

The Cleft of the Rock
Exodus 33:18-23

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September 17, 2017

This is a confusing narrative in Exodus. We are confused by the requests of Moses, the approach/avoidance of the people, and the insistence that our relationship with God is one characterized by both intimacy and distance.

The people are wandering the deserts of Sinai on the way to the land which was promised. They are living mid-way between the old oppression and the unseen promise, stranded inbetween, uncertain, vulnerable, and sometimes hopeless. Just recently they plummeted to the bottom of their natures and created a golden calf to worship because they were not trusting and patient enough to worship the real Lord of heaven and earth. It was a sad scene. Because of that God withdraws from a “stiff-necked” people, people who follow their own way but not God’s way. So far we are connected with this story because it is an apt description of us.

We are a people wandering from the past to the future with some perplexity. We are those who worship other things as substitutes for the living God. We are a stiff-necked people who follow our own promptings more than the promptings of the Spirit. Yes, we are they.

But then the story unfolds. It’s not unusual for holy things to be set aside in holy spaces – like the burning bush or the law giving on the top of Sinai. There is a holy margin through which we pass to connect with the sacred things, “thin space” as the Celts would call it. Moses throws up the tabernacle outside the camp where he goes to commune with the holiness while the people look on. A pillar of cloud blocks the entrance. He comes back and shares his experience of the holiness. There are sacred spaces and some people have more access to them than others. Just a truth of life.

And then we hear that God is blessing them forward but not accompanying them. How strange. The reason is because they are rebellious and God is wasting spirit breath on them.

Moses begs for Divine accompaniment; that they not be left to themselves. Things go very badly when they go it alone. They need God with them. And that's when the strange scene happens.

A very anthropomorphic scene ensues, a very human-like presentation of God, something people might understand. God says, Okay, I will stay with you through thick and thin, no matter how stiff necked the people are, but under certain conditions. Those certain conditions are what we should pay attention to.

I will set you on a rock, God says, but when I pass by I will shield you by placing you down in the cleft of the rock to ... protect you from me. Because you cannot behold my glory and live.

Moses is placed in the cleft of the rock to keep him from immolating on the spot. In other words, don't think when the eclipse comes, before totality, that you can just look straight into the sun. Of course not. You'll burn up your retina, be blinded.

You need the special glasses. If you dare look at me without protection, Moses, you're toast.

And then in this very human-like portrayal, almost like a children's book, God holds up a hand over Moses' eyes while passing by and only after passing by removes the hand so that Moses can see God's back side. You have to love that. You can't look straight on, but only after I pass by. At night the approaching car's headlights are too blinding, so you cover your eyes, but then look at the red tail lights in the rear view mirror.

All of this is to make intimacy possible, but at the same time that intimacy requires remarkable distance. What can this mean?

The Biblical notion of holiness simultaneously contains these two poles. On the one hand the creator of the universe is transcendent, beyond comprehension, beyond our control or manipulation, beyond the limitations of the finite world.

On the other hand we have access to this mysterious God in *mediated* ways, through signs and people and events and immediate sense. But that access is always limited, received by finite beings, therefore always an incomplete revelation; if we had complete knowledge or experience it would blow our sockets. Instead of plugging into 110 volts it would be like plugging into a bolt of lightning.

We have ways to be in contact with the transcendent God of the universe. But what seems to us to be a complete, total experience is really only partial and can only be partial. There is always a distance between the absolute eternal God and our perception of the absolute eternal God. God is absolute; our experience of God is relative and partial.

And that is why this baffling and yet endearing truth-telling story provides such a clue for us. Think of the paradox:

God passes by however God passes by, and God shields us from the intensity of God so we can be in relationship to God. God is at once the source and the mediator of the source.

You and I find ourselves passing through life fairly baffled in any given moment about what is going on. We don't know the large meaning of events as they transpire. We don't know why the hurricane afflicts some and not others. We don't know why we all suffer, find joy and sadness, rise in the spring of life and descend in the winter of life. It is all what it is but it remains a great mystery.

At one time or another most of us have found ourselves wading in the dark water of life, walking through the valley of the shadow. We call out to God but what we hear in return is an echo off the canyon walls.

What we don't know, what we can't know, is that in those moments, we have been placed in the cleft of the rock, our eyes shielded for a moment, only to later see the back side of God moving away, the

reflection of God, the echo of the voice, the indirect experience of God. What we don't know, what we can't know, is how that dark night of the soul is actually protecting us and preparing us for what comes next.

This is the mystical presence of something absent. What seems to be absence is really a shield of protection from what we could not take in, not in fullness, not all at once. It is mediated for us so that we can discern it, understand it, accept it, and even act on it.

Think about how our minds work. When something takes place that is very traumatic, very difficult, we rarely experience and recall that event and our feelings about it in totality, all at once. Rather, dreams parse out fragments of it over time until our conscious mind can finally comprehend it without being destroyed by it.

And so masters of the spiritual life have described this as the *via negativa*, the way of not knowing.

They would say that we enter the cleft of the rock, among those protective shadows, and the spirit provides us with what we can receive at the moment. The hand over our eyes is really a grace, shielding us from the blinding brightness. What we do receive, often later, are the glimpses of God.

The glimpses of God fill us with what we need and what we can comprehend at the moment, always providing room for more disclosure in the future and then more. In a sense, not having all or all at once, keeps us moving toward the God who is all.

I was listening to an interview with a mental health professional who has worked among those affected by disasters. She was present in the aftermath of Katrina and now she is working with those afflicted by our most immediate hurricanes.

What she said was something that surprised me, not because I had never heard it before but rather not heard it related to this. She referred to *Post Traumatic Growth*.

That is something that is talked about a lot today among those working with veterans and post traumatic injury. People like Kate Hendricks Thomas are shifting the paradigm toward building resiliency and moving toward post traumatic growth. That shift really changes the mindset and the possibilities.

Here was this mental health worker and researcher saying the same thing. She said that all their research from working with those directly affected by calamity and disaster shows that an amazingly large percentage of those affected, like 80%, turned disaster into an opportunity for growth – growth of resilience, growth of spirit, growth of compassion.

As she described these findings, she caught herself searching for words to express it. She always kept defaulting to the spiritual lexicon to do so. She couldn't describe this Post Traumatic Growth without referencing things like a growth in awareness of the world, of gratitude, and then she said, of *transcendence*, which is the most neutral way a social scientist can say *God*.

Post traumatic growth occurs because we have been protected in the cleft of the rock during the tragedy, the hand of God shielding our eyes. And then later, after the fact, we see the reflection of God's glory, hear the echo of God's voice, on the way to our healing and our growth. There is the absolute transcendence of God, the God who has protected us in the cleft of the rock and given us what we can receive when we can receive it.

Once upon a time the eternal God acted in ways that could be understood and received by a broken humanity, a God who spoke and moved among them in their own flesh, in terms they could understand. And as the eternal moved among humanity as one of them, that same humanity rejected the radiance of God reflected in the face of Christ, rejected the voice of the eternal echoing through the words of Jesus, and they crucified him on a cross suspended between heaven and earth. It was too terrible to behold, and we averted our eyes from the sight.

And then from the cleft of the rock the hand was removed and we beheld a stone moved aside and an empty tomb where once God's son lay in death.

And as the glory of God departed, too bright for human eyes, we were filled with wonder and awe:

Surely the presence of the Lord was in this place; I can feel this mighty power and this grace ...