
Face to Face

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A Sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Proper 24A

*The LORD said, "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 have passed by;
then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back;
but my face shall not be seen."
-Exodus 31:21-23*

Grace and peace to all of you on this splendid morning, whoever you are and from wherever you may have come. I have just come from a fascinating trip to South Africa, a trip that I will speak about in detail in later weeks, and maybe later years.

For now, I want to say simply that the value of that trip was face to face. I was able to meet with African church leaders face to face. They were able to meet face to face with me, and with others from North America. We were talking about a difficult subject: the controversies about human sexuality that have been so profound and misunderstood between North America and Africa.

In some ways, however, the actual subject of our conversation was secondary (and that subject is not the topic of this sermon). Rather, the primary value of our time together was simply spending time together-face to face. For a few people there, we were the first Americans they had ever talked to.

There is no substitute for face to face. It is the foundation of relationship. To speak face to face is to see face to face.

It is what we long for in this divided world of ours. It is what many of us have longed for, during recent Anglican Communion global discussions. Come let us reason together. Let us see face to face. Let us develop trust that comes from face to face.

It is also the prayer of so many of us in relationship, wherever we are. We want to be together face to face, directly, openly, honestly. It is a sign of suffering relationship when we lose the ability to talk face to face. If we are in a suffering marriage, one of the first things that deteriorates is our ability to relate to our partner face to face. If we are upset with our co-worker, we can no longer look at that person face to face.

If we are upset with God, we no longer feel comfortable, we no longer feel right, approaching God directly-in prayer, or otherwise.

Our story from the Book of Exodus today provides an example of our human desire to see face to face (Exodus 33:12-23).

Moses wants to see God. Moses wants some assurance that God will be with him.

"Moses says, "See here, 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." Well, if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. By the way, remember too that this nation is your people.'" (Exodus 33:12-13)

But God will not allow it. Here is one of the fine curiosities of scripture. God will not allow Moses to see God face to face. Instead, God presents another proposal.

"The LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, , And God said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, , 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 have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen." (Exodus 12:17-23)

Why? Why will God not allow Moses to see God face to face? Why does God allow Moses to see only the back side of God? The answer might be helpful to any of us who desire to see the glory of God.

Sometimes, it seems, the back side of God turns out to be enough. Sometimes the back side turns out to be enough. For, immediately following this event, Moses does ascend Mount Sinai again. Immediately following this story, Moses receives another copy of The Law, what we now know as The Ten Commandments. Immediately following this story, when Moses sees the back side of God, Moses comes down from Mount Sinai with his face radiating a shekinah glory!

It is as if Moses does not see God fully, until Moses has also seen the back side of God. It is as if Moses' face cannot shine with the presence of God until Moses has also seen the back side of God.

This is true in all our relationships, where we long to see and to know fully our beloved. To know someone intimately is to know many aspects of that person-the front side and the back side. The positives and the negatives. It is the prayer, from scripture, that we often read at marriage ceremonies, from First Corinthians 13: "Now, I know only in part; then, I will know fully, as I have been fully known." All of us in relationship want that: "to know fully, as we have been fully known."

The great feature of the hero Moses is that Moses was honest with God. Moses admitted his inability to lead, to speak, to act courageously. Moses was not afraid to show God his weaknesses, his detractions.

So, strangely enough, God seems to act the same way towards Moses. God seems willing to show Moses not only his face side, but also his back side. God, too, wants to be fully known to Moses.

Next week, following our lectionary, we shall hear another Old Testament story in Church, the story of Moses's death. There, in Deuteronomy 34:10, which we will read next week, we will hear that Moses died very close to God, that Moses actually knew God face to face.

"The LORD knew Moses face to face." I believe this was true only because Moses also saw the back side of God. The front and the back. The good times and the bad.

In the ministry of Jesus, Jesus was confronted one day by the Pharisees and Herodians, who sought to entrap him with a question about whether it was lawful to pay taxes or not. It sounded like a question we might hear during campaign season in the United States; what do think about taxes? There is no answer that satisfies everyone.

But Jesus says, "Give me a coin. Whose likeness is on this coin?" It is the emperor's likeness, as we all know. So Jesus says, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." As we all know, that answer

seemed to stymie those who wanted to trap Jesus.

Have you ever considered, however, what might have happened if they had shown Jesus the back side of the coin? Yes, the emperor's image is on the front side of the coin, but what is on the back side?

It turns out that the denarius, the coin they used to pay the tax, has the image of the emperor on the front side AND on the back side. There is a front and back side of the coin, but the face of the emperor is on both sides.

Such is the absolutism, the totalitarianism, of empire. In the empire, there are not two sides; there is only one side, the side of rigid authority. Watch out for a politics that has only one side. Jesus says, give it back. Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor. Let that fanatic obsession with "only one way" remain with the empire.

Our Lord, God Almighty, is different. There is a front side, and a back side. A positive way ("via positive"), and even a negative way ("via negative"). A way of fullness, and even a way of emptiness. To know God fully is to know the face side and the back side.

Yes, we desire to know God face to face. We desire to know one another face to face. But relationship means giving to the front side and to the back side. It was only because Moses saw the back side of God that, when he did die, he knew God face to face.

And don't be afraid of the frailties, the downsides, of your partner or your lover. Your friend or your neighbor, or your child. Get to know the downsides and upsides, and you will know that person fully. "Now we know only in part; then, we will know fully, even as we have been fully known. , Then, we shall see face to face" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

AMEN.

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