

August 7, 2022 Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Exodus 33:17-23

"Finding God: By Looking Back"

Douglas T. King

"Mommy, do you remember when..." Years ago during a pastoral care visit, I spent an afternoon witnessing a grown daughter sitting at her elderly mother's feet and reminding her of the story of her mother's life. "Mommy do you remember when you grew up on the farm?" Mommy, do you remember when you were a teacher? Mommy, do you remember when you met Daddy? Do you remember when we moved to Paris? Do you remember when? It was a sacred moment as this daughter helped her mother, who could no longer remember, remember the many blessings of her life. This daughter told the story of her mother's life, with a gorgeous narrative arc, demonstrating the purpose behind all that had occurred during her many fruitful and fascinating years.

When we are in the midst of living our lives, scrambling to and fro, it is not always easy to recognize a narrative arc in the day-to-day drama. And it can be hard to recognize the presence of God in the midst of our daily adventures. In this final sermon in the series "The Ways We Find God (or God Finds Us)" we are considering the ways in which looking back on our lives gives us an important lens by which we can recognize God's presence with us.

In our text from Exodus this morning we are told of this remarkable encounter between Moses and God up on the mountain. Moses is hungry to see God's glory face to face. And God grants Moses' his request, partially. He will be allowed to see the

glory of God but not face to face. Moses is allowed to see God, but only God's back.

It is important to note what occurs before this interaction between Moses and God. In the preceding chapter, Moses and God are together on the mountaintop and the people of Israel are below and getting restless. In their minds Moses has been gone too long and the wait has become unbearable. In the midst of the wilderness they have run out of patience for a God that is not tangibly present before them. The people implore Moses' brother Aaron to create for them a God that they can view before them all of the time. Aaron responds to their needs by melting down their gold and fashioning a calf for them to worship. They now have something to bow down before that they can see before them each and every day.

It is easy to caricature the people's need for a big hunk of gold shaped like an animal. But, most of us can relate to the deep desire within us to have our God present before us every day. How glorious and comforting it would be if we could just experience God, see God, face to face. It would be great if God could be pinned down in that way for us. But, of course what Aaron fashioned was far from God.

In the aftermath of the people's idolatry Moses boldly convinces God to not destroy the nation. Moses, being told that he has found favor in God's sight, requests to have God's glory revealed to him. But even, Moses is not allowed to have God present before him. He is granted a vision of the glory of God but only after the divine has passed by him.

In the grammar of the original Hebrew text of the Old Testament only the actions of God are presented in the present tense. No human action is ever characterized as being in the

present tense. It is as if the writers of the scriptures are telling us that we can never keep up with the movement of God in our midst. We can never completely comprehend how God is at work in the present moment.

There are lots of ways to interpret what it means that Moses is only allowed to see God's glory after the divine has passed by him. But one of the ways to envision it is temporally. Moses can only fully recognize God's movement after it has occurred.

Oftentimes, the only way for us to recognize God's presence is when we look back over time to see what has previously occurred in our lives. When we read the Bible it seems as if there was a time and a place when and where God's presence and intentions were so much clearer than the time and the place in which we live. But so many of the stories we encounter in the scriptures only make sense because a writer is looking in the rearview mirror of all that occurred and looking backward, recognizing how God was at work.

When young Joseph is sold by his older brothers into slavery it is a barbaric act and the cruel division of a family. His father, Jacob was heartbroken. Nothing could fill the hole within him as he mourned his missing and presumed dead son. But Joseph was on his way to Egypt where he would one day save the nation of Egypt from famine and go on to save his entire family and the tribes of Israel as they were reunited once more. But in the moment there was no possible way for Jacob to know how God's purposes would play out to save his family. It is only in looking back that we can see that God's salvation would find its way to fruition.

When Moses flees Egypt to escape being held responsible for the murder of someone abusing a Hebrew slave it is hard to see how God is at work. And when Moses lives through a decades-long exile in Midian it is not clear how anything saving could come from that. But in time, Moses matures, and one day God visits Moses in the form of a burning bush. Moses is now ready to return to Egypt and, with God's help, rescue his people. It is only through the lens of the entire story that we can grasp that God was always at work in Moses' life, even when no human eye could see it.

And perhaps there is no greater demonstration of how unfathomable the workings of God are in the midst of this world than with Jesus. This remarkable teacher, healer, and miracle worker, the very Son of God, is traveling the countryside bringing wisdom, and wholeness, feeding people on a multitude of levels. And then he arrives in Jerusalem and is tried, convicted and executed on a torturous cross. Surely there is no rational way that God could be present in the midst of this devastating tragedy. Surely there is no way to transform this disaster into anything good. And then even that awful cross will be changed from a symbol of persecution to a sign of victory and reconciliation. God defeats the forces of death and Jesus lives once more. It is only in looking back that the pattern of God's saving grace is revealed.

The same can be said for the entire gospel of Mark. There is a way of interpreting the literary structure of Mark that I have always found quite compelling. It entails a whole lot of analysis of the circular nature of the book. But the simplest element is a look at the final words spoken in the gospel. The two Marys are at the tomb and are dismayed to find it empty. A young man clothed in white addresses them. "Do not be alarmed;

you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth; who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." The young man is sending the Marys and the disciples back to where Jesus' ministry began. In essence it is a literary device sending us back to the beginning of the gospel. This literary argument goes on to say that the only way we can understand the gospel is to read it through again, this time with the full knowledge of the resurrection. Until we know the complete story we cannot understand everything that occurs along the way.

The movement of God in the world cannot make any sense to us until they are viewed in light of the complete story; until the resurrection is presented to us. "Orson Welles said, 'If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story.'" (Lamott, p. 95) This saying can be heard in a cynical way. If you are reading Romeo and Juliet and decide to stop reading after they have their romantic first kiss you have a happy ending. Of course what you really have is an intentional ignorance of the reality of all that is to come.

But there is another way to hear this quote. We may not know the details of what awaits us in the individual days to come in our lives. We may often wonder where and how God is present in them. However we have been given a vision of the ultimate end to our stories. We have been told that the tomb was empty. We have been told that God, in Jesus Christ, defeated our every mortal limitation, even the very powers of death. And we have been promised that we will share in this victory.

The ending of all of our stories have already been written by a God whose love is more powerful than any force in the universe. With this conclusion already written for us, we have the opportunity to look back on our lives and see not merely a random string of events. But rather we gain a glimpse of the ways in which God's grace is skillfully interwoven into the warp and woof of our existence. We receive a vision of God's abiding presence even in our most lost moments in the wilderness. We begin to glimpse the subtle pattern of how God is leading us forward and ever claiming us as beloved children of God promised to share in the victory. Every twist and turn of our story is leading us to the divine.

I think one day, when all is over, God will sit us down and retell the stories of our lives to us, just like that daughter did for her mother, and we will see how God was present each and every step of the way.

Do you remember when?

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Lamott, Anne, *Hallelujah Anyway: Rediscovering Mercy*, Riverhead Books, New York, 2017.