“Unless You Go with Us” Exodus 33:12-23

Most of the time the world seems quite content to exist without any sense of **God’s love, God’s justice, God’s majesty or God’s sovereignty.** Have you noticed that? A woman once confided in me that she liked church, but she didn’t really care much for God. She thought God seems too foreboding, too overwhelming, too overpowering…too big to keep in his place. Well then. Others have wondered if it wouldn’t be better if God were not so omnipresent? If God would only be there to create everything and after that only when we really need God to get us out of trouble. More secular people would prefer that God just stay in the church so this world could get on with its business and commerce, with government and society as we want it!

Thomas Hardy who wrote *Far from the Madding Crowd*, once wrote a poem about **a man who has a complaint and decides to take it to God**. Problem is he had to look so hard for God because God had sort of drifted off to the other side of the universe. Finally, this man locates God and asks for a hearing. “Things aren’t going well on Earth,” he tells God. “Couldn’t you do something about it?” “Earth?” replies God. “I don’t remember it.” The man became very upset. “But God,” he shouted, “you’ve got to remember Earth. You created it! How could you forget Earth?” After a soft sigh and a reflective look, God says to the man, “Oh, now that you mention it, I think I do remember something about Earth. There’s a faint recollection that I did something like that. **But it doesn’t matter...”** Makes me shudder to hear that. God says, **“But it doesn’t matter...”** Earth is left to its own devices, its own political games, and its own competing powers. By the way, Thomas Hardy titled his poem, *“God Forgot.”*

Jesus reminded those around him that even if faith is pushed as far away as possible and the church is completely separated from the state**, we can expect nothing good when God is absent from the realm of human existence.** Perhaps the long list of difficulties we face in life are the best reason why God shouldn’t forget, why God must not stay far away from us, **because it is God’s overwhelming presence** that brings to life a measure of meaning and purpose.

Without the justice of God, without the norms of divine structures for creation, without the righteousness that establishes right and wrong in our consciences and in our hearts, life on Earth would become a battleground of human powers without mercy and human will without restraint. When Paul wrote to the church at Rome he said, *"The authorities that exist have been established by God"* (13:1). When people assume that ultimate authority is ours and not God's, neither Caesar nor we win. In truth it is a critical turn toward **evil**.

We all have habits, behaviors, and ruts we get into. There are things that numb our senses to God's presence. These can be acts of disobedience, simple laziness, or a lack of focus. What we need to realize is that God longs for us to have what Moses had. **God wants every follower of Christ to have a profound sense of his presence so we might say as Moses did,** *"How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us?"* (v. 16). And remember another famous line that Paul wrote to the Romans: *"If God is for us, who can be against us?"* (8:31).

Christian friends, God is for us and God is with us! At the same time we need behaviors and life patterns that help wake us up to God's presence. It can be the discipline of listening to God in prayer, or studying Scripture, or gathering with God's people for worship. Oftentimes it is a crisis or tragedy that drives us back to God. But all of us from time to time have these wake-up experiences. Moses, and the people of Israel, wanted God more than anything else. **Moses was clear that they would not go up to the land promised to them unless God went with them!** Everything else was secondary. **The presence of God** is what marked the nation of Israel. **God's presence with them** is what made them who they were. **If God would not go with them, if his glory was not manifest among them, there was no reason to go at all!**

The wonderful twist in this story is that, once they chose the PRESENCE and GLORY of God, they received everything else God was offering to them as well. But it is important to remember that Moses and the people of God would have traded all the other stuff for **the presence of God**. Seriously! This is the heart of any true worshiper. God's presence, God's glory, walking in

God's ways—these are the most important things in life. When we have these, we have everything. If we don't have them (no matter what else we might possess), we have nothing! **One of the greatest gifts God gives us is the privilege of coming into his presence in public worship**. What joy to experience the awesome power and glory of God as we stand with the community of brothers and sisters **in the presence of God**.

The golden calf story of Exodus is a critical turn in the Exodus Journey. Chapters 1-19 explain Israel's oppressed condition in Egypt and the deliverer the Lord provides in the person of Moses. Chapters 20-40 take place at Mount Sinai where Israel is in essence "married" to Yahweh through the covenant that is formed there. In the middle of this grand event comes a noticeably obnoxious moment. Moses' delay on the mountain because he was talking with the Lord on behalf of the people bred frustration within the community. So, they begged Aaron for symbols around which to rally, and what emerged was a bull calf made of gold. If we read the account carefully, we will see that the Israelites were probably not seeking to worship something other than the God who brought them out of Egypt so recently, but rather they were trying to find a representation of God within their frame of reference. Since the bull calf was revered among the Egyptians as portraying the liveliness of living power, maybe it could serve the Israelites in this stage of their national adolescence.

There are two problems with the golden calf. First, the calf was an Egyptian symbol and therefore virtually blasphemous in light of the Lord's recent decisive victory over all aspects of Egyptian power and civilization. **And second,** the calf reflected brute power in the natural order of a kind that could be controlled by human will. A bull is meant to be yoked and harnessed and guided by whips. A bull is more powerful than its human driver, but it becomes a tool of sorts in service to human will. For the God of Israel to be represented in this way undermines the whole significance of the Lord's defeat of Egypt and attempts to turn the Lord into a mighty but controllable source of power, serving the will of the people, and not God.

Under Moses' leadership, his own tribe, the Levites, rallied to avenge the

Lord's disgrace. (We won't go into the ugly details today). But because of that action they were appointed to the honored position of keepers of the House of God. Meanwhile, the Lord himself threatened to break covenant with Israel and start over with Moses' family as described in verses 1-5 of chapter 33, since Moses and the Lord had become great partners and what we can call close friends over the past forty years. *"For the Lord had said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites, 'You are a stiff-necked people. If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you. Now take off your ornaments and I will decide what to do with you"* (33:5). So Moses argues against the Lord's vengeance.

First, Yahweh is the one who made this covenant with Israel and therefore it cannot be easily discarded or broken. The Lord invested his own destiny in these people deliberately. And Moses insists the Lord can no longer deny it. **Second**, what would the nations say if the Lord quit this project now? The people of the ancient Middle East had begun to tremble because of the Lord's decisive victory over Pharaoh. If the God of Israel was able to clearly and convincingly topple the deities of Egypt and their power in both the natural and supernatural realms, what hope could there be for any other national interest or power? But if the Lord now suddenly left the Israelites to die in the wilderness, the nations around would see that this God was no more than a one-hit wonder, a dog with more bark than bite. Moses uses the Lord's own covenant promise to bring God back into the game when things looked grim.

In our passage today, before the glory of the Lord finds its home in the yet to be built Tabernacle, Moses begs to experience God's glory for himself. He wants to "touch the face of God," so to speak, so that, face-to-face, he and God will be on the same page about Israel's fate and future. This is much more than a desire to have the experience of a lifetime; it is a prayer that they share a full understanding of each other. I believe there are only a handful of truly *great* words in the English language. By that I mean they are words without synonyms, words that cannot be explained, words that sound like what they mean. One of those words is **glory** *(shekina* in Hebrew). The most direct translation for glory is "weightiness" but God's response to Moses indicates

there is no way Moses could lift this weight. It would crush him. But God relents because he shows Moses the "goodness" of God. As Robert Alter explains, "God's intrinsic nature is *inaccessible*, and perhaps also *intolerable*, to the finite mind of a man, but something of his attributes, his 'goodness,' the directional pitch of his ethical intentions, the afterglow of his radiance, can be glimpsed by human beings." This is what Moses needed to see, experience and know. Forever after Moses would be changed. **The same sort of thing can happen to us when we too genuinely desire to know God.**

There is a children's book, a *Golden Book,* I've forgotten the title, about a little girl who had to go to the hospital to get her tonsils out. She was afraid and knew that she would miss her mother. So, after she was admitted and settled in her bed, her mother slipped off her gloves that she was wearing (that tells you how old the book is 😉) and she gave them to her daughter with words to the effect that when her daughter felt lonely, she was to put those gloves to her face and she would know, "I am with you and I love you." God never gave Moses a pair of gloves to hold, but to prove that God was with him, God passed before Moses, *"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'"* (v. 19).

As we come to the last leg of our Exodus Journey, I'd like you to imagine yourself on a desert island like the ones depicted in cartoons: a little pile of sand with one palm tree under a blazing sun surrounded by circling sharks. If you could have one thing on that desert island, what would it be? What do you need most to survive on a desert island? Water, food, shelter, a boat, an iPhone? Now stop and change the picture to fit Exodus 33 and our own life situation. We're in a desert, wandering through the wilderness on our way to the Promised Land. What is it we need most to survive in this wilderness? **What is the ONE THING we absolutely must have to make it to the Promised Land?** My answer is the same as Moses: ***"How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people UNLESS YOU GO WITH US?"*** There's absolutely nothing more important to take on our faith journey! God bless this simple witness to his word…Amen.