

Reflection 18th October
Exodus 33:12-23

Have you ever seen something so magnificent, so other, so huge, so vast, so lovely that you've wanted to look away, even as you've longed to never look away?

I have long freaked my friends out by maintaining that I would love to see a twister up close. Or a polar bear. I know seeing either of these things up close would mean my death was likely imminent, but in some way, I feel like if I saw something that inhuman, that glorious, that terrifying and beautiful, it might be worth it.

Are there things that is it worth dying to be close to? That question has some relevance for our reading today.

I've preached before on the notion of the glory of God- and I say 'the notion' of God's glory because of course that is all any of us can do is to gesture towards a stumbling, small often private notion of what we think this is. I can't possibly convey to you what exactly God's glory is, not in a way that you or I will understand. And I think its this otherworldly ness, or this very we-don't-know-what-to-do-with-it-ness is what this reading points us toward.

Moses was God's man. They had a good thing going on- revelation, relationship, a back and forth. But when Moses insisted he'd like to behold God in all God's glory, God said no, because to see me would kill you.

There is a wonderful series of books called the Chronicles of Narnia, by CS Lewis and he does a good job I think of gesturing toward the idea of the unapproachable yet irresistible glory of God.

These books are centred around the magical land of Narnia, where human children are lucky enough to travel to on occasion, and where they have magical adventures.

The ruler and in fact maker of Narnia is the lion, Aslan. Throughout the books, characters meet Aslan, this huge, glorious shaggy maned lion, and are simply awed by his presence.

In the first book, the Magician's Nephew, when the boy Diggory is finally face to face with Aslan he notes 'and aslan was bigger and more beautiful and more brightly golden and more terrible than he had thought. He dared not look into the great eyes'

And in the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, we read "but as for Aslan himself, the beavers and the children didn't know what to do or say when they saw him. People who have not been in Narnia sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time. If the children had ever thought so, they were cured of it now. for when they tried to look at Aslan's face they just caught a glimpse of the golden mane and the great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes, and then they found they couldn't look at him and went all trembly".

I love that idea, of something being terrible and good at once. That slight edge of wariness and fear that we so often lose when talking about God.

Back to the reading. At this point in Exodus, God has given the people the ten commandments, and a bunch more. Then as Moses has spent increasingly long periods on the mountain with God, the people have grown scared and twitchy, and in the episode just before this one, asked Aaron to make them a golden calf. Moses was understandably livid about this as was God, but Moses interceded on the people's behalf and talked God down from destroying them.

And now here, Moses is shown again almost arguing with God. This time about the specifics of the presence of God with the people as they move on. Moses is saying "you've said I've found favour with you, if that's the case, give me some more information. Show me what you're about. Let me know you're coming with us"

And god says sure my presence will be around, but in the Hebrew, there is no mention of the words 'with you' so Moses persists

How will we know that we are yours, essentially, if you don't go with us?

God says again "sure, you have my favour" but Moses still not satisfied, still wanting assurance and actually, slipping into what I think is a slightly different vein, suggesting what he actually wants begs "show me your glory".

Do you feel this request in your gut?

Do you ever want to just throw open your arms and beg ‘please God, just show me your glory?’”

Why do you think that is? Certainly it seems to me more understandable when times are tough, when we feel a certain distance from hope.

We long for just a taste, a glimmer of God- the real stuff of God- to be shown to us. Because we want to know that we’re not alone. We want to know that all this has not been in vain, that we are on the right track.

I sense this is Moses’ response.

But, God knows that it’s not up to Moses to decide how much of God he gets. God knows that the way humans comprehend the world around them, how we understand it and make sense of what we see and interact with is simply not up to the task of beholding God fully as much as Moses wants it.

God gently tucks Moses into a cleft in the side of the mountain, covers him tenderly as Godself passes, and then allows him to see what is left. The language in the passage ‘you shall see my back’ should be heard metaphorically, let’s not fall into the trap of anthropomorphising God too much, we could maybe think of it as allowing Moses to see where God has just been. And even this would have been dazzling.

This is an amazing account of God interacting with a person, allowing Godself to be negotiated with on behalf of a sinful, erring people, and a scared, wilful man, and God actually protecting Moses from God’s glory, so terrible and dire for human consumption.

Now Moses did have God’s accompanying. Did talk to God. Why did he want more?

Why is it that we long for more and more proof of God’s being with us? Why do we long to see God, to feel God, to touch God? Is it to simply appreciate the raw, shocking beauty, or is it to grasp a little at control? We seek evidence that we are accompanied, we seek proof that the

picture we carry in our heads of who God is is correct, we want to KNOW. This is after all why the Israelites wanted that golden cow.

The Israelites were lost in the desert, and those reading the book of Exodus were in exile, both divorced from certainty and routine, and the latter group longing for a return to the familiar places where they worshipped and where their faith told them their God was. We here might not resonate with that fully, even if consider the church building to be where we go to do our worshipping, I suspect we don't think that the presence, the very glory of God is housed there.

And so we might not understand the beautiful longing that was answered when the Israelites were allowed to erect a tent, and told that their God would be there, in it, with them. Show us your glory.

Having said that, perhaps this longing will have some resonances for us. Though once again I should press us to remember that as hard as this year has been we are not in exile, as the people were who first read this book when it was written, we are removed from our patterns and rituals, and hidden from one another when the presence of our faith community would be of most benefit to us all.

Show us your glory. Help us know we are not alone.

So how do we experience God's presence or glory? Is it all just too difficult, because of the risk involved? I think at this point its important to remember that as much as Moses didn't get his way exactly as he wanted it, God did show him something, and protected him from the rest. There is revelation when we seek it I think.

I sense in some ways we are on the right track when we think about what God leaves in God's wake- the work of God, the hand of God moving and stirring, lifting and healing, leaving traces of glory littered about.

In God's interaction with God's people, God often reveals Godself in a name. I am the God who has delivered you. I am who I am. These names often refer to what God has done or is doing. This, the revelation of who God is, God's movement in the world, God's saving action, is a representation, a naming of God. There could be something in there

about the action of God being present when we simply seek a shiny image.

There's a poem I love called God's bathrobe. It's based on the reading from Isaiah that talks about the robe of God spilling holiness into the temple. The author Micheal Coffey has God sitting in a deck chair in her bathrobe, drinking a nice Summer drink as the edges of her bathrobe spill and flap about almost accidentally leaking holiness throughout the world. It is not supposed to be taken too seriously I suspect, but I love it for its lightness, yet the reverence that knows even a slip of God's hand, even the tie of her bathrobe is such a holy thing that it will change the life of anyone who sees or comes near it. Such is Her being full up of holy, divine, fire and love.

So if God is named by her actions, if God's glory is left where she has worked her will, perhaps we can in some way encourage or help reveal this glory, the presence of God in the world, by working in God's name and for God's reign in the world around us. Perhaps where people are loved, and God's will is done, there is a glimpse of the otherworldly glory of God. Perhaps it feels right to call it otherworldly because we are thinking about that other kingdom, so mysterious yet present all around us.

It is good for us to remember that God is God. That we cannot control the terrible and good presence of the divine.

It's important to remember the words of Mr Beaver

"he'll be coming and going, one day you'll see him and another you won't. He doesn't like being tied down- and of course he has other countries to attend to. It's quite all right. He'll often drop in. Only you mustn't press him. He's wild, you know. Not like a *tame* lion."

God is not ours to know through and through, in the way that seeks to control our understanding. If we could see and understand God fully, wouldn't we not be who we are? wouldn't it be a little less glorious? God is not a tame lion.

When we long for it, let's remember what it is that we're longing for. Something so beautiful you might not be able to look directly at it. Something so terrible and holy it changes the things around it.

Something so other, it fills up the places around it and behind it with light, fire, goodness, awe, and might just be glorious enough that you'd die to see it. And something so surprisingly present that it might be left on the mountainside for us to witness, it might be scattered all over the world, it might even be born in the body of a baby, raised to surprise us once again as the truly human one.

God sat Sunday in her Adirondack deck chair

reading the New York Times and sipping strawberry lemonade
her pink robe flowing down to the ground

the garment hem was fluff and frill
and it spilled holiness down into the sanctuary
into the cup and the nostrils of the singing people

one thread trickled loveliness into a funeral rite
as the mourners looked in the face of death
and heard the story of a life truer than goodness

a torn piece of the robe's edge flopped onto
a war in southern Sudan and caused heartbeats
to skip and soldiers looked into themselves deeply

one threadbare strand of the divine belt
almost knocked over a polar bear floating
on a loose berg in the warming sea

one silky string wove its way through Jesus' cross
and tied itself to desert-parched immigrants with swollen tongues
and a woman with ovarian cancer and two young sons

you won't believe this, but a single hair-thin fiber
floated onto the yacht of a rich man and he gasped
when he saw everything as it really was

the hem fell to and fro across the universe
filling space and time and gaps between the sub-atomic world
with the effervescent presence of the one who is the is

and even in the slight space between lovers in bed
the holiness flows and wakes up the body
to feel beyond the feeling and know beyond the knowing

and even as we monotheize and trinitize
and speculate and doubt even our doubting
the threads of holiness trickle into our lives

and the seraphim keep singing "holy, holy, holy"
and flapping their wings like baby birds
and God says: give it a rest a while

and God takes another sip of her summertime drink
and smiles at the way you are reading this filament now
and hums: It's a good day to be God