

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

WHAT'S IN A FACE: GOD AND MOSES—PART II
Exodus 33:18-23

Richard Bowman
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When we last checked in on Moses, he had been commissioned by God to lead the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. The commission alone though was not enough information for Moses. He wanted to know God's name; that is, he wanted to know God's larger purpose and intention; he wanted to know the details of how he was to carry out this task. He wanted to know, to use biblical phraseology, good and evil. He wanted to know, to use more contemporary terminology, what he should do in order to do the right thing.

In Martin Luther's brilliant formulation, Moses wanted to know the hidden God. In the process he overlooked, again to borrow a phrase from Luther, the revealed God. In his quest to discover what was hidden to him, he ignored what was revealed to him. What was revealed to him was that God would be with him. Like it or not, that's all God would reveal to Moses. Moses is then told to live his life out into the future, return to Egypt, negotiate the release of the Hebrew slaves, and bring them out of Egypt.

Now that that task is accomplished, Moses resumes his quest to know the hidden God, to know good and evil, to learn what he needs to do to do the right thing. Such knowledge is vital to Moses in his role as leader of the people. Doing the right thing is crucial for Moses success as a leader because the people, following their escape from slavery in Egypt, have not been faithful to God or loyal to Moses. Instead they have rebelled, made a golden calf, and worshiped it as the god who of brought them safely out of Egypt.

In such circumstances how can Moses be an effective leader? What should Moses do? What does God want Moses to do? In order to find out the answers to these questions, Moses presses his relationship with God and tries once again to get a glimpse of the hidden God. He asks God: "Show me your glory." In other words: "Show me what you want me to do, reveal to me how I should carry out this task."

This request is significant because Moses has just won a concession from God. An angry God told Moses he must take the rebellious people to the land flowing with milk and honey by himself. Because the peoples' disobedience, God will no longer accompany them on their journey. Moses protests, saying, that unless God accompanies them, he and

the people will not continue the journey to the land promised them. God concedes telling Moses: "I will do the very thing you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight." Given this concession Moses presses for more insight into God's hidden agenda.

In so doing Moses stresses an already existing, unique relationship with God. Previous texts suggest that "God spoke to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exodus 33:11) or that God speaks with Moses "mouth to mouth clearly, not in riddles." (Numbers 12:8) The phraseology suggests that although Moses may not have seen the glory of God, he does have a close, even intimate relationship with God. After all Moses speaks face to face with God or more literally in Hebrew mouth to mouth. Think of a baseball manager arguing with an umpire: toe to toe, nose to nose, hat turned backwards to allow for a closer in-his-face positioning. This imagery suggests that the conversations between Moses and God are so intimate that Moses could feel the divine spit spray on his weathered face.

For most of us that might be an intimate enough relationship with God. But for Moses even the closeness of this mouth-to-mouth relationship was not enough. Much about God is still hidden, and Moses wants to get behind

the hidden God and see, in the words of the story, God's glory.

In response God instructs Moses: "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." The response is interesting both for what it reveals and for what it conceals. Yes, God will reveal the divine goodness to Moses, but God further reminds Moses that he is already revealed to him the divine name, YHWH, here translated as "the Lord." Recall from last week that this name ironically concealed more than it revealed since it means "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be."

What God does not conceal though and what God does reveal is the divine graciousness, the divine mercy. God will be gracious on whom God will be gracious and merciful on whom God will be merciful.

God continues by telling Moses "but you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." Moses may speak with God face to face, mouth to mouth, but he cannot see God's face. This imagery suggests that Moses was so close to God that he could not actually see God's face. Nor will he now. Hidden from Moses is the divine face, the divine glory, the specifics of the divine agenda.

At this point, the story is not without humor for God instructs Moses: "See, there is a place by me where you will stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in the 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 will see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

Moses will get a glimpse of God's glory, but he will not get behind it. Although he will not see God's face, he will see God's backside as the deity passes by him. In effect, God moon's Moses. Moses want a closer relationship with God. One whereby he not only speaks with God face to face, but he sees the divine face. But instead of seeing God's face, he sees God's backside.

Moses will not get behind the hidden God, behind God's glory, to learn good and evil, to understand precisely what he must do to the right thing. With only a glimpse of the divine backside, Moses must return to his role as leader of the rebellious, unfaithful people. And as he returns to take up his divinely commissioned task, he must once again accept human limitations and proceed "without being entirely sure his acts are right rather than wrong."ⁱ

Still Moses does not return to his tasks empty-handed. He may not gain insight into the hidden God, to acquire

certain knowledge of good and evil, to learn what to do to do the right thing; yet God does reveal to him that God is gracious and merciful. Given the task that Moses has, and his lack of certainty about what he should do to do the right thing, the revelation that God is gracious and merciful is important. Moses may fail to perceive the right thing; Moses may fail to do the right thing; but Moses will be forgiven when he fails to perceive and do the right thing.

This story, like the one last week about Moses' call, is problematic in helping us achieve that basic human desire to know good and evil, to learn God's will, to understand what we must do in order to do the right thing. Lacking divine guidance in determining what we must do to do the right thing, there is an ambiguity about the nature of good and evil. This is an ambiguity not only experienced by Moses, but it is an increasingly recognized problem for our society too. Popular culture abounds with examples of our rising anxiety about what is good and what is evil, about what we should do to do the right thing.

For now one example must suffice. In the recent movie "Gone Baby Gone" starring Casey Affleck and Michelle Monaghan, private detective Patrick Kensie promises a distraught mother that he will find and return her

kidnapped daughter. The movie portrays this mother as an irresponsible drug dealer as well as addict and alcoholic. Nonetheless a sympathetic Patrick promises he will return her young daughter. As it turns, out the kidnapping was engineered by the mother's brother-in-law and a retiring police captain. Their intention is not to seek ransom for the child but to provide a more nurturing and supportive environment for this preschooler. The detective eventually works through layers of deception and discovers this ambiguous truth. He is urged by his partner Angie Gennaro to leave the apparently happy and thriving child in her new home. Because of his promise, Kensie does not do so. The movie concludes with a scene in which he drops in on the mother and her child. The mother is drinking beer from a bottle while preparing for a hot date. When it becomes clear that she intends to leave this preschool child home alone while she goes out, the detective volunteers to babysit. Movie ends in silence with the detective sitting next to the child staring into the television set.

What was the right thing to do: rescue the child from her kidnapers and return her to an irresponsible, negligent mother; or allow the child to find a healthy new home with her kidnapers? The movie portrays without

resolution the ambiguity of good and evil. What was the right thing to do, the responsible choice?

The contemporary detective Patrick Kensie could not ask for clarification by a request to see God's glory as Moses did. Nor did he see God's backside in response. But he nonetheless needed to face the situation, to make choices, and to live with the consequences of those choices just as Moses did, just as we all do when we face such situations in our lives. We cannot penetrate the hidden God, but we can go forward with the revealed assurance that God is gracious, merciful, and forgiving.

Across the centuries this promise of grace, mercy, and forgiveness binds God to us so that when we finally do see the face of God, we see the face of a baby who, an angel tells Joseph, will save his people from their sins.

ⁱ Aaron Wildavsky, Moses as Political Leader (New York: Shalem Press, 2005), p. 119.

MORNING WORSHIP
Monday, September 15, 2008

Prelude *"The God of Abraham Praise"*
Hopson/Proulx

Welcome/greeting
Pr. Paul

Call to Worship

[based on Romans 11: 33-36]

L: O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

C: How unsearchable is God's justice; how inscrutable God's ways!

L: For who has known the mind of God?

C: Or who has been God's counselor?

L: For everything comes from God, is through God, and belongs to God.

C: To God be the glory forever

Hymn *"You are Holy"*
ELW #525

Text Exodus 33:18-23

Sermon

"What's in a Face: Moses and God--Part II"

Richard Bowman, Chair of Moral Values

Prayer

[based on a prayer by Ted Loder]

L: Teach us, O God, the great cost of paying attention, that

Naked to the dazzle of your back as you pass

C: I may know that I am always on holy ground.

L: Make me wide-eyed for beauty,

C: And for my neighbor's need and goodness;

L: Wide-willed for peace making

C: And confronting power with the call to compassion.

L: Wide hearted for love and for the unloved

C: Who are the hardest to touch and need it the most.

L: Breathe into me the restlessness and courage
To make something new, something saving,
and something true

C: That I may understand what it is to rejoice.

Benediction

Postlude *“The God of Abraham Praise”*
Michael Burkhardt

Today Dr. Richard Bowman preaches the second sermon in the Chair of Moral Values Fall Sermon Series "Knowing God, Knowing Good and Evil." Dr. Bowman will lead a community discussion on the sermons from this week and last week in the Three in One room in the Commons Building on Tuesday, September 16. All faculty, staff, students, and administrators are welcome. Treats will be served.

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

INVOLVEMENT AND SERVICE

Interested in getting involved in Campus Ministry. Forms are available on the Narthex table. Turn them into the chapel office. There are MANY ways that you

OUTREACH

Groups of students lead worship and youth retreats across the region. A great way to get acquainted with a smaller group of students of all ages with a modest time commitment! The teams are forming now, so if you are interested in joining, come to the chapel office soon!

CATHOLIC MINISTRIES

There will be a party for all Catholic and ‘catholic friendly’ students on **Wed., Sept. 17th at 7 pm**, in the chapel. Meet the new Catholic Ministries coordinator, Shane Wuebben, ‘04 and visit about programming for the year. Food, fellowship and all are welcome!

SERVICE TRAVEL

Service includes local involvement and advocacy and travel to Pine Ridge [fall break], New York City [J-term break] and storm stricken parts of the country through Lutheran Disaster Response [Spring break]. Details at the **travel fair on September 23, Commons.**

This week in chapel

Tuesday (16 th)	Chair of Moral Values Discussion, 10 am - 3-1 room
Wednesday (17 th)	Holy Communion, 10 am - Pr. Paul
Friday (19 th)	Worship, 10 am - Jennifer Falkenstein, Sr. Spkr.
Sunday (21 st)	Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul; Sr. Academy
Monday (22 nd)	Sung Morning Prayer