

“More”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Exodus 33:12-23
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
on October 22, 2017

After visiting the ruins of Greece and observing how ancient people worshipped, and after exploring the caves and mountains of Crete where people who lived long before Father Abraham encountered and paid homage to the Great Divine, it is not difficult for me to imagine Moses encountering God in the cleft of a rock. After sitting in Delphi, after standing in the Agia Sophia—Holy Wisdom—Cave, I do not read this story and think it far-fetched. I read this story and think, “Of course.”

There is a reason the earliest shrines can often be found atop mountains or hidden in caves or near a sacred tree. God, in God’s mystery, is more palpable there than, say, in the back of a taxi cab or stuck in traffic on I-35. More palpable there than in the office or in the grocery store or even, dare I say it, inside the often window-less walls that make up our cathedrals and houses of worship, where brick and dry wall and fluorescent lights separate us from the majesty of all that God has made.

It’s not just the buildings and vehicles that get in the way, of course. It’s the pace of life too. It’s the text messages and the emails and the bills and the doctor visits and committee meetings and the treadmill at the gym. It’s not that God cannot be found in those places and activities—it’s just harder to identify God’s presence there and generally we don’t even think to look. There are far too many ways our modern life keeps us from the natural rocks where God’s presence might be felt, ways we are split off from communion with God and perhaps do not even know what we are missing.

Now, it is interesting to me that Moses is so insistent that God show him some sort of proof that God is with them. Because there was already the burning bush and the Ten Plagues and the parting of the Red Sea and the manna from heaven . . . It’s like Moses is a bit of miracle junkie. Just can’t get enough, that guy. Moses and miracles is like a less adorable James Helton and crackers: more, more, more.

Moses has this insatiable hunger to experience the infinite and just enough faith to believe he can experience it, not just once, but again and again. I like it that Moses feels no shame in asking for more. I like that God responds right away, that Moses’ hunger is rewarded, his asking is answered. I like it that there seems to be no limit on how many times God will show up when asked. I like that it’s okay to say to God, “I need more.”

Maybe our modern life not only distracts us from God’s presence but also discourages us from even asking for it. As intellectuals and as independents, we don’t always leave ourselves permission to experience the mystical. Perhaps we are too sophisticated and enlightened to talk to God, to tell God, “This is what I need. Will you do it?”

Right before the text we read today, Exodus 33 tells us that Moses used to meet with God face-to-face in the tent of meeting. He would pitch a tent at some distance from the rest of camp, and he'd go there to converse with God. I wonder where your tent of meeting is? Do you know? Do you make a point to visit there? When did you last visit?

Sometimes I pitch my tent in my backyard. Under the trees down by the creek bed is best, my soul has found. Sometimes I pitch my tent in the arboretum, sometimes at the labyrinth. Sometimes I pitch my tent in Greece!

There are many places you can meet with God, but it usually helps for it to be some distance from camp—that is, away from the usual hustle and bustle and away from the crowds.

Evidence suggests that long, long ago, ages before the birth of Christ, ancient people worshipped and revered rocks. We could dismiss such behavior as primitive and unenlightened, or we could marvel at the mysterious ways God's glory has manifested itself and inspired awe throughout of all of time and history.

When I was wandering the ancient stones of Delphi—which houses some of the most beautiful and breathtaking ruins in all of Greece—I saw the remarkable remains of an outdoor theatre, a stadium, a temple to Athena and another one to Apollo. But what struck me most were not the remains of these manmade structures. Instead it was this singular rock, jutting up from the ground and half-covered in ivy. It was little beyond the omphalos stone—which according to Greek mythology marks the navel, or uterus, of the world—and just past the treasury of the Athenians. I rounded the corner, and there was the rock and something in my spirit gave a little leap at the sight of it, so I stopped. Natalie came up from behind me with the guide book and said, "That's Sibyl Rock, where the priestesses of Delphi received and delivered oracles."

I learned that this rock was considered sacred to the earth goddess long before the temple to Apollo was ever constructed and before the myths about Apollo were ever told. I sat down on a smaller rock nearby to contemplate these mysteries, and looking out over the stunning mountainous landscape, it felt entirely natural that human beings were drawn to worship there.

The Christianity I was raised in would be wary and suspicious of any sort of religious experience that occurred independently of Christian teaching. But sitting at a site that long pre-dated Christianity, feeling and sensing the worship and prayers that had inhabited that space, I didn't experience it as something to be afraid of, but rather as something to marvel.

When God shows Moses God's glory, Moses is only capable of experiencing a small part of the whole. God is explicit that it would be *too much* for Moses to encounter all of God. So the Lord hides Moses in the cleft of a rock where he must wait while God passes by. God's hand will cover the rock, and once it is safe, Moses will be able to peak out and see God's back. God's face would be too much. I find myself thinking, if all that the ancient people ever saw of God's glory was the rear-side—a part of God but not the whole—oh, that we would be so lucky as to see it too.

Interestingly, just a few verses earlier, before Moses encountered God in the cleft of the rock, the writer of Exodus described the “tent of meeting” as the place where “the Lord would speak to Moses face to face,” which sounds like a bit of contradiction. Did Moses encounter God face to face or did he not? One minute we are told he met with God face to face inside the tent, and the next minute we hear that he cannot possibly see God’s face or he will die. I think this confusing juxtaposition of stories means that whatever Moses experienced of God inside that tent, there was always and infinitely MORE that he hadn’t yet known. On the one hand, whatever Moses knew of God inside that tent was real and true and authentic. On the other hand, whatever Moses knew of God inside that tent only barely scratched the surface of who God was. And Moses had the audacity to keep asking for more. More. More. More.

I wonder, where in your life have you sensed the More-ness of God? That infinite, boundless creative energy that is Love, that can never be fully grasped or described? Are you brave enough to ask for More? Whatever piece of God you have known, it can be both real and true *and* woefully inadequate all at the same time, which is why it is best to stay hungry and to stay humble. Never mistake your glimpse of the divine as your own private monopoly on God. There is always, always more to be seen.

Come, beloved children of God, to the tent of meeting, to the cleft in the rock, to that place where you feel your soul expanding to encompass even more mystery. Don’t be afraid to ask for more. Don’t be shy. Maybe God is listening. Maybe God will answer. How will you know if you don’t ask? If you don’t show up?

May God in God’s mercy show us a glimpse so that we might hunger even more. O God, we need to know if you are with us. Let our prayers find favor in your sight. Amen.