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Sheltered by God’s Hand

Some years ago at Vacation Bible School we sang a song written by Bryan Moyer Suderman. As I read today’s text, the song keeps running through my head. The lyrics of the chorus go like this: How do you know? How do you Know? How do you know when the Spirit’s here? How do you know? How do you know? How do you know when the Spirit’s here? I think perhaps that is the central question of human existence. How do we know God is near when the results of climate change bring species to the brink of extinction and threaten our own safety and security? How do we know God is near when war continues in Ukraine with no end in sight, when Hamas massacres men, women and children, when missiles turn the city of Gaza into rubble killing and displacing thousands of Palestinians? How do we know God is with us when our own Congress is in disarray and cannot work together? Where is God when bad things happen, when illness or trouble threatens our well-being? How do we know that God is near?

In our text today the children of Israel are in crisis. In their fear they had created a golden calf and broken the covenant with God. They are out in the wilderness, in the desert. It is a forbidding place with little water or food. Although Moses has interceded with God on their behalf and God has forgiven them, they know they have done wrong. They are in mourning, unsure of God’s continuing presence with them. God has told Moses, “Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” Instead God has promised to send an angel to lead the people and drive the inhabitants out ahead of them. (Exodus 33:3)

This is not good enough for Moses. Perhaps he is feeling overwhelmed. He, too, was angry with the people. Perhaps he does not feel capable of leading them further without God’s presence. Perhaps he feels like a failure. Perhaps he knows that it is Yahweh the people need, not Moses. For whatever reason, he intercedes with God again. “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me.” Moses does not wait for Yahweh to answer. He continues, “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 find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.”

Yahweh responds, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

To find favor with God is to experience God’s kindness and compassion. It is to receive God’s grace. It is not something we earn but is a gift of God. God has responded, but Moses is not finished. Moses is asking for God’s favor, not for himself but on behalf of the people. The favor Moses wants is God’s continuing presence with the people, not just with Moses. Moses said, “Consider too that this nation is your people.”

The British Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that Moses was “in effect, saying to God: What the people need is not for me to be close to them. I am just a human, here today, gone tomorrow. But You are eternal. You are their God. They need You to be close to them. It was as if Moses was saying: Until now, they have experienced You as a terrifying, elemental force, delivering plague after plague to the Egyptians, bringing the world’s greatest empire to its knees, dividing the sea, overturning the very order of nature itself…The people needed, said Moses, to experience not the *greatness* of God but the *closeness* of God, not God heard in thunder and lightning at the top of the mountain, but as a perpetual presence in the valley below.” (end quote)

Moses continued his plea, “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.” For Moses, the survival of the children of Israel as a people is dependent on Yahweh’s presence with them. Their very identity is connected to their relationship with Yahweh. Without Yahweh, there is no reason for them to exist as a people.

Moses and Yahweh are on intimate terms. They have a strong relationship. Moses is able to confront Yahweh. And Yahweh responds, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight and I know you by name.” With God’s presence assured, Moses makes one further request. “Show me your glory, I pray.”

What exactly was Moses asking for? It could be honor, divine presence, a fuller manifestation of Yahweh than he had received at the burning bush or in the pillar of fire or cloud of presence. He wants to know more, a clearer picture of the Divine Presence.

What he gets is an invitation to meet God on the mountain. “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I 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,” Yahweh declared. “But you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live.” God directed Moses to a place where he should stand on a rock. “While my glory passes by, ‘ God declared, ‘I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and 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.”

Some scholars see this verbal exchange between Moses and Yahweh as a turning point in Exodus. Worship of the golden calf had broken God’s covenant with the people of Israel. In chapter 33, Moses intercedes, not for forgiveness as he had in the previous chapter, but for a new relationship between Yahweh and the people. In the following chapters the second tablets with God’s commands are formed and construction of the tabernacle begins. The tabernacle, which would be placed in the center of the Israelite camp, represented God’s presence with the people, not outside the camp but in the very heart of the camp. Yahweh would now dwell, or tent, with the people.

There is paradox here. The eternal, holy, divine presence that we cannot totally comprehend (God’s face is hidden from Moses and from us)…dwells in close intimacy with human beings who are mortal, fallible, and who do not know God’s ways. God chooses to be gracious and merciful; we do not determine when or where God’s grace and mercy appear. And yet, like Moses, we can intercede on behalf of others, as well as asking forgiveness for ourselves. But there is an ethical imperative implied here, that God’s people hear and do what God asks of us.

But what about the times when we don’t feel God’s hand, when God seems distant? Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz describes it this way: “when a person doesn’t want someone else to see him he has two options; to cover his own face and turn his head away, or to extend his hand out to cover the other’s face so he won’t be able to see him. When we read the God might hide His face, we imagine it like a person turning away and ignoring what he sees, or covering his own face with his hand. But the sages of the Talmud say …that should be compared to a person covering his friend’s face so the friend can’t see him, even though he is still present and can totally see his friend. If so, when someone is suffering, it is not that God is hidden or has disappeared. He is completely present, but temporarily, the person cannot experience His good and compassionate presence.”

Exodus 33 presents God in anthropomorphic terms. We can visualize God placing Moses in the cleft of the rock and shielding Moses with his hand. Rabbi Nehemia Polen of Hebrew College in Massachusetts connects this text to the Jewish holiday Sukkot, or Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. This holiday is a harvest festival and remembers the time the children of Israel traveled through the wilderness, living in booths, on their way to the promised land. Rabbi Polen points out that the Hebrew verb used here for sheltering or protecting is sakoti – God says, ‘I will shelter (vd. Sakoti) you with the palm of my hand. This verb uses the same root as sukkah, the festive booth that gives it name to the holiday Sukkot. Rabbi Polen says, “What this suggests is that Sukkot is indeed the holiday of divine intimacy, when we feel the love and protective closeness of the divine hand, as Moses did on Sinai long ago. But it is important to remember that Moses’s intimate encounter was not primarily for his own sake, but in selfless devotion to the people –suggesting that our own quest for the divine spirit will only be meaningful if our goal is to energize our service to others.”

We cannot be close to God unless we are also close to our neighbors. As followers of Jesus, we look to Jesus to show us what God is like and what living God’s way requires of us. Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God with our whole being…with our whole mind and soul and heart and strength….and that the second is like it…to love our neighbor as ourselves.

When I look at our church, First Mennonite and Primera Iglesia Menonita, I think God’s presence as shown in our love for each other, is what holds us together. The song that runs through my head, “How Do You Know?” ends with this verse: There’s a people formed, There’s a people formed when the Spirit’s here. There’s a people formed, a people formed. There’s a people formed when the Spirit’s here.” It was so for the children of Israel. May it be so for us.