

**Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2023**

**Sermon: *Exodus 33: 12-23***

One of my favourite stories in scripture is from the book of Numbers – a book that virtually never appears in our cycle of readings for Sundays – and it’s the story of five sisters: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah; daughters of Zelophehad. I’m sure I’ve mentioned this before. Their father dies and his estate legally becomes the inheritance of their male cousins, leaving them destitute unless they marry. They complain to Moses – he says, what can I do, it’s the law. They persist, and to appease them, to appear like he’s doing something, he tells them he’ll have a word with God, not expecting anything to come of it. The law, after all, works to his advantage. God hears Moses and says, you know what, these women are right, that’s a really unfair rule – go change the law.

Moses seems to have to ear of God a lot, and here in our story this morning we have him in robust conversation. He’s respectful, but not a pushover. He argues back. He champions the people; he’s their advocate.

In the previous chapter those wilderness-wandering Israelites have taken a pause whilst Moses is up the mountain, chatting with God. And they get bored, and because they are used to being let down, lied to, they think their leader has abandoned them. And to be fair, Moses spends 40 days up in the clouds – 40 days without telling them when he’ll be back. And these people start to think that Moses and God don’t care, so they turn to the other gods they know – the gods of Egypt – and these gods need flattery, these gods need sacrifices to prevent punishment, and so they melt down gold and mould it into a large calf.

God sees this and is furious because they have already broken that third commandment about not making idols to worship. But Moses intervenes and tells God not to be angry, and the threat of burning wrath disappears and Moses persuades God’s mind to be changed.

We sometimes talk about God as all-mighty, all-knowing, never-changing, but there are several incidents in scripture when God gets cross and warns of punishment, and is then filled with compassion for the people. Jonah, for example, is sent to warn the people of Ninevah of impending doom, and the people immediately repent. God sees their honest regret and decides against destruction – and Jonah isn’t happy about God flipflopping on this decision.

But despite God agreeing not to punish the Israelites about the golden calf, God wants to put some distance between them and suggests an angel is sent to guide them instead on the rest of their journey. The people had been liberated from slavery in Egypt, but their route to the Promised Land was proving much trickier than they’d

anticipated, and it was certainly taking a whole lot longer. And they spent a lot of time complaining to Moses about it. And because of their choice of idolatry, God says to Moses, these people will eventually reach the Promised Land, but I'm not going to stick with them, I'll send an angel instead, because if I hang around and see how they continue to behave, I'm likely to stay angry. It's better for everyone if I withdraw.

And here we have Moses saying to God, but we need you. We need your presence. You need to stick with us. We can't go it alone. An angel isn't enough. And amazingly, God says okay.

Scripture reveals some uncomfortable thoughts about the nature of God – we might assume the story of Exodus is simply about God's liberation of enslaved people, guiding them to the promised land. And even though their wilderness experiences are longer than they'd want, God remains steadfast. But if we dig into it, there are times we see God's anger, even God wanting to step away in frustration. How do we make sense of this? What does this story tell us about the nature of God and the relationship God seeks with us?

The covenant that Moses brings down from the mountain, the Ten Commandments, has already been broken. These rules were not designed to be a killjoy list of things we're not allowed to do, but a system of preserving life and relationships. But the people are so used to death and destruction they don't trust this covenant can bring them life. Remember, they have lived for generations under a system of slavery – those in authority were not to be trusted, because they would always put the interests of themselves first. And the people expect God to do the same. They haven't yet learned to depend on God, and this is why the covenant is so easily broken.

God is disappointed that they didn't understand these boundaries were for their own benefit, rather than something to constrain them. And they revert to the old ways of what they know.

The story of Exodus reveals the complexity and depth of God's love, the many layers of God's character, that even when the people choose a path of death, because the worship of something cold and static and impenetrable cannot give them life, that the balance of God's character leans towards grace and mercy.

I love the fact Moses and God have such a close, intimate relationship, that Moses can cajole God into digging deep, that God's anger is superficial, that God's love lies more at the heart of who God is.

A couple of weeks ago, the doorbell rang when I wasn't at home, and David answered it to find some Jehovah Witnesses standing there. And because he is happy to talk with them, they had a conversation about the signs of the end times, and David

provided them with an alternative perspective, and they ended their chat amicably. The next day the news was filled with the horrors of the actions of Hamas, and David said, maybe the JW's had a point; with a world that seems determined to destroy itself, it's harder to argue those signs of the end of the world aren't there. It's hard to hold onto hope. It's hard to see God's presence when we have pictures of children covered in blood.

I'm sure the peoples of both Israel and Palestine are crying out right now, How long O Lord? How long? Why have you abandoned us?

Moses sticks with God and starts making demands. Insists that God is revealed to him, and that's an astonishing request. No one looks upon the face of God and survives. He's being really presumptuous here. He's making an extraordinary request. But Moses is wanting to get deeper into God's character, is wanting to immerse himself further into the mystery of God, is not satisfied with a superficial relationship, knows there is more to God.

The creation of the golden calf is an attempt to control the relationship with God, to contain it. Moses knows God is wild and free and fierce and sometimes frightening. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it like this: *the request for glory is to draw even closer, more dangerously, more intimately, to the very core of God's own presence.*

This is the last of our readings from Exodus for a while. Chapter 34 tells us Moses came down from the mountain, his face changed, shining from the reflected glory of God to the extent he had to put a veil over his head. And the last few chapters are about the renewing of the covenant and the detailed construction of the tabernacle, this portable box to transport the covenant so the people could keep God's promise with them as their travelled.

It's this desire of Moses to get deeper into God's character that strikes me most about this reading, and how this is described by Brueggemann as something dangerous. It's dangerous because seeking God's nearer presence, going deeper into God's character, changes Moses. And that might give us a clue about how we can approach this reading and what it might be teaching us today.

By stepping into God's presence, we cannot remain unchanged. We cannot remain unmoved by the sufferings of others, we cannot continue to behave as if God doesn't exist, or our behaviour doesn't matter, or we are incapable of reflecting God's glory to those we meet.

It doesn't mean we will forever be immersed in God's presence – how many of us only get glimpses? Only recognise God was there in hindsight, but not in the moment? Moses himself, despite his intimate relationship, despite his audacious

request, never got to see God directly, only got a glimpse. And that fills me with relief, that someone with such a close relationship of depth with God, still didn't manage to see God. Because even when we think we know God, God remains never fully known, incapable of being contained by our definitions.

One of my favourite feminist quotes is *Nevertheless, she persisted*. And I think we can apply this to Moses. He persisted. He didn't accept God at face value. He had the audacity to make demands. The Psalms are littered with not just with praise, but with lament; with psalmists making demands that God show up, and angry when it appears God is absent.

We are sometimes too timid about how we approach God. We might believe we will offend God if we don't shower constant praise and thanksgiving, as if questioning God might lead to punishment. Moses questioned. He persisted. And that led him into a deeper relationship.

We have a lot to complain about. There is a lot of injustice in our world. When we pray, we might pour out our hearts to God about how upsetting it is, how wrong it is, but are we honest with God about wanting to find God's presence in these places, and being angry at God's apparent absence? I think God is big enough to be shouted at from time to time, about sharing our frustration about the state of the world, about the unfairness of things. Moses didn't let God off the hook, and I'm grateful to him for teaching me it is possible to make extraordinary requests about needing God's presence when things seem bleak.

We might reach the end of our journeying with Moses and the Israelites still baffled about the nature of God, still with many questions about why God behaved in certain ways, and I don't think we should be afraid of these questions, this confusion.

As we edge ever closer to Advent, just six weeks away, although God's face might have been kept hidden even to Moses, we are shown through Jesus what God looks like, as shortly we will start thinking about the incarnation, of God with us, God one of us. God who transforms us, who lives through us, loves through us, is present in us.

To God be the glory, for ever and ever. Amen

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