

2023 Proper 24A

We've been hearing snippets of the story of Moses for a couple of months now. We have skipped over a lot—A LOT—and we are nearing the end of his narrative. Next week we will hear about his final conversation with God and his death, on the border of the Promised Land.

There are times when I wish I could have been in the room as the framers of the lectionary made their choices. Why did they choose this passage and not that one? Why did they chop up one Gospel narrative that should be heard together, and then string together several parables that don't really go together?

And, why did you whitewash Moses' life the way you did?

Moses was far from perfect. He had a temper. He could be impatient. He wavered between overconfidence and despair. On one occasion, he took credit for the mighty acts of God, which according to the narrative is the reason he is prevented from entering the Promised Land.

But through it all, Moses never stopped talking to God. He would argue, he would cajole...he was downright passive aggressive at times. But he never turned his back on God.

So it's a little astonishing that God does that very thing.

To set the scene for this part of the story:

Moses came down the mountain after being in the presence of God for 40 days, to find the Israelites worshiping the Golden Calf. In his anger he smashed the tablets of the law he had just received. He confronted those involved, most especially his brother Aaron, who denied being the instigator of the whole thing, and made this ridiculous defense about how he just took their gold, threw it into the fire—and out walked this golden calf! Moses meted out the punishment, which included capital punishment for about three thousand people.

God pulled back, too. Up until this point we hear that the people were led by God, or the presence of God. After this, God sends an angel, a messenger, to guide them. Remember that the whole reason Moses went up on the mountain to talk to God in the first place was because the people were afraid of being so close to the presence of God. It was too much for them. So God isn't punishing them by withdrawing. God is accommodating them, respecting their limitations.

But apparently Moses still expects to be able to enter into the presence of God as before. Moses goes up onto the mountain needing the kind of immediacy he had known before. In that first encounter with the living

God, in the burning bush. That's what he expects. What he wants. Maybe even what he needs. Or thinks he needs.

But God recognizes that things have changed. God needs to show the same restraint with Moses as God shows the rest of them. So when Moses asks to be shown the glory of God, expecting to see what he's seen before, God makes a counteroffer. God offers a glimpse of God's *goodness*, instead. So God sets Moses safely in the cleft of the rock and prepares to pass by. It's an image that resonates through the ages, into the psalms and eventually into our hymns. We take comfort in the idea that God places us where we can be surrounded by strength and sheltered from the worst of life's storms.

But be careful not to get stuck there.

There is actually a very comic element to this story, in the original Hebrew. The word 'face' here is elsewhere translated as presence. And the word 'back' is closer to...*backside*. Moses wants to see the full glory of God, but God tells him, "You can't handle it, but I'll show you my rear."

And so Moses only sees God from behind. And for generations, the people of God understand accept that that is the only view of God we can handle.

Until Jesus comes along.

It's so easy to forget that through Jesus, we come face-to-face with God. God has figured out a way to be present with us without overwhelming us.

The problem is, we don't always recognize Jesus for who he is. Much like those Pharisees and Herodians in today's gospel passage.

I was specifically asked on Wednesday to repeat what I said to them about this episode from the Gospels. I think I can tie it together with what I wanted to say about Moses, but we'll find out!

As one of the commentaries says, this encounter between Jesus and these community leaders happens on the "very busy last Tuesday of his life." It's the week of Passover, Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem just two days ago. Crowds have been gathering everywhere he goes, he has caused a scene by clearing out the moneylenders from the Temple, he's told provocative parables that make the religious leadership look bad...

He's stirring up trouble. And if there is one thing Jerusalem didn't need, it was more trouble.

So the Pharisees are determined to discredit Jesus so that things will calm down. It is a sign of just how desperate the Pharisees have become in their attempts to get rid of Jesus, that they send their “disciples” and the Herodians to do it. The Herodians are Jews who accept Herod as their king, even though he’s a puppet of Rome and considered blasphemous by the most faithful Jews.

Together they develop a question about taxes to trap Jesus (some things never change, huh?). This particular tax, the *kensos*, was a Roman “head tax”. It was salt in the wound of those oppressed by Rome. The Roman Empire would defeat a nation, occupy them, then charge a head tax on every person to pay for “privilege” of Roman “protection.” And even worse, it had to be paid using a *Roman* coin—one with the blasphemous graven image of Caesar, with the claim he was divine on the other side. You would never expect to find a Jew just carrying this coin around, and certainly would not bring it into the Temple. That would be like bringing pornography to church.

So they spring their trap by asking Jesus this question: is it lawful to pay this tax to Caesar? It’s really a way of saying to Jesus, “Which authority are you going to acknowledge, the Jewish religious legal system, or the Roman legal system? You can’t have both, so someone is going to be displeased with you.”

They are so tickled with themselves for coming up with this foolproof question to trap Jesus, they don't even notice that Jesus traps THEM.

"Show me the coin," he says. And they produce one. That coin with the image of Caesar and those blasphemous words on the back. Someone has one. IN THE TEMPLE.

Jesus has won the argument before he even says a word, because he has revealed their own hypocrisy. They are face-to-face with the presence of God that Moses so desired to see, and all they want to do is shut him up. They fail to see the glory. Even if it comes with a bit of sass on occasion.

What Jesus finally says is just icing on the cake, really. "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's..." You may know it better as "Render unto Caesar..."

And give to God the things that are God.

Jesus leaves them to decide how to parse that out.

And Jesus leaves us to do the same work of discernment. How does our relationship with *things* reflect our relationship with *God*? How do we navigate the difficult places in this world where the values of our faith conflict with the values of society—and which side of that conflict do we land on? Which kind of a system do we really want to be part of? And how do we

disentangle ourselves from systems we don't want to be part of?

We were created in the image of God—but how well are we living into that image?

And do we recognize God's presence when it's in our midst? Or do we reject it because it's in an unexpected form?

They were expecting the Messiah to look and act a certain way, just as Moses was expecting the presence of God to appear in familiar form. They wanted a God who fixed things to their liking. They didn't want to deal with a God who asked hard questions.

I think, too often, we are the same way. We look at the things going on in the world and ask, "Why, God? Why won't you do anything to change this?"

I leave you with the meme I've seen in several places. A man is given the opportunity to ask God a question face-to-face. He struts up, full of righteous anger, and says, "Why God? Why do you allow poverty and violence and disease to exist? When are you going to do something about this?"

And God answers, "I was just going to ask you the same question."

You are created in the image of God. You are the currency of God's kingdom. You don't receive this gift of grace to tuck it away in the crevice of a rock and wait for God to pass by so you can catch a glimpse of the glory as it goes by. We have received this grace so that when it shows up in the most unexpected places and faces, we recognize Jesus. Maybe we are only shown the back of him sometimes, as a reminder to *follow* him. Amen.