



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## Was It You, Lord? Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22

You have to appreciate God's sense of humor in even the most distressing of circumstances. We all know the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt and God's attempts to shape them into a nation that would bring blessing to the earth. When they camped at Mount Horeb, Moses went up the mountain to meet God and receive the tablets on which God inscribed the Ten Words (as the Jews know them), the Ten Commandments (as we understand them). While Moses was away, the Israelites grew impatient and worried. They complained that they had been led into the desert to die. Out of his own frustration and fear, Moses' brother Aaron asked the people for their gold jewelry. He melted what was offered and sculpted a golden calf like so many of the religions in that part of the world used to represent the source of life. The people rejoiced when they had something tangible to represent their faith. They could see and feel the calf while this God Moses talked about was nowhere to be found. A celebration ensued but ended abruptly when Moses came down the mountain, saw the unfaithfulness of the people, and threw the tablets to the ground in protest.

God was not pleased but urged Moses to retrieve a second set of tablets. Reluctantly, Moses trudged back up the mountain but this time he wanted to know for certain that God was with them. "How will I know it is you, Lord?" Moses implored and God smiled. God must have smiled because what happened next seems a bit mischievous. God told Moses to stand at a certain place on the mountain, in a cleft of the rock, and God would pass by. "I will cover your eyes with my hand," God tells him "so that you will not see me and die. You will see my backside, but not my face."

Is God teasing and playing with Moses? After all Moses had been through with God—the burning bush, the confrontations with Pharaoh, the escape from Egypt, and the frustrations of leading a rather ornery group of folks to a place they really did not want to go, why cover Moses' eyes and then offer a glimpse of God's backside heading the other way? Why some revealing of his divinity but then continued hiddenness? If he could not see God's face, how could Moses know it was really God? How can we know whether or not God is here with us?

We believe that God is here right now, don't we? Do we? It is, after all, the very premise on which our worship is built. Sunday by Sunday our Call to Worship summons us to gather here to worship God. The Invocation literally invokes the presence of God in our worship. Is God here? How can we know? Moses wanted to see God, to be assured that God was present and accounted for. So do we.

Sometimes I wonder if God was not paying a little hide-and-seek with Moses to make him pay more attention to what God was doing. If we do not pay attention, the story of Moses on the mountain begins to take the shape of two men camping out on a lovely outcropping overlooking the Sinai Peninsula. God chisels his top ten guidelines for living into tablets of stone and sends Moses back down the mountain to implement them. If that were the story, then God is little more than a holy man on the mountain and Moses is simply his messenger.

Instead, as we have it, God is coy, interacting with Moses as needed but retaining some hiddenness, some mystery and wonder and awe so that Moses does not forget who is God and who is human. God forces Moses to pay attention to everything that is happening. God insists that the Israelite people open their eyes and minds and hearts to discover the living God rather than put their hands on a crude golden sculpture that does not even represent their best ideas about God.

Douglas Burton-Christie writes about a game he and his then three year-old daughter used to play. When she began attending preschool, he realized that asking her to tell him about her day resulted only in a synopsis of activities but nothing of real interest. Eager to discover what was going on in his daughter's heart and mind, Burton-Christie began asking her, "What did you notice today?" Suddenly her days bloomed with sights, sounds, shapes, and colors. He discovered that she noticed everything and daydreamed about what she did not see. Because she, in turn, asked the same question of him, he, too, opened his mind and heart and imagination and discovered so much of the extraordinary things he had been missing in ordinary days.<sup>1</sup>

I think this lack of attention was the primary problem of the Pharisees who pestered Jesus with their trick questions. I know that you heard that familiar story of the religious leaders asking Jesus about the legality of paying taxes and his response of giving to Caesar what his and to God what is God's and you thought, "O, no! A sermon on money!" If you did, then this sermon is for you!

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas Burton-Christie, "Learning to See: Epiphany in the Ordinary," *Weavings* (November-December 1996): 6-16.

All the Pharisees could see was another itinerant shyster making the rounds to garner support for the latest apocalyptic scare to rile people up and get a little money. All they could see was one more challenge to their comfortable and unexamined lifestyle of religious superiority. All they could see was what was before their eyes. They refused to look for what they could not see.

They could not see God at work in the world. They could not see God in front of them as people were healed, injustice was challenged, broken hearts were mended, sins were exposed, sins were forgiven, outcasts were accepted, and the very Word of God came to life. Like their ancestors, they wanted to worship something they could hold and handle and control. They still were not ready for a God with a sense of humor and a passion for justice, for a God who offered a glimpse of his backside in the hope that they would follow in order to finally see God's face.

Granted it is risky to allow each of us to bring our imaginings of what God is like and insist that they are accurate. It is unwise to believe any experience claimed to be of God simply because it is appealing or compelling. That is why I think Jesus made a point of telling his disciples, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). Whenever we unite, whenever we come together in Jesus' name, in the spirit of his character, he is right here in our midst. But we have to pay attention to notice. We have to look and listen and feel to know God is here.

In order to be open to God, we have to be vulnerable to God. Earlier we sang that familiar hymn written by Augustus Toplady nearly two hundred and forty years ago. "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me" borrows the image of God hiding Moses in the rock as he passed by to symbolize God's care of us. Complete vulnerability characterizes the third and fourth stanzas as the speaker becomes completely open to God:

Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling;  
Naked, come to thee for dress; helpless look to thee for grace;  
Foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.

While I draw this fleeting breath, when mine eyes shall close in death,  
When I soar to worlds unknown, see thee on thy judgment throne,  
Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee.<sup>2</sup>

Vulnerable and open and paying attention, we might see God.

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<sup>2</sup>Augustus M. Toplady, "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me," 1776.

Just before the sermon, Carol and Jaye sang Mendelssohn's beautiful aria, "O Rest in the Lord" from *Elijah*. To fully appreciate the music, we need to know the back story.

There had been a severe drought in the land of Israel. Following the lead of Queen Jezebel, the people had turned to idols for relief. The Prophet Elijah denounced their unfaithfulness and challenged the prophets of Ba'al to a contest to prove whether their gods or the God of Israel was real. The prophets of Ba'al built an altar, laid wood on it, then prayed feverishly for their gods to light it on fire. Over and over, they pleaded and begged but nothing happened. Elijah mocked the false prophets and even poured water on the altar he had built. Then he prayed that God would reveal his might and immediately fire from heaven consumed the altar. Elijah's wrath consumed the false prophets and he slew them.

Queen Jezebel did not take kindly to Elijah's antics and ordered him killed. The prophet fled into the wilderness and hid. He was hungry and weary and frightened, feeling betrayed by his people and by God. He prayed to die. He slept and an angel appeared and gave him bread and water. He slept again and an angel woke him and offered bread and water for his journey. At this point, Mendelssohn chose words from Psalm 37 for the angel to speak encouragement to Elijah: "O rest in the Lord, wait patiently for him."

Rejuvenated, Elijah arose and journeyed to the mountain of God. All he wanted was to be in the presence of God. As he waited in a cave on the mountain, suddenly several dramatic natural events that we tend to attribute to God occurred: a tempest struck, but God was not in the tempest; an earthquake hit, but God was not in the earthquake; a wildfire rampaged through the area, but God was not in the fire. Then Elijah heard a still, small voice and knew without a doubt that God was with him.<sup>3</sup>

Was it you, Lord, who passed by today? Is it you, Lord, who is before me right now? Was it you, Lord, who spoke? God does not always make himself known in the big, brash ways we expect. Sometimes it is God who is in the details. What have you noticed today? What have you seen and felt and heard? It just might be God. Pay attention.

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<sup>3</sup>Felix Mendelssohn, "O Rest in the Lord" from *Elijah*, 1846, based on Psalm 37.

October 19, 2014

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

It is often when our thoughts alone cannot give voice to our deepest needs that our songs speak the longings of our hearts, O God. It is when we lift our eyes to you that peace comes in the midst of life's storms. We praise you, O God. We praise you and offer thanksgiving for all you do for us.

There are times when we do wonder whether or not you hear our prayers. There are times when our prayers cannot even be spoken. But there is an assurance that you know our needs even before we do and you move to provide for us even before we ask. We thank you, God, for loving us enough to pay attention to us and pray that you will help us to do the same.

Bless now each one whom we have mentioned today. Provide them with the care and concern they need. Minister to them through healthcare workers and counselors, therapists, and friends to bring about restoration of wholeness. Grant rest to those who are weary, encouragement to all who are discouraged, and hope to each one who is mired in despair. We pray for enlightenment for us all and for courage to do those things that are good and right and needful.

We admit that our world frightens us at times, O Lord, and its needs confound us. We feel helpless to do anything about dangerous diseases, erratic economies, or violent conflicts. Steady our spirits, we pray. Inspire our imaginations. Strengthen our hearts. And use our compassion to transform the world into the place you long for it to be. Teach us the value of kindness and generosity that we might begin the transformation today, in this place. May your will be done here as in the community of heaven.

While we would often like to hide from the problems of our lives, let us hide only in you, O God, for there we shall surely find confidence, assurance, and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.