

IN GOD'S WAKE . . .

“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 continue to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” God said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And Moses said to God, “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 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 God 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,” God 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 33:12-23**

The Israelites are not the best behaved group of chosen people one could imagine. When their story (as a people) begins, they are enslaved in Egypt, groaning under the weight of slavery and oppression. God hears their cries and frees them, and that is where the trouble begins.

God leads the Israelites out of Egypt, they cross the red sea safely, watch the Egyptians get swept away, turn around, see the desert in front of them and promptly tell Moses he should have let them stay where they were – for surely they have been brought to this place and time only to die from lack of food and water.

God hears their complaints and provides food and water. Manna shows up on the ground every morning and water springs forth from a rock. It is nothing if not impressive. God does provide – the evidence is bread from heaven every morning. And God promises the Israelites everything they could have wanted: freedom, good health, success in military endeavors . . . the promised land. In response, the people create a god in the form of a golden calf because Moses is on the mountain too long and they fear God has left them already.

And this seems to be the final straw. God has had enough. God tells Moses to take the people and continue, but God will be going no further, for surely God is *too* much for these people.

The Israelites are not the cleverest bunch. It's easy to see where God might be inclined to send them along on their own. But when I look at the world around me, at the people we have become, and I wonder if we are any better.

We also seem to be wandering in a desert of war, genocide, and terrorism; wandering in circles around public policy and international politics; wondering where we are supposed to be, what the promised land might look like, and *if* we will ever see it.

The presence of God is in our midst, but we see war and natural disasters and wonder aloud if we have been brought to this place and time only to be destroyed by lack of food and clean water.

We know what God requires of us, yet we continually lift up other gods, claiming our God is too far away, too uninvolved. Surely if we bow down to money or power or work hard enough ourselves, we can accomplish God's work more effectively.

I particularly identify with Moses in today's dialogue. In the midst of a desert where he has been wandering for years, in the midst of a people who can't seem to figure out right from wrong with a flashlight and a search team, in the face of a God who he knows is too great for this haphazard group of people, Moses confronts God, afraid he is going to be sent on alone.

I do not have the relationship with God that Moses had, but in the midst of this desert of bad news and human destruction that I see on the news every night, in the midst of a country and a denomination so split along ideological lines that we can't seem to find one another with a flashlight and a search team, in the face of a God who I know is too great for the mess we have made of our humanity, I wonder where God is in our midst. And I also, along with Moses, wish to see God's face.

I find it comforting that despite God's immediate reassurances to go forward with the Israelites, Moses continues to question God's faithfulness. Moses, who seems to have had the most intimate of relationships with God, questions whether or not God will follow through with the Israelite people. I know our God is a faithful God, but in the face of so much disaster in our world, so much destruction, I wonder if God is really following through on God's promises as well.

It would be easier if I could know exactly where God is and what God is up to at every moment. But this story reminds us that God doesn't work that way. . . . God promises presence and goodness, mercy and graciousness, but God preserves the mystery of God's identity: I will be who I will be; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious. I will be faithful and go forward with you, and you can see me from behind: you can see the good news I leave in my wake, but you will not know what I will do before I act.

It would be easier if we could see God coming. If we could know that God was about to clean up the messes we've created. If we could know that God was about to do a hard thing, or an incredible thing, so we could be prepared – we could be ready and we could notice.

But it is not about our being ready or even our noticing. God acts in God's own time and in God's own way. It is not *God's* responsibility to make sure we notice what God is doing in the world, but is our job to look for the good news in our midst. We *know* our God is a faithful God who goes ahead of us and so it is our commitment as Christians to go out and search for God's presence.

It would be easier if we could know exactly where God is going, but we only get to see God from behind.

Too often, however, we forget that seeing God's back means God has gone ahead and is already preparing the way for us. We do not go forward alone, but walk into a future where God is already present – creating good news in the midst of bad news; working miracles in the face of destruction. And it is our job to look for signs of where God has been, and the miracles left in God's wake.