

LIGHT FOR THE JOURNEY VI - GOING ON AFTER HEARTBREAK

Ordinary Time

Exodus 33:12-23

A Sermon Preached by
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Pastor Amy Roon:

I started listening to "This American Life"¹ when I was in seminary in the late 90s, largely because they had a few episodes on prayer and faith that really named some things that I wasn't hearing anywhere else. In an episode called "Faith," Ira Glass talks about going to Hebrew school when he was 14 and learning and trying to understand and argue about how all these ancient stories where God is intervening and moving and acting in mysterious and huge ways and be so present in the world of the Bible and so *not* present in the everyday life that he was living. Somewhere in the arguing and trying to figure that out, he came to realize he didn't believe in God. And in realizing that he didn't believe that, he also realized that no one could really talk him in or out of it. That it was kind of like being in love: you could describe it, but you are either *in* it or *not*, and at some point you just had to accept that.

I found this to be a very helpful way for me to think about faith. When people ask me if I believe in God, I have found it an odd question for precisely the reason Ira describes. If they asked me if I felt good about my relationship with God, I could tell them all sorts of things. If they asked me if I was happy with God, I'd often as not said no. If they asked me if I was on *speaking* terms with God, I could answer that – but that answer was not always yes, either. But belief in God, that just felt odd. I mean it just, it just is, and whether I felt God's presence or not never really had much to do with it. It does feel like a long-term relationship. It's that old kind of love, the one that has stories of great passion and feeling. But most often these days it's like a steady pulse that simply undergirds everything else in my life. And sometimes I feel jealous of those of you in a newer kind of love with God. Sometimes I find myself wanting that kind of faith. Sometimes God and I are seeking together, sometimes doubting one another, sometimes we just rest in the quiet acceptance that we are both in this relationship. But it's not just about me or you.

Our Scripture today reminds us in hearing the story about Moses and God and God's people, that there is a relationship between a god's people and God. Our Scripture today is about a relationship between God and all of us.

¹ Radio program on NPR (National Public Radio).

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Liturgists – Scripture:

Listen for the word of God.

Exodus 33:12-23² Moses' Intercession

Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." The Lord said to Moses, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And Moses said to the Lord, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

The Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray." And the Lord said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," the Lord said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." And the Lord continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I pass by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

Pastor Amy Roon:

Please join me in prayer:

God,
Be in our hearts,
Be in our heads,
Be in our understanding,
Be in the words heard and the words spoken.
– Amen

For years I was my mom's go-to computer person. My dad to this day mostly uses his teaching and lab assistants – handy thing for a professor to have – but my mom had me. And it was not unusual to get a call at 10 PM at night that went like this. "Amy, can you help? I been working on this *stupid computer* for three hours now and it just *won't work!*" ... "Okay, sure. Tell me, tell me what you're trying to do." ... "Well, the *stupid thing* does not work. I've done everything, everything! 100 times! And it never works!" ... [Amy, calmly] "Okay. I hear you're frustrated. Can you tell me what you're trying to do?" ... "Well! I'm trying to check my email but my computer *won't do it!*" "Well, what program are you using?" ... "It's my regular program. *It won't work!*" ... "Mom, can you tell me what

² The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. 1989.

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does the screen look like?" ... "There are a bunch of words on the screen. I've clicked *everything!* It *won't work!* I've tried it all!" ... "Mom, You've been telling me that it won't work and you mentioned that you were calling for some help. Do you believe that there might be a solution we could find?" "Of course! But *it won't work!*" "Mom, I appreciate you might just need to vent about this, but there's no way we're going to figure out how to make it work until you at least trust that it might." ... [*Mom, indignantly*] "Fine! I can't do this anymore tonight. I'll call you in the morning!" ... And frankly, if it could wait until I got out there to just do it, it did [wait]. ... Sometimes, most times we have to leave a story behind in order to make room for a new story to be different.

If you are here for the first time or the first time in a long time or just happened to miss this last week's sermon with that piece in the Scripture that Peter was working from last week, today's Scripture comes to us well after the Israelites were first brought out of Egypt. It comes after weeks of believing they'll die of hunger and thirst in the desert. But most importantly for today, it's *after* an anxiousness and panic that God and Moses had left them, they had made a new God called Baal and worshiped it. They did this while Moses and God were away. Moses was off receiving the Ten Commandments, the foundation of practices and laws that would make the covenant the binding pact between God and God's people.

The first one being: You shall have no other gods and you shall love God only.

And Moses came down and was heartbroken. And God with heartbroken. Because grumbling and complaining and arguing and unhappiness, these can most definitely strain the relationship; but there is nothing like infidelity to make a couple or a community truly wonder if they can go on. So here in this passage that you heard this morning is Moses asking God, "If *these* are your people" – as if they were not also Moses's people – "If *these* are still your people, how do you do this? How, how do you stay with them? Show me your ways, O God. Show me the way to love after this heartbreak. Show me how to do this going-on thing." And God agrees to have a presence with God's people. And Moses wants to know what to expect that presence to look like. Moses wants to see God. Moses wants proof. – And keep in mind this is Moses and this is God and they've had a lot of one-on-one time, pretty much more than any other human-God relationship in the whole Bible. They've had the burning bush. They had ... However ... They had all their chats to figure out the ten plagues and get out of Egypt. And Moses is constantly going off and having some good time to talk with God. They had the parting of the Red Sea. They figured out how to survive in the desert. But here in the wake of this infidelity, Moses is worried about God's presence being real. How would they know that God will really keep going with them.

And isn't this the crux of the world we live in in the modern world today? Isn't this the crux of a modern faith? There just seems to be this time – and really it's in any religion in *any* mythic journey. There was *some* time when we got these stories, the way that they were formed, where we had a love and a relationship with God that was, must have been more intimate than the way we experience it now. It *had* to be! Because nobody can survive and feel all this hope and move forward without a sense of face-to-face, without a sense that you, God, are *really* with us. Are you really *with* us, like you were with our ancestors? Like you were with the generations before who got through the big thing? How will we know that God is really with us today and will go with us past this brokenness?

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And isn't that just the heart of the matter, the story isn't working. The story broke. The story was that we were God's people and God will always be with us and God will bring us to the Promised Land. And one of those things has gotta not be true, because this either isn't the Promised Land or God isn't with us or we're not God's people! But since we're not there, something's gotta be wrong. And as a people we know, we know we break our covenant over and over again.

[Sigh] "God, we look around at the devastation today through the lenses of history that convicts you, too. God, we look through a history – histories – of genocide – genocides in the plural – of floods, of fire, of famine. We ... This is broken."

And we come to God with our story of brokenness and God asks, "Well ... What you trying to do?" We reply, "Well, we're *trying* to get it right, but we just can't!" God replies, "Well, I can see that. But what are you trying to do?" ... "Well, [*with brave anxiety*] we're trying to make peace. I'm trying to fight for peace. We're trying to fight ... And I'm trying to get Peter to fight for peace. I'm trying to get this other person, I'm trying to get everybody to fight for peace. And we're trying to stand together. We can't and we're trying to love, but we can't." ... [*God, calmly*] "I love you. Are you only interested in telling me the stories of our failure? Or do you have room for the possibility of another ending?" ... "Well, we've failed so often!" ... "Which means you've tried many times." ... "We've been betrayed! We've been betrayed over and over! We've been betrayed by you, God." [*God, calmly*] "Which means you have loved a lot." ... "We've fallen down over and over and over again!" ... "Which means you've stood together again and again." ... "God, we cannot see the way!" ... "Perhaps you need a different way to see."

In our Scripture today, Moses is asking God how to be with God's people, how to lead God's people. Moses is asking God to show him how to lead the way.

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