



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

We Cannot Know Everything
Exodus 33:12-23

I have been preaching a series of sermons on the life of Moses. We began in Exodus chapters one and two looking at Moses, a Hebrew child who was reared in Pharaoh's household. Then we spent time in chapter three where Moses first encountered God at the burning bush. Two weeks ago for All-Saints we jumped ahead to the end of his life, where Moses on Mt. Nebo saw the Promised Land, but died before he entered the land. Next week we will join Moses on the mountain where he received the Ten Commandments, but today we come to the time in Moses' life, where with God's Law in his hand, he will to lead the people to nationhood, preparing them to move out of the wilderness and into the Promised Land.

As Moses considered the task before him, he knew it could not be done alone. How could a band of Hebrew slaves survive the wilderness, and eventually cross the Jordon River and take a land that was inhabited by folks who had fortified cities and trained armies?

Moses had to know that God would be with him, for if God did not lead Moses, then Moses was not willing to lead the people. Moses had questions and he wanted answers. And his questions centered on the identity of God. Moses was risking his life for a God with no name, who actually is called, "I AM."

Our text is Exodus 33:12-23. Hear the word of God.

Moses said to the LORD, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favor with me.'¹³ If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people."

The LORD replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

Then Moses said to him, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”

And the LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name.”

Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.”

And the LORD said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.”

Then the LORD said, “There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”

In the text, Moses says, “Show me your glory.” Show me just how strong you are. Demonstrate to me so that without a doubt I can know you have the power to accomplish your purpose. Assure me beyond any question that you will be with me. I need to know.

Faith is difficult. We have all kinds of questions and no real answers. Oh, I have heard some people who are absolutely confident that nothing bad will happen if they trust God. Some go so far as to say, serve God and you will prosper. They think they have answers until they are faced with a tragedy. And we are left with questions:

Why does God let bad things happen?

Is God eternal? Has he been around forever and will he be around forever? I mean forever is a real long time. We cannot comprehend forever.

Where was God when my father was suffering with Parkinson’s disease?

Does God really exist?

A certain man had a choice between being transferred to a job in the World Trade Center or to Seattle. He took the job in Seattle. Was that an example of God saving his life? But what about those who died?

Is God a Presbyterian?

Does heaven exist? Does hell exist?

Do you know what our problem is? We live in a scientific world that has to know all the answers, and it is most difficult to live with mystery. But in many parts of this nation, there are churches that have all the answers. We expect our preachers to enter into the pulpit and say, "God has told me, and so now I am telling you." But the truth of the matter is we will never know everything about God; we will never even scratch the surface. Christianity is always a mystery and it will always take faith. It is a faith that works best when we are searching, using our minds, our intellect and our hearts seeking God, knowing we will never know it all. It will take an attitude that thinks, "Since I do not know it all, I must always be open to reform." That is the motto of the Presbyterian or the Reformed faith: "The church reformed and always reforming led by God's word and spirit."

Yet we are bombarded by the teachings of those who know it all and they make such proclamations as, "The suffering in the world, whether it be caused by a hurricane, earthquake, tornado, or human violence, suffering is God's punishment on the people for their tolerance of the wrong people." That is what happens when people think they have God figured out.

When Moses was at the burning bush he asked God, "Who are you?" and he heard a voice that said, "I Am Who I Am." "Tell the people that 'I AM' have sent you." That is not a proper name; it is a verb. It is the most basic of verbs "to be." God is "being itself." It is a way to describe God with no limits, and it has to be that way, for human beings have the wonderful talent of thinking of God in anthropomorphic terms. That is, God is basically like us, but only bigger. But in fact God is holy; God is other, different, transcendent.

We moved in the story from the burning bush, to Egypt to free the slaves, then across the Red Sea into the wilderness. On Mt. Sinai, God provided these slaves a constitution in order to make them a holy nation, and we know that constitution as the Ten Commandments. The authority for this nation was established, "For I am the Lord your God." And the law was given. The future of this new nation of Israel was dawning, and Moses was a little

nervous and made some understandable requests. “God, show me something here. Give me some proof that I am not imagining all this, something tangible, something to hold on to. Come out from behind the curtain and show me your face.”

And God gave Moses something less than sure facts. Moses was given just enough to have faith, but not so much that will make faith unnecessary. God said to Moses, **“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.”**

Let us be aware of one of the pillars of our faith, demonstrated long ago to Moses, that God cannot be totally seen. God cannot be comprehended. God cannot be captured by human language. We have to live with this mystery. And the church has lived with the mystery for 1700 years. Of course there was corruption, but God was mysterious.

But then came the modern age with its science and reason. We found out that the earth is not the center of the universe. It is in fact round and it orbits the sun, which orbits a galaxy, and even the Milky Way is not in the center of the universe. And this age of reason was passed on to the church, so that our Reformed fathers, with confidence, were able to describe God. It is right there in the Westminster Catechism. I memorized this when I was younger. “What is God?” And the answer is, “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, justice, goodness and truth.” That is what I was taught, and notice the catechism answer did not include the word “mystery.” It didn’t even include the word “love.”

But we, for many years, were able to take Moses out from the cleft of the rock, out from under the hand of God and look into God’s face. Oh, how we had much to reform.

I understand that in 1900 at the Congress of Mathematicians in Paris, a German mathematician announced that there were only about 23,000 outstanding questions in the Newtonian system, and once they were solved, our knowledge of the universe would be complete.

Please know that I am not a scientist, but I understand that Einstein brought us a little closer to reality when he announced that things are not nailed down. Conclusions about the universe, the nature of matter, that we

once assumed were final, are not final at all. I have a very unscientific theory that as soon as a scientist finds a smaller part of an atom, God creates something smaller to find. And when the astronomer finds the most distant galaxy, God creates one deeper in space to give us something else to discover.

I understand that Einstein said, “The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mystical. It is the source of art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger is as good as dead.”

To experience true faith you have to join Moses in the cleft of the rock, under the hand of God who only shows us a portion of who he is. We have to know the humility and admit that we do not know everything. In fact we know very little, and that is how I AM intended it to be.

I do not want to take away the absolute importance of thinking about God or using our minds to better understand what God has revealed. God has given us intellects and an amazing capacity for reasoning. We do ask difficult questions and struggle with vexing challenges. We are to study the Bible with a critical eye for God’s word. But being in the cleft of the rock and not able to look God in the face means that there is a limit to human knowledge that ultimate truth lies beyond understanding, that humility before the mystery is a most important human virtue.

God means for it to be this way. God means for there to be freedom to think, inquire, struggle, and doubt. God means for human beings to have faith, to trust when the answers have all run out, which ultimately they do. God means for us to remember that no one has all the truth all the time.

There is a story about a famous philosopher who gave a lecture before a large Jewish audience on the subject, “A Critique of the Existence of God.” The lecture was well attended; a thousand people wanted to hear what the philosopher said about God not existing. It was a long lecture, and as it went on and on the speaker noticed that people were leaving. Finally, when only a few were left he asked the chairman, “Mr. Chairman, am I talking too long?” “No,” said the chairman, “your lecture is not too long. And you proved to almost everyone’s satisfaction that God does not exist, but you see it’s almost time to assemble for our evening prayers. And, God forbid, we wouldn’t want to be late.”

The truth of the matter is that what makes us Christian is that God has reached across the gap between the transcendent and the mundane, the

sacred and the human, and revealed himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ. I would certainly not want to equate our knowledge of Jesus with Moses seeing the back side of God. Jesus is far more than that, for he is as close as humanly possible the very face of God. But Jesus is still in human form, which by definition means that God cannot be completely defined by Jesus, but as a human Jesus Christ is the perfect revelation and representation of God to human beings. We read in John, “No one has ever seen God . . . It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”

So from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we can simply conclude, as did John, that God is love. Jesus, how he lived, how he taught, how he forgave and accepted and welcomed all, how he healed and reached out to the lost and marginalized, how he died – in Jesus we know enough about God to trust God with our own lives, our futures and our deaths. I know, I know, I know, we still find ourselves in the cleft of the rock, never able to comprehend the wonder of God, but God in Jesus Christ, at least God’s hand is removed, and in Jesus we experience God in our lives.

Two thousand years ago, a follower of Jesus on his way to his death, asked his version of the eternal human question, “What are we to say about these things?” St. Paul asked, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” And then he answered in words that are precious enough to keep in your heart:

“I am convinced”—“I am certain” the older translation put it; I know, insofar as I am given to know anything—“that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.