

Creating Space (part 4 of 4 in *Extravagant Hope, Extravagant Generosity* series)

Exodus 33:12-23

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There are a lot of great stories in the Bible, lots of characters I can identify with, but this text from Exodus is my very favorite. I love Moses, for one thing – he’s my favorite character of the Old Testament. He’s so flawed, so quirky, so far from perfect. I don’t think he’s Charlton Heston nearly as much as he’s kind of a scrawny, awkward fellow whose voice cracks at the most inopportune times. He’s *real*, and he has to work *really hard* at faithfulness, which makes him all the more compelling. And his realness makes his relationship with God extraordinary, too: he has the closest relationship with God of anyone in the Old Testament, arguing with God, compromising with God, bargaining with God, interceding for the Israelite people with God, and sometimes even changing God’s mind.

Add this character to the great story of the Exodus, and you’ve got something really extraordinary. The Exodus is one of the first stories of salvation, and one that we can read and experience again and again in our own lives, as we move from captivity to Promised Land by God’s power, trudging through the wilderness, where we are trained to rely on God, who provides bread from heaven and water from rocks. And this chapter of Exodus, in particular, is powerful to me, because of the exchange between God and Moses, the words God speaks to Moses, and the implications that exchange has for each of us. As we commit ourselves anew to the ministry of Browns Point UMC today with our financial commitments, I think it has implications for the world around us, as well.

Remember the background with me: Moses has gotten the Israelites out of Egypt, though he was an unlikely hero – they’ve escaped Pharaoh’s rule and miraculously crossed the Red Sea and come to Mount Sinai. God has given the 10 commandments on the stone tablets, and Moses has come down from the mountain to find that the people have begun to doubt God already, and have made a golden calf to worship instead. Moses has gotten angry with the people’s impatience and shattered the tablets with the 10 commandments on them, but because he is their leader, he goes back up on the mountain to try to make amends with God on their behalf.

He says to God, “these people have sinned a great sin, but you need to forgive them, God.” And God says back to Moses, “They deserve to be punished,” which is true, so God sends a plague on them... but then God tells Moses to continue leading the Israelites on the journey to the promised land, offering to give the land to him as they go. God’s still willing to carry out God’s side of the deal: the people are still headed to the land flowing with milk and honey, but God is angry because the Israelites have been so faithless, so God says, “I’m not going with you, because if I was among you I would consume you like fire.” God says, “I would end up destroying you because you are such stubborn, faithless people.”

This is the point in the story where our reading from this morning comes in: Moses says to God, “Wait a minute, if you’re not planning to go with us, don’t lead us away from here.” Moses knows it’s silly to try to go forward without God, that even a leader like Moses will not make it on his own. Moses knows that God’s presence is what makes them God’s people. And God responds to Moses and says, “Okay, I’ll do what you ask. My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest,” which here means peace and prosperity. But Moses pushes even further and says, “Show me your glory.” God has already shown his intimate involvement with Moses – God has called him by name;

God has seen Moses' face. And Moses asks for the same from God, demanding, "Show me your glory."

Now God knows better than anyone that the mystery that is God is not something we can see face-to-face; God is too great for us to comprehend. Even a glimpse of God's splendor is enough to be totally overwhelming to us, so God can't just descend and show up in front of Moses, as if God is a regular guy. But God chooses to make Godself known, even in the midst of fear and anxiety and sin and doubt, and says Moses can hide in a cleft in the rock on Mt. Sinai – the original "Rock of Ages cleft for me" – and God will cover Moses with God's hand as all of God's glory passes before Moses. And Moses can see God's back, but God's face cannot be seen.

And in the midst of that exchange, near the end of the passage that Beverley read this morning, is what I think might be the most life-changing verse in the whole Old Testament: God says to Moses, "There's a place for you beside me on this rock where you shall stand, and all my glory will pass by."

First God says, "There's a place for you." All of our searching for belonging in this life comes down to this. All of our angst over finding 'a place to belong' is secondary to this, because from day one, we already have a place. We are God's people. We belong with God, doing God's work, in God's kingdom. We belong in the church, which is, however broken, the body of Christ. There is a place for each of us here, created by the God of the universe.

And not only that, but that place is beside God. Not behind God or beneath God or set apart from God a little ways, but beside God. God is our companion and our leader, our mentor and our friend as well as our creator, our protector, and our judge. And the place where we belong is beside God. St. Augustine said, "our hearts are restless until they find rest in God," and perhaps this is what he meant: the place we belong is with God, beside God, close to God. Our hearts long to draw nearer to God, which is why we worship, why we pray, why we fast and participate in sacraments and commit ourselves to justice-seeking and service with 'the least of these.' We are called, we are created, to be beside God in that place God has created for us. We might try to run away, but the place near God will always be there for each of us.

And then, as if it could get any better: our place, which is beside God, is on a rock, a firm foundation, solid ground, where we shall stand. In Jeremiah God says, "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a future *with hope*." And here in Exodus, we get a similar message: the place for you is a place of promise, a place of strength and protection, a place that will last. Remember the story of the man who built his house on the sand? When the storms came, it was washed away. That's not what God has in mind for us: our place is on a rock. And we're invited to stand tall there, to thrive, to grow.

There's a place for you beside God on a rock where you shall stand. Not "there might be a place for you" or "if you play your cards right..." and not, "you might stand," or "you could stand," or "you've got a 50/50 chance of falling," but there is a place for you where you *shall* stand, where you will thrive, where you belong.

Now I used to think it was pretty funny that Moses saw God's back, and not God's face. I used to laugh because I thought, "Moses just saw God's backside!" I used to think that was strange. Then I realized the significance of God passing "before" Moses. Moses' request has been all along that God would lead him, that God would go personally through the wilderness with them toward the Promised Land. And in passing before Moses, God symbolically says, "I commit to leading you from here on out." God's back is *exactly* what Moses needs to see, not only in this moment but for years to come. In this gesture, not only does God protect Moses in a deeply personal, intimate way by

hiding him in the rock and covering him with God's own hand, but God also shows God's commitment to leading God's people, however childish and faithless they (or we) may be.

After this exchange, God makes a new covenant with Moses and the Israelites, and Moses gets a new copy of the 10 commandments to take down the mountain. And when he comes down the mountain, Moses is visibly different: he got a glimpse of God's splendor, and when he came down from the mountain, the text says "the skin of his face was shining," so much so that Moses started to wear a veil over his face when he talked to the Israelite people. He caught a glimpse of God's glory, and everyone else could see it reflected in him.

And this is the message for us, the message that has implications for our own lives and for how we live in this community, how we can take part in God's transformation of the world: there is a place for each of us, with God, on a firm foundation where we shall stand. There's a place where each of us has the opportunity to catch a glimpse of God's splendor, where we can see as much of God as we can possibly handle. This church is a place where many of us have had this experience, where we have encountered God, where we have found our place to belong, where we have seen a glimpse of the beauty of the kingdom. And because we've had that experience, we know our lives will never be the same.

But we couldn't keep that to ourselves, even if we wanted to: when we have seen God's glory, everyone around us will know – they will see it on our faces – and they will have the opportunity to experience it for themselves. When we have experienced God's love, God's acceptance, God's grace, when we have found that space that God has created for *us*, the greatest gift we can offer is to show it to others. The greatest gift we can offer the world is to make space for others to encounter our God as we have. This is what you're doing when you commit to our ministry here. You create space. You make a way for others to see the glory of God reflected on your own face, and to find the space where they belong, near God, on a firm foundation where they can thrive. You create space for others to see God's back, and to begin the journey toward the Promised Land. You proclaim to a world clamoring for belonging, "There's a place for you, too! I've seen it!" And I dare say, when you do this, you transform the world through God's power. Thanks be to God that there is a place for each of *us*. Thanks be to God that *you* have committed to creating space for others. Amen.