

Chasing Glory

Exodus 33:12-23

A young woman who was filling out a college entrance application came across a question which asked, "Are you a leader?" She hesitated, guessing that the response to the question that the admissions department was looking for was a "Yes." Being an honest sort of person though, she marked the space for "No." As in, "No," she was not a leader. Several weeks later a letter of acceptance arrived that read, "Upon receiving 1340 applications from students to attend this university and seeing that 1339 of them identify themselves as leaders, we find it only proper to accept at least one student who is a follower, so they will have someone to lead."

If Moses had been applying to that same institution of higher learning, I think that woman would have had some company in the "follower as opposed to leader" category. Even though Moses will be forever remembered for leading one of the greatest liberation movements in history, he was a reluctant leader. Every time God thrust the mantle of leadership upon him, he reacted by dragging his feet and complaining that he was not qualified to do whatever it was that God asked of him.

Moses' path to leadership began in a strange encounter with a bush that was on fire but was not burned up. He turned aside to look at it more closely and that was when he heard God's voice. From that experience of God's glorious presence in an ordinary place onward, his life was never his own again.

God gave him one leadership responsibility after another. Go to Pharaoh, ruler of Egypt, and tell him to let the Hebrew slaves go free. Lead them through the wilderness to the Promised Land I have waiting for them. Assure them that I will provide for their physical needs by giving them Manna from heaven to eat and water from rocks to drink. Give them my commandments to live by.

Moses didn't always fulfil his responsibilities as a leader flawlessly. But his most prominent leadership quality and saving grace was his commitment to pointing beyond himself to God's glory. Not everyone who aspires to be a leader, does so

with that same intent. Some leaders chase their own personal glory. They lead, because something in them craves followers.

On their way to the Promised Land Moses and the Hebrews came to Mount Horeb, where Moses climbed to the summit for a meeting with God. While he was up there, a full-blown mutiny erupted in the Hebrew camp. The people gathered together all their gold and brought it to Aaron—Moses' brother—and demanded he melt it down and make a god that they could see and touch. So, Aaron made for them an idol in the form of a golden calf that they could worship in the place of their immortal, but invisible God.

When Moses descended from the mountain, he was carrying the tablets with God's Commandments, which were intended for bringing out the best of the people. What he discovered was that they had turned to worshipping an idol that permitted them free reign to vent their worst and most depraved impulses. By their own choice, the relationship of the Hebrew people with the Creator was ruptured.

Our reading this morning picks up in the aftermath of that event. God told Moses that God would give the people what they wanted. No longer would God's presence accompany them on their journey to the Promised Land. Moses' response was to say, "if you are not coming with us, then don't bother sending us at all." Moses knew that if God didn't go with them, then what was the point? It was their relationship with God that made them a people distinct from their neighbors. Made them a people set aside to reveal God's glory to the world. What good is a Promised Land if a relationship to the Giver of the Promise is no longer part of the promise? Maybe, what Moses also wondered was, what kind of leader would he be without God's presence to guide him. To reassure himself, Moses asked God to show him God's glory.

The place where Moses held intimate conversations with God such as this, was in a tent that was packed up and carried when they moved from one location to another. A tent was an appropriate dwelling for a God whose presence travelled along with them. The ancient Jews had a word for this Presence of God. They called her the Shekinah. I say her because they perceived the Shekinah as a feminine manifestation of God.

The name Shekinah came from the Hebrew word for the act of dwelling. The Shekinah of the Lord dwelt with them when they travelled in the desert. When they were established in the Promised Land, she dwelt in the Jerusalem Temple. When the Temple was destroyed God's presence was not destroyed with it. The Shekinah dwelt within the people. Wherever the Shekinah dwelt became a holy place. When God's presence dwelt with the people, the people themselves became holy. Not holy as we tend to think of the word; not pure or perfect. Holy really means to be set apart for a certain purpose; to be distinct.

When God threatened to withhold the Shekinah from the people, Moses asked, "How shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth." In the same way, those of us who make up Christ's Church are made distinct by God's presence among us. Because of God's presence, we are holy people, in the sense of being set apart, distinct.

In the New Testament, 1 Peter 2:9 describes the Church this way: But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. We aren't holy because we are better than anyone else. It is not our own glory that makes us distinctive. But we are distinct because God's glorious presence accompanies us. We are not holy because of what we do, but rather because of what God does in and through us.

A holy person reflects God's glory. When we are consciously aware of God's presence; it will have an impact on the choices and decisions we make. It will affect the lives we touch when we pass on the grace that we have received from God in Christ Jesus. Living in God's glory makes us into leaders because the proclamation of our ordinary words and deeds hold the potential to lead others to God's presence.

When Moses asked to see God's glory full on, God placed Moses in the cleft of a rock and covered Moses' eyes as God's glory passed by. In the Hebrew tradition, God's glory was associated with the Shekinah, with God's presence. So, this is a wonderful image of God's presence resuming its rightful place as the leader of God's people.

As this pandemic has dragged on it is as if we have been wandering aimlessly in our own wilderness. Like those Hebrews of long ago, we have had our deprivations and our losses. There have been shortages of everything from PPEs to toilet paper. We've endured losses of jobs and income, shutdowns of businesses and downturns in the economy. We've lost the social structure that connects our lives. We've lost lives. Many, many lives.

Like those Hebrews, we have yearned for a return to what used to be. For us the Promised Land we search for on the horizon goes by the name of "Back to Normal." When the road to that Promised Land has felt never-ending, when our rising hopes are derailed by new surges of COVID cases and deaths, we have been tempted by Golden Calves of our own creation. Idols don't always come in the form of gilded statues. An idol can be anything or any idea that we put faith in besides God. Denial of the severity of our circumstances and chasing shortcuts to the Promised Land of "normal" that have led us around in circles and back into danger are examples of the idols people have followed recently.

Moses only saw the back of God as God passed by. That is by definition the perspective of a follower: looking upon the leader's back. But it is also the place of a genuine leader. A leader who is chasing after the glory of something or someone worthy of leading others to follow. When we are being led by God, we do not see God's face; only God's back. We cannot see God's face, because we are following God, and not putting ourselves before God. God doesn't reveal to us the whole picture. Much about God always remains shrouded in mystery until that day when we will see God face to face.

In the middle of the wilderness, Moses regularly entered a tent where he would have his intimate conversations with God. If practicing the presence of God through prayer and reading scripture is a priority for us in our wilderness, we too will make time and place for it, in even our crazy COVID schedules. We can grow to experience God's presence accompanying us wherever we are. We can grow to notice God's presence in ways that were invisible to us previously.

Before the pandemic, when we gathered under one roof to worship, we began our services by singing the assurance that "Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place. I can feel God's mighty power and God's grace. I can feel the brush of angel's wings I see GLORY on each face. Surely the presence of the Lord is in this

place.” Although, for the time being, we worship in different places, that presence of God surely is with us wherever we may be. God’s shekinah ultimately dwells not in places, but in people. And wherever we are faithfully gathered in that presence, there will God’s glory be.

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Preached FCCW October 18, 2020