to dare to live lives of forgiveness and reconciliation. And the heart awakens to the wonder of a love."

I don't know who will need your forgiveness this week, or your mercy, or your understanding, or your help. Maybe it won't be someone else- maybe it will be you who needs this. What I do know is that whoever will stand in need won't deserve love because we've earned it. In fact it will probably be quite the opposite. What I know is that whatever forgiveness, whatever healing God enables anyone to offer- it will be given just because we're children of God: broken, beautiful, and longing to be whole. Everyone of us. **Amen.**