
Moses, Max, and Our Exodus Journeys

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
Proper 24 – Year A**

In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen. Good morning, and welcome on this 20th Sunday after Pentecost. I hope this finds you safe, healthy and well. In the text for today from Exodus we see Moses in an extended conversation with God, resulting in Moses' request that God show God's face, a request denied. The faces of others are deeply important to us of course, and we need look no further than music and psychology and ultimately even theology, such as the texts from Exodus and Matthew for today, to find reminders of how important faces can be. Remember for example James Taylor's "whenever I see your smiling face, I have to smile myself, because I love you." Or, the Beatles', "I've just seen a face I can't forget," or Roberta Flack's, "The First Time Ever I saw Your Face," and "I've grown accustomed to Her Face," from the wonderful musical *My Fair Lady*. Faces are often how we connect with others, and this is essential to what it means to become a whole person.

In recent weeks we've been on this journey with Moses and the people of Israel, and I've found myself empathizing with Moses and, come to that, with the journey. And what a journey it's been. Moses' Hebrew mother secretly hid him when Pharaoh ordered all newborn Hebrew boys to be killed, and through Pharaoh's daughter Moses was rescued from the Nile, adopted, and grew up with the Egyptian royal family. After 40 years of wandering in the desert, Moses died within sight of the [Promised Land](#) on [Mount Nebo](#).

Truth told, the clinician in me empathizes with Moses' desire to see God's face. Attachment theory, a psychoanalytic theory, reminds us that we are born needing safe, consistent relationships, especially from our primary caregivers, and these attachments happen when they respond to us in face-to-face interactions. Early on when we smile at infants they smile back and vice versa. The faces of those dear to us, who helped shape and nurture us, are deeply important. Insecure attachments can lead to challenges later in life, and regardless of the nature of our earliest relationships, we may all find ourselves in situations when we need to be reminded that we are not alone. Moses' early attachments were, to say the least, insecure and unpredictable.

Ann Maria Rizzutto's iconic book, the *Birth of the Living God* reminds us that our earliest attachments participate in our own religious development, including our ways of thinking about God. When I was in Divinity School I remember writing a paper on images of God, and found myself astonished as my writing revealed that my most meaningful image of God bore more than a passing resemblance to my maternal grandmother. She was a constant, loving presence in my life. When we imagine the mystery that is God, we often take with us on that journey the faces of those who have reliably loved and cared for us, just as we hope our relationship with God will prove loving, steadfast, and reliable. Alternately, we may imagine God as stern, and unforgiving, or distant, if these attributes we experienced in our own primary caregivers. Moses was no different. And, if our attachments have been insecure or disrupted we are more likely to test the boundaries of those relationships when they arise.

Many of us recall the lovely children's book, "Where the Wild Things Are" by Maurice Sendak. In that book, Max is acting out as toddlers often do, testing limits and exploring his new found sense of self. Predictably he is given a time out and sent to his room where, in his imagination, he takes a trip across time, to the land where the wild things are. Of course, one way of understanding Max's own Exodus journey is that he is exploring his boundaries in relation to his parent figures, often portrayed in his own drawings as wild things with parental faces he tries to tame. And, of course, the real wild things needing taming are inside Max himself, just as we have our own wild things, our own shadow sides Max must go on the journey to that place where he names

them, and knows them by name, and tames those, too. He must do this in part because they have threatened to cause separation from those whom he loves most, and who love him.

Moses and the people of Israel are also testing their limits with God in relation to their newfound independence. They are engaging in the good and difficult work of what we therapists call healthy self-differentiation, or, defining oneself in relation to parents, family, self and the world. It is a long and complicated journey, and it is absolutely necessary in order to grow up. Moses' interactions with God in today's text are just that. Moses is testing boundaries, exploring the relationship to God and, along the way, to Egypt, Pharaoh, and whatever may lie across the Jordan. All such narratives are centered on growth, change, resilience, and learning to identify and manage our fears, joys, sorrows and anger. This is how we manage to come to grips with the realities of our lives and become grown-ups. Remember, God says to Moses that "my presence will go with you and I will give you rest." But Moses continues to press – if your presence doesn't go with us, then don't take us any further. Moses is not sure. There's doubt, despite what he has seen and experienced – so how will he know? I don't know about you, but that sounds familiar to my own experience. Doubt is always present, and maybe that's a good thing. Maybe Moses' questions are permission to push the conversations with God. I hope so.

Being adrift among the bull rushes in the Nile can take an infinite variety of forms of course. It may be the loss of someone dear to us; it may be life in the ambiguity of a pandemic--a latter-day plague--and the loss of connections with those whom we love; it may be a life cycle transition...an illness or retirement or the ambiguity of not knowing when and what form the new normal may take. In the text for today from Exodus, God does not show Moses God's face, but God does stay in relationship. God is mystery, and we are invited to fill in the spaces of this mystery with compassion, and imagination, and love. And like all such spaces this requires us to come alive in our own responsiveness. There is not much mystery, dear one's, in the face of Caesar on the coin. We render unto Caesar what we owe Caesar. It is transactional. On the other hand, Moses learns that God is mystery, and that, as Richard Rohr reminds us, "Mystery is not something you *can't* know. Mystery is *endless knowability*. Living inside such endless knowability is finally a comfort, a foundation of ultimate support, security, unrestricted love, and eternal care. For all of us, it takes much of our life to get there; it is what we surely mean by "growing" in faith. Each soul must learn on its own, hopefully aided by observing other faith-filled people." That's one reason we are gathered here this morning.

No, unlike the image of Caesar on the coin, our relationship with God is not transactional. God asks of us that we look into the eyes of those whom we love, and who love and care for us, and see God's love reflected there. We must learn to *live the contradictions in our lives, not simply endure them or relieve ourselves from the tension by quickly resolving them. The times where we meet or reckon with our contradictions, our shadow or wild sides, are often turning points, opportunities to enter into the deeper mystery of God or, alternatively, to evade the mystery of God...a kind of beauty and truth that can't be fully spoken or defined.* These are questions we share with Moses and the people of Israel. They are questions at the heart of what it means to be human. At the end of WTWTA Max wants to go back home, and of course he has never really left his room. But he is a different Max having been on the journey, and home is not the same place either. Nevertheless he wants to be where someone loves him best of all, where the faces of those who love him are present and dependable...that place where love is embodied, incarnate, reliable and sustainable. And in a lovely rapprochement, Max returns home to be fed. Moses and the people of Israel, wanted this too—to return home to a place they had never been—and so do we all. God reminds Moses and the people that God will remain steadfast, no matter the circumstances. May these relationships of love sustain us, too, until we see God, face-to-face... Amen.