

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
October 16, 2005

Scripture Readings      Exodus 33:12-23  
                                    1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Hymns:                      469 Morning Has Broken  
                                    394 There is a Balm in Gilead  
                                    432 Song of Hope

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Nooks & Crannies  
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The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was once heard to remark that since he had an especially busy day ahead of himself, he was going to need at least three hours of meditation to get started!

Well, not for three hours, but maybe for half of three minutes, following this morning's reading of the gospel by Ernie, let's close our eyes, if you would, and meditate a bit on what you think the face of God would look like, if you could see it?

What did you see? (The following are references to stories of my own that presented me with "the face of God.")

- Story about the Midnight Run.
- Story about Laquanna following the death of Buddha.
- Sometimes the face of God that I see is reflected in the beauty of nature and prompts a dialogue, which to God is always a prayer of one sort or another, which may have happened to you as it has to me when walking a trail or outside admiring creation in one way or another.
- Or, the face of God that I see more often are the ones that I look at each morning, just like today, as we gaze upon one another. In this physical and spiritual presence we share.

And, Moses is said to have been in that very up close and personal presence with God: – on Mount Horeb and in the tent where he consulted with God as the Hebrews made their way to Canaan, the Promised Land. And, just as we are affected by being in one another's presence – Moses, too, had a somewhat extreme physical response to being in the glimmering presence of God – what

the ancients referred to as Shekinah – his face shone to the degree that he had to cover it when addressing others, since it was simply too distracting.

It is a good thing, we are told, that Moses had this relationship with God – because if it wasn't for his intercessory powers, according to Scripture, the People of Israel and our entire history would have been quite different.

In one of Moses' most poignant pleadings with God, he states to God that he would rather be dead than to go forward without YHWH.

Because of fear? I don't think so.

No, I think it is because Moses knew what we know, without God – all is lost.

Ecstatic in the agreement and assurance that God will stay with Moses and the Hebrew tribes, Moses becomes enthusiastic. In his fervor, he says to God tell me your ways; show me your face!

In Hebrew, "face of God" is another way of saying "Presence of God." Moses wants to see the fullness of God.

And in this God refuses to do, but not without striking a bit of a deal. Instead of Door Number One and the full presence of God, Moses gets Door Number Two. Moses will get to see the back of God as God passes Moses – Moses who is tucked away in a cleft of the rock. It seems clear that while we may be given knowledge of the will of God and the power to carry that out, we are not to plumb the full mystery – no matter how fervent, enthusiastic, or blessed we might be. It would simply be too much for this human vessel and its capabilities to bear.

In a way, it's like looking at the sun – just as our eyes are not made to stare into the atomic reaction of our nearest star for very long without serious damage, neither are we to look upon the full mystery of God's being.

Still, why not? God is God and could make us able to see God if God wished. Why tantalize us with the closeness and then hold us back from the full embrace?

I don't know, but it is something to think about. In fact, some believe that's the main purpose of the Scriptures to give us more to think and pray about than we could ever resolve. In the practice of Taizé worship and meditation, leaders remind us that the simplest words of Scripture are sufficient material for a lifetime of meditation and response to God.

And so, I think it is true with most if not all biblical passages. In many cases we simply will not know beyond what we can know – and getting to that point can take a lifetime.

The title for this morning's sermon came to me, as it often does, upon reading the passages early in the week to prepare the bulletin. It was the part about how Moses was placed by God in the safety of the rock's cleft, protecting him from the glory of God as God passed before him, allowing Moses only to see God's back.

Here is another example of the wonderfully powerful and sometimes disturbing imagery that is present in so much of the Old or First testament. Moses would not stand in front of God, but behind the back of God – protected as God went before him and the nation of Israel, as well as enveloping Moses in the boundless wake of God's grace – surrounded in a “nook or cranny or cleft” that takes away the fear of being lost, don't you think?

I remember some of those crannies.

I remember how I used to love to get into small places and feel surrounded, protected, safe, and secretly peering out into a world that could not see me! Attics were like that. Or the “snow igloos we would make after a major snowstorm,” tree – houses – usually at a friend's in the country – didn't have many tree houses in the Bronx, or secret hiding places, like the openings in the center of a large bush – or under the canopy of a weeping willow. I loved those places! Probably the one I most loved was the one as a little it'sy bitsy kid – when standing by my mom I could just wrap myself in the folds of her dress or overcoat. In all these places I was safe, warm, protected, and – yes – happy. All was right with the world.

It's hard to get into those places these days, but the practice of such things as a kid is the image I use today when I think of being in the Spirit or Presence of God; it's the image that comes to mind when I think upon the passage of this morning's reading. Moses and the Hebrews were in the folds of God's great garment – as are we today. There is a sense of rightness about that – and assurance that we can get through. It's a balm, of sorts, for this broken world in which we minister.

And, as Taizé reminds us, there is more – always more. If God had shown God's face to Moses, what would we see in one another?

All those faces of God we saw in the beginning of these comments this morning – those images of God would likely be gone. Instead, we might end up comparing everyone to what God looked like, measuring one another as we go.

Isn't that the phenomenon we most often discover when we get up close to most of our justice issues? Some group sees God and God's law as thus and so; delineating those who measure up and those who don't; offering membership if we change in one way or another – and exclusion if we refuse or can't? In these types of exchanges and conflicts, have you ever noticed that there seems to be

more willingness to welcome the stranger among those who are a little less certain of the Scriptures than those who are so sure? Could it be because those of us who are a little less certain – find God in ways that are surprising, wonderful, and not prescribed?

I think God did Moses and all of us a favor by not showing us God's face, because ever since we have been seeking it in what God did give us – one another and this beautiful planet we share.

In God's wake, we have been left a powerful spiritual practice of seeking – seeking God in the Other – one another – and in so doing our relationships have changed greatly.

Think about it, if you would. I think it makes it easier to see God in those we love and care for. But - if I can truly attempt to see God in the person who opposes me or with whom I have a conflict - I have truly entered into a different place and at some level beyond my understanding – by so doing I have invited that spirit in the other to come to life – maybe in spite of the other.

It's the greeting namaste: the Spirit in me greets the Spirit in you.

When we do such a thing, is there immediate change? Will there be any change in those who are against us? I don't know – that's the Holy Spirit's work, but I do know that I change. Gradually, I mellow...things gain perspective...I can breathe again...and I move on from the anchors of resentment and anger. It's a striking transformation in me and I have seen it over and over – even though I practice this with uneven success.

And when we as a community practice this here or in other gatherings – becoming consciously willing to see God in the other – in all the nooks and crannies of the other --the outcome can be astounding.

It's what you and those before you have done here for so long; it is what those who will follow you will learn from you and continue – multiplying the God we see in one another to the point of transformation and revolution that an impatient God, I think, is calling us to – just as we are called to in the radical teaching of Jesus.

Just as God ignited the spark in Moses, so can the spark of God in each of us ignite one another, and another, and...

And, we don't need to see the results. We always see only the tip of the Spirit and of God. Such is God's nature – always there is more....

In Paul's writings to the Thessalonians that Ernie read this morning we heard this:

“We know that God has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction...for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit...for the word of God has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith has become known, so that we have no need to speak of it.”

Imagine a faith and the practice of that faith so alive that we have no need to speak of it! Imagine a God whose face we do not need to see because we are so distracted in the presence of God (love) in one another – that it never occurs to us that God has one face, one look, one color, one...anything...except an abiding and steadfast love for us to share – the Hebrew word: *Hesed*.

It's the Good News... the GOOD News...

One of the members of this church – the one who lives directly across the street - passed along a copy of *The Christian Century* to me yesterday. In September's issue, the opening piece was on the passing of Walter Bouman, longtime professor of systematic theology at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, who, in part, said this:

“The resurrection of Jesus Christ (that is his life and Spirit and presence in the world today) frees us to do more with our lives than to protect them. We are free to offer them. We are called to love the world, to want clean air and water for everyone, to give ourselves to the service of peace, to commit ourselves to the cause of justice, especially [at times] when our institutions and country are guilty of injustice.”

We are called to this – as you know...

There is a soaring, intense, whoosh to all of this that brings us together and raises us into a place that causes us to shine as Moses did, to radiate with the God from within – inspired by the God in one another. Trust me – God recognizes God's self – and so say the Scriptures about when two or more of us is gathered. God is always there, no exceptions – however hidden God may – for a moment seem – it's always just a nook or cranny blocking the way – temporarily. The shining faces are just a glance, a touch, a smile, and a prayer – away! Amen.