

Almost Nothing

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Exodus 33: 12-23

Delivered on October 22, 2017 at Northminster Presbyterian Church in North Canton, Ohio

There is the scene of the burning bush, when God first called to Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the Israelites go. There is the scene of the plagues like gnats, and frogs and locusts and finally the death of the Egyptian first born. There is the scene of the parting of the Red Sea, when Israel left Egypt and their captors pursued them only to be left in a watery grave. There is the manna that fell from heaven, the Ten Commandments being brought down from Mount Sinai. There are just so many scenes in the story of Moses. The kinds of scenes that were perfectly written, absolutely ideal for a Hollywood movie starring Charlton Heston and directed by Cecil B. DeMille. And all of these dramatic scenes leads up to what is supposed to be the final scene, the final act, when Moses was supposed to lead the people of Israel into the land that God has promised them and that God even promised Abraham long before Moses was even thought about. Now, I say supposed to because this last scene if you know your bible well, is a scene that Moses will never actually be a part of. Moses dies before he ever gets to lead Israel into the Promised Land, and it is Joshua, Moses' successor who will actually have this honor. But today, we find ourselves in a scene where Moses is on Mount Sinai, and the Lord commands him to get up and go to this Promised Land, to complete this long journey out of slavery. But there is a problem, of course. There is a problem as there always is. Just as this entire journey has not been easy for Moses and God's people, there is no thought in Moses' mind that this last part of the journey will be any easier. In fact, there is every reason to think it will be harder. There will be people in the Promised Land that will not exactly be happy to see all these foreign Israelites arriving to take their land as their home.

So Moses says to the Lord, “God, you have said to me bring the Israelites up out into the Promised Land, but I don’t know you, so before I go, I want you show me your glory.” Well, then the Lord says, “Ok, I will show you my glory, but you cannot see my face. For no one can see my face and live.” And so that is what the Lord does. He shows Moses his kavod, his glory. He put Moses in a cleft of a rock, and as he passed by, he covered Moses’s eyes so he could not see the his face, but then as he passed by he took away his hand, and Moses was able to see the Lord’s back.

Now, here’s what I want to know. How many of you know this story? How many of you know this story about Moses seeing the Lord’s back? Well, I have known this story for a number of years, and I have preached on it a number of times, and sometimes I have found myself thinking, thinking about what it must have been like after this moment, as Moses no doubt excitedly told all the Israelites about what he saw. And I say that, because I think to myself that among all these Israelites who heard this story, there must have been two kinds of reactions. There would be those who gasped and said “If only I could have an experience like that. If only I could see the Lord passing by! Hallelujah!” And then there must have been others who said, “So what? So what, Moses, all you saw is a back. You can’t even tell us what the Lord looks like. That is almost like not seeing God at all.”

I am guessing you are probably familiar with these two types of responses to this experience of God, and if you are a part of this worshipping community, or any worshipping community, you are probably very familiar with the second type. Those who say that any kind of experience you might have of the divine, and an experience that you value is so insignificant, and so small, it is nothing to get excited about, for in their view, it is almost nothing at all. It is

just like a vision of God's back and nothing more, not even a vision of God's face, you still don't know what God looks like. In fact, I sometimes think that these people would say that about everything we do here at Northminster. They might even suggest to us that we should change our name from Northminster Presbyterian to God's Back Presbyterian, because that describes most everything we do. For let's think about it for a moment, shall we? Most of us, after all, were baptized as young infants in a time we probably don't remember, and then with a baptism that was probably just a sprinkling, almost nothing at all. We celebrate the Lord's Supper with a little taste of bread barely large enough to feel on the surface of your tongue and you drink a sip of wine that is so small it is barely enough to wet your throat. Almost nothing at all. We come and hear messages each Sunday of about fifteen minutes each, no moving pictures on a screen, not even still images. We can't afford trips to the Holy Land for all of us where we can wade in the Jordan or see the empty tomb in the Garden of Gethsemane, or journey to Bethlehem at our Lord's birthplace. Just a fifteen minute message. Almost nothing at all.

Now, lest you get me wrong, I am not saying that sermons should not involve pictures or moving images. I am not saying that communion should not be celebrated differently or that baptism should never be done differently. I am not saying anything like that. But what I am saying is there seems to be a lot about our experiences of God that are almost nothing, barely anything at all, just like Moses' vision of God's back and is that enough? Is that enough?

We should ask if that is enough, because I think it is clear for all of us here at Northminster and in this world that this life is pretty far from the kingdom of heaven. There is humiliating poverty in this world we live in and you don't even have to go to some remote part of the world to witness this poverty, you can drive to some neighborhoods just down the street to see it.

There is an opioid epidemic in our state that no one seems to know the answer to, and which only seems to get worse. There are parents who don't know how to talk to their children, children who don't know how to talk to their parents. The Repository headlines are all about wars and threats of wars, hurricanes, mass shootings and just a general ugliness and a lack of civility in our political discourse. And all this is to say nothing about cancer that has affected nearly every family, poison in the food we eat, the air we breathe and the water we drink. We are pretty far from the kingdom of heaven, aren't we? So is what we have enough? Well think, if you would, what it is that you have when you have a promise. A promise is not much of anything, is it? It does not show us anything, it does not do anything, and people who want to manipulate you and win your trust can make promises to you all day long that sound so sincere but they mean nothing to them. Nothing at all. A promise is nothing more than a set of sounds that come out of someone's mouth or a set of marks on a sheet of paper. But think of what happens to your world when someone makes a promise to you that you trust. Your world is utterly transformed. Or consider what it is like when someone you love finally says those three words "I love you" to you for the first time. Again, it is just words. Again, it is just sounds coming out of someone else's mouth or marks on a sheet of paper. But just how much did those words transform your world? A promise isn't much, the words I love you aren't much, our glimpses of God aren't much, but the question for us is not how much they are, but how do they change our present, and what would our lives be like if we didn't have them? How hopeless, and how dark would our lives be?

I doubt that many of you believe there are such things as magic words, but if there were such things as magic words, just like *Abracadabra* or *Open Sesame*, you know that among those

magic words are the words *hocus pocus*. But do you know what “Hocus Pocus” means, or where it comes from? It actually comes from the Old Latin Masses in the Catholic Church when the priest turns his back to the congregation and says the words of Jesus “This is my body.” Now, according to Catholic doctrine the Eucharistic host, the communion bread as we would call it, is transformed into the body of Christ when the priest says those words and when the priest says these words in latin, what he says is “Hoc Est Enim Corpus Meum”. And when the priest is mumbling “Hoc Est Enim Corpus Meum” with his back turned to the congregation, it sounds like what “hocus pocus”. Well, I don’t believe in magic words. I don’t believe in words that can change bread into a body or wine into blood. But I do believe that words like “I promise” or “I love you” can utterly transform the reality in which we live, even though these words are almost nothing, and in the same way, our ways of experiencing God that are almost nothing can utterly transform the world we live in.

I know of people, and you may know some too, who can tell you that they see a lot more than God’s back, they are more like those who claim to see God face to face, and who will talk to you as if God as is real to them as you or me, they will talk about casual conversations they have with God as if they are talking to their spouse or their next door neighbor. And when you talk to them it is as if they aren’t even there. It is as if they are walking around with both feet in the kingdom of heaven and life for them is just bouncing between one spiritual experience and another. And if that is the kind of person you are, that’s wonderful. People can laugh and snicker behind your back all they want, but let them laugh and snicker. If your life is a journey from one heavenly scene to the next, I say that’s a gift. But I will also tell you that has never been me. And I don’t think that is the vast majority of people. Most of us don’t have both feet

or even one foot in heaven. Most of us live in this world, but this world we live in is transformed by these glimpses, these holy experiences of God that are almost nothing.

I was seventeen when I accepted Jesus into my life. One day, I remember I prayed to God and I said I was sorry for all the things I had done in my life which God did not approve of, and I vowed that from now on I would live for God. I remember I opened my eyes from that prayer and I looked around and for some reason I expected everything to be different. But nothing was. It was still a cloudy and overcast day. The clouds didn't suddenly part with a choir of angels singing. I went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror and I still looked the same way. There was no halo circling around my head. I had a car that wouldn't start on cold mornings and the next morning, my car still wouldn't start. The appearance of this world had not changed in any way. But, on the other hand everything had changed. Everything had changed.

Glimpses of God. Small experiences. Things that make some people say "So what?" But to you and to us, I wonder if they make all the difference.