

February 26, 2017

TEXT: Exodus 33:12–23

TITLE: Glorious Freedom

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

You wandered into a Presbyterian church this morning and thought to yourself, “I want to learn more about God.” You pull a bible out of the pew rack in front of you and not being sure where to start reading, you open it up at random and drop your finger somewhere in the middle of Exodus chapter 33. And you read, *Moses said to God, “Show me your glory.” God replied, “You cannot see my face and live. But stand on that rock and when my glory passes by, I will cover you with my hand. Once I take away my hand, you’ll be able to see my back.”* You think to yourself, “Did Moses really see God in person? And why did Moses only see God’s back as God walked away from him?” Then a little voice whispers in your ear, “This story is about a whole lot more than glimpsing God’s glory from a cleft in a rock wall. Are you sure you want to know what it’s really telling you today?”

Long ago, the ancient Hebrew people messed up bad. Moses had been up on Mount Sinai, meeting with God for a long time and, in the end, receiving from God two tablets of stone that contained the Ten Commandments. Moses was gone for so long, though, that the people grew impatient. So they made an idol—a golden calf formed from their melted down jewelry and they started to worship this false god. When Moses saw what they were doing, he smashed the Ten Commandments, melted their golden calf, and rebuked the people. Then he realized he had to go back up the mountain and see if God would forgive them.

So Moses the mediator went back up Mount Sinai and began a three-part series of negotiations with God. In effect, Moses said, “God, can you forgive the Israelites?” to which God replied, “Yes, go on to the land I have told you about. My angel will go before you.” Now, an angel to lead them wasn’t such a bad thing, but Moses really wanted God to be with them. So in the passage we heard earlier, Moses did some more negotiations: “God, I’m happy to lead the people onward and I trust in you, since you’ve said you know me by name and I’ve found favor in your sight; but will you journey with us as well?” To which God replied, “Be at peace. My presence will go with you.” Moses wasn’t quite sure that was the full answer he was hoping for, so he made a third request: “OK, Lord, one more thing: Show me your glory. Let me see your fullness, your grandeur, power, and might that I may trust you will truly be with us in the journey ahead.”

Moses wants the fullness of God to be with them, to protect them – something like the glory of God in the Battle Hymn of the Republic: *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; he hath trampled down the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; he hath loosed his fateful lightning from his terrible, swift sword; His truth is marching on. Glory, glory, hallelujah.* Now a different “glory of God” was mentioned when Martin Luther King reached the climax of his “I Have a Dream” speech. He quoted the famous words from Isaiah 40: *I have a*

dream that every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain shall be made low; the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain, for the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people shall see it together. (That same passage will soon be sung by our choir as it was set to music in Handel's *Messiah*.) But in Dr. King's and the prophet Isaiah's use of the word "glory," something different is being described than sheer power and overwhelming force.

Back in 1849, a Maryland slave owner died, and his daughter, in order to cover some family debts, planned to sell some of the estate's slaves. At that point, one of the slaves, Harriet Tubman, knew she had to escape. Traveling at night, she journeyed 90 miles until she crossed the Pennsylvania border near Philadelphia. Describing that moment, she wrote, *"When I found that I crossed that state line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person now that I was free. There was such a glory over everything. The sun came up like gold through the trees, and I felt like I was in heaven."*

Isaiah called for a time when things are set right—when valleys are lifted up, mountains made low; places made rough by sin and racism and injustice are smoothed out by God's grace, mercy and love. Then God's glory is revealed and all see it together. Harriet Tubman stopped in the woods while standing for the first time on free soil. Slavery shackles no longer had any authority over her. As she looked at hands free at last, she said she saw "such a glory over everything." Glory is not overwhelming power. It is not Desert Storm and Shock and Awe. It is not shouted down critics or bulldozed protestors. Glory is the dawning light of righteousness, the slow crescendo in a song of freedom; it is a wondrous gift of heaven that comes to be seen when we walk by faith through this troubled, yet amazing world—when we make rough places plain to the glory of God.

God was happy to negotiate with Moses. So when Moses asked to see God's glory, God knew what Moses really wanted. Moses wanted to be sure that God forgave their sin. Would God be with them despite all they'd done to offend the Lord? Yes, said God to Moses. But when Moses asked to see God's glory, God changed the word. (vs. 18) Moses said, *"Show me your glory."* (vs. 19) And God said *"I will make all my goodness pass before you."* What was needed in that moment wasn't a bright, powerful glory blinding us everyone. What was needed was a goodness – one wide enough to forgive sins, one deep enough to touch every life, and one trustworthy enough so that Moses and you and I can follow it wherever it may lead us.

Moses asks to see "glory"; God promises to show him "goodness." God says to Moses that this is all part of the mystery of who God is—the mystery of God's name, Yahweh, I am who I am—the mystery of God's mercy, being gracious to those whom God chooses to be gracious, not by the world's standards but by a deeper standard of divine love. Then God tells Moses to stand on a rock. God will cover Moses with God's own hand. And Moses will see the glory, the

goodness, the wonder of God after God passes by. Like the wake of a boat moving through still waters, Moses will see most clearly from the back, in hindsight, as God's goodness and mercy have been manifest and gone before him here in this the Lord's world. We don't see glory and then act; we act, work and walk by faith, and then we see God's glory.

When the revolution happened in Egypt several years ago, the government was toppled and crowds filled Tahrir Square. A New York Times reporter listened to people in Cairo express their worries about the future. One man said, "*The revolution came, the revolution ended. Now I want to know, who do I belong to? Everyone says it's the revolution of youth, but it's the revolution of everyone who suffered injustice. Now we want someone who will lead us to something correct, and we can't find anyone.*"¹ The Egyptian man asked "Who do I belong to?" — and in effect, Moses negotiating for the people while on Mount Sinai asked that same question. Who will lead us? Who will forgive us? Who will show us the way of goodness and glory?

Centuries later, those questions were answered when Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24). Jesus then went up the mountaintop and was transfigured, seen in glory by a few disciples. But as soon as they tried to hold onto that glory, it went away. He told them not to mention this until after his crucifixion and resurrection, not to try and understand this except in hindsight, after the fact. Jesus passed by them, and they saw him from the rear as he descended the mountain. And the first thing Jesus did once they were back on level ground was to respond to someone in need. A man knelt before Jesus and prayed for mercy for his epileptic son. Jesus healed him. They'd seen glory briefly on the mountaintop; they saw goodness as they followed him on earth. And that led them to true life, true understanding, and ultimately to true faith.

Reading the paper continues to be a difficult part of my daily routine. I grew up very near to the place in Olathe, Kansas where a man killed an innocent Indian guest worker, shouting "Get out of my country." We all live near to the Pittsburgh neighborhood of Beltzhoover where a Somali cab driver was robbed and died from his injuries. Sin and brokenness are all around us. Golden calves and the broken stone tablets of God's law litter the ground at our feet. To whom do we belong? Whom should we follow?

You can drop your finger in the bible and try to get a quick answer to these questions, but scripture never works that way. Moses asked to see God's glory and instead was placed on a rock—the rock of God's abiding mercy that forgives us even in our brokenness and violence. Moses was covered by God's hand—protected out of an unmerited love that constantly seeks our well-being. And finally Moses was given a glimpse, not of glory, but of something more—of God's goodness, which is always most clearly seen in hindsight, after it passes us by, after we've come down the mountain and looked around—after we step forward

to stop hate crimes and racism—after we travel the risky 90 miles to get over a line of freedom—after we remember that what we seek will become most clearly visible when the rough places are made plain and the high places of power, violence and domination are finally brought low. Then like Harriet Tubman we too can say, “There was such a glory over everything.” And the glory of the Lord, the goodness of Christ’s mercy and resurrection hope, shall shine upon us and all people shall see it together.

Amen

¹ “The Revolution Came, The Revolution Ended,” Robert F. Worth, *New York Times magazine*, May 29, 2011, p. 38.