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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
Proper 24, October 18, 2020
Exodus 33:12-23

Last week, we heard the story of the golden calf in our OT reading. The Israelites got tired of waiting for Moses to come back from his encounter with God on Mt. Sinai. They didn't like God's timing and they took things into their own hands. God is not too happy about this. We learn at the start of Chapter 33 that God has decided not to continue among them when they start up again on their journey to the Promised Land.

Poor Moses. He is devastated. He has been chosen by God, against his own better judgement, to lead the chosen people and God has been with him through it all so far. He just came down from a mountaintop encounter with the Divine to find that God has had it with this "stiff-necked people." This was not at all what Moses expected.

I have joked with some of you about the unexpected nature of my call. First, a call that came much later in life, at a time I might have just put my feet up and rested. Then it turns out that I was called in the midst of an unprecedented global pandemic. Come on God! This is not at all what I expected. And it's hard.

Maybe you have experienced this kind of challenge. You had plans for yourself, for your kids, career plans, retirement plans. And then things take an unexpected turn. You are disappointed or, depending on the turn, devastated. This was not what you expected.

Moses models for us this morning a way of dealing with the unexpected. He speaks his mind to God. God has said that he will send an angel to accompany them on the journey in his

place. Moses essentially says, “What do you mean, an angel? You are the one who called me forth to lead this people and you promised to be with us. Come on God! Don’t abandon us now.”

Moses knows of what he speaks. In an earlier encounter God said, “I am the Lord their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt *in order that* I might dwell among them.” The whole point of God delivering Israel was to make it possible for God to be close, to live with them, in the midst of God’s beloved people. Moses reminds God of that when he says, “These are your people.”

So, God relents a bit and tells Moses that, “My presence will go.” The translation we heard this morning adds “with you,” but scholars agree that the Hebrew says only, “My presence will go.” There is no “with you.” Moses gets that ambiguity. He hears God saying, “I will go with you to Canaan but not *in the midst* of you.” This is not acceptable to Moses. He trusts that God will stay true to the promise and he holds God to that.

What a model we have in Moses. We know God’s promise, too. We know that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. We know that God has promised to be with us always. We know that God pitches his tent among us. It’s easy, though, to doubt that in those unexpected times when things don’t go as we had hoped, when it feels like God is so far away. But Moses trusted enough to be relentless in holding God to that promise. He insists that God must go with them.

And, amazingly, God relents. God tells Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked.” But when Moses pushes for certainty, a view of God face to face, God says, “No, I will be with you on my terms.” Our Psalm today declares that the Lord is holy. The idea behind the Hebrew word used three times in this Psalm is apart or separate. God is holy, meaning something

apart from what we are. We cannot fully know God. We can catch glimpses, but we cannot, in this life, get the whole picture. It's too much for us. So, God promises to reveal Godself to us a little at a time, just as God does to Moses throughout the Exodus story.

Full knowledge of God is not possible for us. What IS possible is to live with the mystery of God who is wholly other AND who dwells among us. Fr. Richard Rohr says that mystery is not something you can't know. Mystery is endless knowability. God is with us waiting to be known endlessly in all of the joys and the sorrows of our lives.

What IS possible is to take our disappointment and our devastation to God relentlessly and to turn to God in our moments of joy and deep fulfillment and in that dialogue to have another bit of the mystery that is God revealed. When God puts Moses in a little crack in a rock on top of a mountain, God isn't denying Moses' request to know God more deeply. God is allowing Moses to catch a glimpse, to see where God has just passed by.

How has God passed by this week? How might God be waiting to be revealed in unexpected ways this week? In the busyness of our day to day lives God promises to be with us, showing us, and calling us to show, graciousness and mercy. We can all too easily miss the glimpses of God in the swirl of life around us and we can miss out on opportunities to reveal to others the goodness that is God. It takes stepping out of the fray from time to time to be able to see and name God's presence among us. If we keep moving and never stop to rest, we are sure to miss the moments of God's glory revealed. But when we sit in the quiet at some point in each day, when we spend time intentionally looking for the places where God has been passing by, we might be surprised. This week, find a little crack in a rock, and sit in it for a while. Then open your eyes and see where God has passed by.