

“Coming Face-to-face with God”

Exodus 33:12-23

Scripted into two parts from *The Message*

Yesterday, I heard an adventurous man describe the exciting adrenaline rush he gets when he goes “cliff skiing” in Canada. I had never heard of “cliff skiing” before, but apparently it’s when you are carried by helicopter to a high, snowy, remote mountain on skis and dropped off on the cliff’s edge. He said literally you are dangling on the edge of the cliff then you let go and start speeding down what’s called a “no fall run.” It’s called a “no fall run” because there are cliffs and rocks everywhere and if you fall – you will most definitely get hurt, if not die. This guy said if you’re afraid of failure you’re doomed. You have to just commit yourself to it, no matter what, no turning back. Ironically, for this guy, the “adrenaline” and the “risk” in the adventure creates a serene feeling inside of him.

He said that going to these remote places by himself and being let dropped off into danger is how he connects to God...he said: *“Even when I think perhaps I pushed it too far because I have lost control and have no where to go but straight into rocks...I’ve always made it through...I’ve always survived.”* But there’s more - not only did he say that

being on the side of the mountain was how he connected to God – but that moment of initial release when he is dropped, literally, *into* danger – at that moment listen to how he describes how he feels: *“I’m perfectly at peace. I feel so alive. It’s like touching the face of God.”*

Moses was not being dropped off into danger on the top of a mountain cliff. But he was being directed to the cleft of a rock to wait for God. And even though we wouldn’t call waiting in the cleft of a rock for God to pass by a “danger” or a “risk” – for Moses, at this early point in Israelite history, everything he was doing was a risk. And when his people weren’t happy – it could get dangerous – or at the very least, out of hand. And that’s exactly what happened before today’s text. Moses realizes he has lost control walking down the mountain into the chaos of the golden calf. But what he really wonders is, *“Is it my job to be in control? No – it’s your job God. So show up! And don’t leave us alone!”*

The Israelites desperately wanted to touch the face of God. Or at least see the face of God. They needed that visual assurance to feel “alive”...to feel like they weren’t wandering

aimlessly in the wilderness, but were indeed on the way to the Promised Land, as God had Promised.

You see, it was about four months after the Israelites had left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea; it was forty days after God gave them the Ten Commandments, and it was about time for another sign. The Israelites felt a desperate need to *see* God, to have tangible proof that God was still with them and had not abandoned them after leading them into the desert.

Keep in mind, these were people who had spent every day of their lives in Egypt, a highly visual, highly materialistic culture, with its pyramids and treasure houses. In Egypt, if something was real, you could see it. Dead people weren't simply remembered; they were kept around as mummies. The branch of mathematics in which Egypt excelled was not algebra or calculus but geometry, the measurement of real things. It was no wonder that the Israelites had trouble absorbing the idea that something can be real even if you can't see it.

Rabbi Harold Kushner surmises that, *“As long as Moses was around, they could look at Moses as an embodiment, an incarnation of God. For them, Moses was God in human form. He told them what God expected of them. He worked*

*miracles, even splitting the Red Sea.”*¹ But right about now, right when they really needed a visual reminder of God's presence - Moses was gone. He was up on Mt. Sinai having a rendezvous with God - without them.

So they fashioned a Golden Calf to represent the power and the glory of God. God was no longer an abstraction. Now they could see the God they were praying to...they could see the face of the calf and somehow to them that was the face of God. They could see that God was physically present in their midst.

Now, as we know, God gets angry at them for turning God into a thing, an idol. And, Moses is so upset that he breaks the tablets of the Law. Moses has to plead with God to give them a second chance:

Moses confronts God. He says to God, in effect: “I've got a bunch of people down there who are having trouble believing that You are real because they can't see You and they don't know how to believe in something they can't see. If it would prevent future Golden Calf incidents, could we just have a tiny peek at what You look like?”

God answers, "You don't get it. The reason you can't see Me is not that I'm hiding, and it's not that you're obtuse. You can't see Me

¹ Rabbi Harold Kushner, “Yearning to See God” *Rosh HaShannah 5763* – posted on *Temple Israel of Natick's website*. Accessed on 15 October 2011 at http://www.tiofnatick.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=63&Itemid=180.

because I have no form or shape. I'm not a thing." But then, rather than send Moses away empty-handed, God utters a most puzzling verse. He says, "Wait here in this cave while I pass by, and then look. You won't be able to see My face, but you'll see My back."²

How can that be, Kushner asks? God has just insisted that He has no form or shape. God has just severely punished the Israelites for portraying God in physical form. And now God tells Moses, "*You can see my back!*"

Is God losing God's mind? Well...maybe that's part of it...give how the Israelites are acting. But again, Rabbi Kushner interprets this passage in a different light: "*We can't see God but we can see God's after-effects. That's what the reference to seeing [God's] back implies. All we can see of God is the difference that God makes as [God] passes through our lives, just as you can't see wind; you can only see things being blown around by the wind.*"³

When co-founder and former CEO of *Apple*, Steve Jobs, died, his speech to the 2005 graduating class of Stanford was circled around widely. I'm sure you've read or heard excerpts of it. At one point he reflects on how his career developed after dropping out of college:

² Ibid. Based on the aforementioned sermon.

³ Ibid. In Kushner's original quote the pronouns "His" and "He" are used where [God's] and [God] are inserted.

If I had never dropped out, I would have never dropped in on this calligraphy class, and personal computers might not have the wonderful typography that they do. Of course it was impossible to connect the dots looking forward when I was in college. But it was very, very clear looking backwards ten years later.

Again, you can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something — your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever.⁴

As Christians, we would say that "the something that we trust" is God...even more - we trust the God of love that has been revealed to us in the life and love of Jesus Christ and that lives in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. And while we might think that the people who were around Jesus for the 33 years he was alive were lucky because they had "God Incarnate" right in front of them...we shouldn't be so jealous. Because they didn't recognize what was right in front of them. They didn't realize God was in their midst. They were sceptical of this man who was going around healing lepers and hanging out with criminals and upsetting the social

⁴Steve Jobs, *Commencement Address at Stanford University*, (Stanford, CA: 14 June 2005). Accessed on 15 October 2011 at <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-061505.html>.

and cultural and religious mores of his day. It wasn't until after he died and rose again, that the disciples were able to "see Jesus" anew...that Thomas was able to touch his wounds...even after all that...two of his disciples didn't recognize him on the Road to Emmaus.

Wanting to see God is not a new thing. *Struggling to recognize God in our midst* is not a new thing either.

Which is why I find so much truth in Rabbi Kushner's understanding of this text. The point is not to physically "see" God, but rather to see the effects of the love of God in the world. The question is not "*Where is God?*" but "*When is God?*"⁵ Maybe we should focus on experiencing God as a verb. God was not turning God's back on Moses, God was in motion – God was passing by – and perhaps was waving his hand saying, "*Come along Moses...I'll lead you...follow me...I'll guide you and walk beside you...*"

Physicists spend a lot of time studying motion. No scientist has ever *seen* an electron. No physicist has ever actually *seen* a quark. But they are absolutely convinced that quarks and electrons exist, because when they look through their microscopes, there

⁵ Noted from "Who is God?" *Questions of Faith: Series One* DVD (EcuFilm Classics). Seen in Women's Bible Study on 27 September 2011 at Calvary.

is bumping around and movement all over the place. They see things happening that could only happen if quarks and electrons were real. An electron is actually pretty easy to see since it leaves tracks in many things.⁶

You know, **God is actually pretty easy to see since God leaves God's tracks in many things...or rather, all things...you and me included.**

What does God look like? *God looks like you and me acting differently because the presence of God is alive and at work in us.* To see God is to see a human life transformed. But it doesn't happen without work and patience and persistence. God doesn't just pass us by once to give us a glimpse...God is constantly moving all around us and deeply within us...and more often than not God is not revealed to us directly – face to face – but is revealed to us gradually – as we learn to live and love in God's grace and mercy and love.

Sometimes those face-to-face moments with God might come. Have you read the New York Times Bestseller *Heaven is for Real?* The book is about now 11-year-old Colton

⁶Brian Kross, Chief Dectector Engineer, "How do people really know that atoms exist even though they can't see them?" on the Q&A page of *Jefferson Lab: Exploring the Nature of Matter's website* (Newport News, VA). Accessed on 15 October 2011 at http://education.jlab.org/qa/history_03.html.

Burpo's experiencing of going to heaven when he was in the hospital as a 4-year-old boy when his appendix ruptured. In his account of his near death experience, Colton says he was in heaven for about three minutes, and Colton's parents give compelling reasons for why they don't think Colton is making this up...namely that he met his unborn sister in heaven...a miscarriage his parents had never told him about. The pastor of his Nebraskan church says, "*Colton and Christ came face-to-face.*" Colton remembers sitting in Jesus' lap, but he also describes God: "*God – he's the biggest one in heaven. He can hold the earth in his hands.*"⁷

Such stories have their skeptics, but if we are a people of faith, then we have no need to be skeptical of such accounts. Albert Einstein said, "*There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.*"⁸ The human experience is full of mysteries beyond our comprehension. We can ask all the questions we want, but as Frederick

⁷ Clarissa Stephens, "WHNT NEWS 19 Special Report: 'Heaven is Real' - A young boy says he experienced heaven after a brush with death," *WHNT News 19* (25 February 2011). Accessed at http://www.whnt.com/news/whnt-whnt-news-19-special-report-heaven-is-real-20110223_0_3849308.story?page=2 on 15 October 2011.

⁸ Written in my personal quote book.

Buechner says, "*God does not give us answers. God gives us [God]self.*"⁹

In a similar way, perhaps we can't see God, but we see things happening that could only be happening because God is at work. And usually when God is at work – we are doing something – we are working too.

I have a friend who took an Iconography class a few years ago. One of the first things he learned was that icons were considered "windows into heaven": ways to find God. The point was not to worship the icon as if it were a sacred relic, but to focus on it so that it pointed you to God. The spiritual practice of writing the icons has been crucial for him in dealing with his depression. In that practice, he learned that the darkest colors are laid down first and then you "paint to the light." He has held on to that image tightly. He says,

The paint we use is almost translucent, so it takes painting each line over and over – about fifteen to twenty times – for the lighter colors to establish themselves against the darker background. After hours and hours, a face begins to emerge from the darkness and the icon takes shape.¹⁰

⁹ Written in my personal quote book. Original quote says "Himself" not "Godself."

¹⁰ Milton Brasher-Cunningham, "I Sing a Song of the Saints" blog entry from www.DontEatAlone.com (1 November 2006). Accessed on 16 October 2011 at <http://donteatalone.blogspot.com/search?q=icon>.

Transformation doesn't happen overnight. Transformation takes work. And repetition. And trust. *The image or presence of God emerges in and through us in time.* The Israelites were slow in connecting the dots of God's impact. They saw the gates of freedom swing open when the Red Sea split, and they knew that somehow and in some way, God was at work...but they forgot that rather quickly because they were so focused on finding a way to "see" God rather than just "experiencing" the results of God's leading and faithfulness in their life. We, too, are often slow in connecting the dots of God's image, impact, and presence in our lives.

*"Human beings are God's language."*¹¹ Human beings, reaching out to others in need, doing good things when they don't have to do them, are as close as we will ever come to seeing the face of God.

Any time we find ourselves stirred to be more generous, more courageous, more self-disciplined, more grateful, we may not have seen God face-to-face but we will have felt the movement of God passing by us and working within us - and we will have

seen the difference God can make in our lives.

Maybe, in the end, it's not important whether we can literally see God face-to-face. Because maybe what's important for faith is not our ability to "see" or know God, but to recognize that we are indeed already seen and known by the God whose presence goes behind us, beside us, before us, beneath us, above us – and through the power of the Risen Christ through stirring of the Spirit – we are known by the God whose very presence resides within us.

Calvary, may we not be so concerned with *coming face-to-face with God* as much as we are concerned with *being the face, and hands, and feet of Christ.* So that when people see us and know us – they may say, *"I have seen something of the presence of God in your face...in you."*

Amen.

¹¹19th Century Hassidic rabbi, Menahem Mendel of Rymanov as quoted in Rabbi Harold Kushner, "Yearning to See God" *Rosh HaShannah 5763* – posted on *Temple Israel of Natick's website.* Accessed on 15 October 2011 at http://www.tiofnatick.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=63&Itemid=180.