**October 22, 2017**

**Exodus 33-34:9**

Remember when Moses went up the mountain and God wrote the Ten Commandments? Remember when they were interrupted from the work “because the people were running wild”? Remember that Aaron was on the ground with the people, and made a golden calf at their request? Remember how God got so angry that God threatened to abandon everyone, and how Moses actually stood up to God and reminded God what God believed, and that God loved these troublemakers? Well, this is the next part of the story… And God is still mad at the people, while Moses is still arguing on their behalf… Listen again to the Word of God for the people of God:

Read Exodus 33-34:9.

Moses had seen more of God and God’s glory than anyone – in the burning bush, in the miracles with Pharaoh, in the parting of the Sea, in the pillar of fire that led the people through the wilderness, in the manna and water for the people, in the writing of the law… Moses had seen evidence of God’s presence and actions in many, many ways. Moses knew God in a way that no one else had known YHWH. The text even tells us that the two of them “spoke to one another face to face, like friends”. But in spite of his familiarity with the Lord, Moses was curious about the rest of God. What he had seen wasn’t enough. It wasn’t everything. And he wanted more. So when he asked this time, God responded, "Not quite. I'll show you my goodness, but you can't see my face."

As we get to know someone, and as we spend time looking into someone’s face, it gradually changes. Well, *their* face doesn’t actually change, but we begin to notice the details that we hadn’t seen at first. We see the colors in their eyes, the unique wrinkles and lines, the changes in skin tone and color, and all of the tiny details and beautiful imperfections… For as we get to know someone, we begin to actually see them for who they are.

The expression Moses used in the Hebrew here was just that. He asked to see all of God’s self, and all of God’s glory. He wanted to know God absolutely and to understand everything about God. He wanted to eliminate the mysteries around God, and really get to know the intimate details of God’s self.

God's counter-offer was humorous. If Moses will hide in a crack in a rock, God will cover Moses with a hand and race by. At the last second, God's hand will move so that Moses can see God's backside.

It is ridiculous to interpret this story literally. Is God’s hand not large enough to cover the mouth of a cave? Is God’s backside less glorious than the front? That’s not the point. The point is that The Holy One is beyond our understanding, beyond our imagination. YHWH is a God beyond even Moses’ knowing. For even in this story, where God is almost fully revealed – scampering through the mountain – even this story which details YHWH as an Immanuel, God-with-us, hanging-close kind of deity – even this story which is more exposes God more than any other in scripture – even *here*, God is still hidden.

When God passed by Moses, God didn’t want Moses to remember the physical glory. God wasn’t interested in Moses having a picture for his memories. Instead, God reintroduced YHWH by saying, “YHWH… a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness…” And, “YHWH, forgiving iniquities and transgressions and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, in fact, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’ children to the third and fourth generations…” What God wanted Moses to take away from this self-revelation was not God’s physical glory, but God’s character. The qualities of God’s glory: merciful and gracious, loving and faithful… slow to anger, but once angry, WARNING!

While God may not want the people, or even Moses, to see God’s self, humanity has forever been fascinated with the idea of what God looks like. Karl Barth wrote in *The Church Dogmatics* that "Our knowledge of God begins in all seriousness with the knowledge of the hiddenness of God." We learn more about God and God's goodness precisely because God is hidden, and we want to know more. Like Moses, we keep pushing and returning for more conversation and more experience. And as we do so, we begin to understand that we *cannot* understand God, and in spite of and because of that, God is worthy of our worship. Whatever we may experience or know about God, there is always more to be experienced and known. Just as God stands close to us and loves us, God is also far above us, far beyond our knowing.

Our curiosity is tickled. Our interest is piqued, but our questions are never fully answered. God did not give us so much that we have no choice in our faith; instead, we've been given enough information and experience to *choose* to believe. Although incomprehensible, the nature of God is a source of hope if we are willing to trust the goodness we've been given, to venture into the wilderness, living in the light of God's face, following the glimpses of God's love.

On a routine day, we, like the Israelites, may feel that God is absent. In the midst of our worries and responsibilities, we stop looking for God. Maybe we are too busy and distracted. Maybe we are too independent. Or maybe we become hopeless and whiney, tired of wandering in the wilderness, just wanting to go home, wishing that God would just get us home to the Promised Land. And yet, just every once in a while, we have the unmistakable feeling that someone is holding us and loving us. There are hints and inklings of mystery. Some days we hear God's voice in the voices of people we love. When they mention some almost-forgotten scrap of the past and we laugh more than is sensible. *Something* tells us that those moments matter eternally. *Something* brings joy in unexpected ways. *Something* brings hope in unexpected places. *Something* brings companionship when we're completely silent, reassuring us that we're not alone.

Maybe the signs of God's presence are all around us, but we've forgotten how to see.  Abraham Maslow wrote, "The great lesson from the true mystics is that the sacred is in the ordinary, that it is to be found in one's daily life, in one's neighbors, friends, and family, in one's back yard."  Forget about the glory. God's graciousness passes before us each day. In my own life, this happens in an unexpected email with good news or kind words. God appears in an idea that sparks energy and engagement. God passes by in the fluttering of autumn leaves, the sparkle of fall’s color, a cool wind, and a quiet moment.

God isn't into glory as much as goodness. God says, "Don't look for my glory. I'll give you something better. I'll give you mercy and grace."

As we continue in our Reformation, may we be signs of God’s mercy and grace for others. May others be drawn to the glory that radiates from our loving community. Amen.