

Highland Presbyterian Church
21st Sunday after Pentecost – October 22, 2023
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Isaiah 45:1-7

Exodus 33:12-23

In 2017, my spouse Shannon and I traveled a few hours west with some friends of ours to be in the path of totality of a solar eclipse. Another total solar eclipse is going to happen again next year in April, and we are already making plans for where we want to be when this happens because being in the path of totality is an incredibly humbling experience and being in that space for as long as possible feels like a very distinct privilege. About an hour before the total eclipse, there's a flurry of activity in nature – animals, bugs, and birds begin to respond as if preparing for nightfall and they start returning to their burrows, dens, or nests. Then, when the moon passes directly in front of the sun, the light around you fades. The sky darkens as if it were dusk or dawn. Everything gets really still and quiet. There is a moment of confusion. Then the night sounds start. The crickets and cicadas start to sing their evening songs, the owls start hooting. Then, just as quickly as it started, a few minutes later it's over and the songbirds begin to sing their morning songs as if a new day has begun.

When we experience these kinds of moments, these magical moments – when we look at the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls – we know we are looking at God's goodness, God's glory, God's majesty. That is what Moses is trying to receive. He desperately wants to know God in an intimate way, so he demands that it be so. He demands to see God's glory. I would be curious if any of you have ever been so audacious to take this approach with God and if it ever worked. Because for Moses, it did work.

In the chapters prior to the passage we just read, Moses comes down off the mountain after receiving the 10 Commandments and realizes that while he was gone, the people he left behind have failed. They got worried when he took so long, and they created their own god out of gold and began worshipping it instead. So, in today's passage, Moses is now back up on the mountain trying to make amends with God on behalf of the Israelites. We enter into the midst of an ongoing argument between Moses and God about the shape of God's relationship with the newly formed people of Israel.

Now, between these two stories there's a lot of killing and wrath of God and a plague because it's the Old Testament and the writers made sure to note God's anger over the Israelites' sin and that there has to be atonement. But after the atonement, God and Moses are now having a pretty heated conversation about their relationship going forward. Moses needs to know that God will not abandon them when they screw up again and Moses gets a little brave and shows that he's not afraid to use God's own words against God.

Eugene Peterson's translation *The Message* catches the tone of the exchange well. He translates Moses saying, "Look, you tell me, 'Lead this people,' but you don't let me know whom you're going to send with me. You tell me, 'I know you well and you are special to me.' If

I am so special to you, let me in on your plans. That way, I will continue being special to you. Don't forget, this is *your* people, your responsibility."

The fact that God chooses to abide with human beings is an astonishing thing. That God chooses to be in relationship with humans means that God makes Godself vulnerable to the pain that ensues when that relationship is betrayed. But it also means that authentic communication is made possible, and Moses is the model for us of that authentic divine-human communication. That is, Moses models prayer for us, prayer that is not afraid to hold God to God's promises, prayer that is not afraid to appeal to God's love for God's people, even over and against God's holiness. Moses, through this bold prayer, succeeds in securing God's promise that God will indeed abide with the Israelites throughout their long wilderness wandering.

Today's Isaiah passage also highlights this same need. Throughout this section of what is sometimes called the second book of Isaiah, the prophet is trying to give the exiles hope that all of God's divine power is dedicated to their restoration and renewal. They are feeling hopeless, like God has abandoned them in their long exile, not knowing when they will be done with their suffering. But the prophet tells them that their God is a God who is so amazing that God can bring about both light and darkness, prosperity and disaster. Their God is a God of mystery and secrecy, one of solar eclipses and majestic mountains. But even a God who is so splendid as ours doesn't stay hidden from us. According to the prophet, God summons us by name and goes before us to make our path clear.

Much like the people seeking Isaiah's words of comfort, we, too, live in anxious times. Recent events have left many of us holding our breath when we turn to the news, anticipating the next disaster. So, it's even more important to remind ourselves that we are a people of hope, and that God did not abandon the exiles of Judah and does not abandon us either. Our ancient faith bears witness to the power of God to redeem and restore sometimes in unexpected ways. We have received this faith and are called to live into it just as the writer of Isaiah called the exiles to live into it. To do so requires us to be a people always looking for the signs of God's work in the world. It requires us to be a people of hope.

Sometimes when we feel lost and anxious, we feel that the presence of God has been withdrawn. It can feel impossible to be people of hope. The structure of faith remains, but it feels like an uninhabited structure. When this happens, we try to fill the void in whatever ways possible – maybe by buying things we don't need or browsing through travel magazines planning our next big escape. This void reminds us when we are in a dilemma or a crisis, we don't always see what God is doing and we, too, can get impatient and turn our backs on God.

Walter Brueggemann suggests that the primary condition for reentering into relationship with God and experiencing God's presence is the "stripping of ornaments." He says, "We are blinded by "commodity fetishes" and by our assignment of status to ornaments and the material world. Religious vision is found in unfettered simplicity."

Unfettered simplicity... we worship a creating God of incredible majesty and splendor, but that's not what God asks of us. Moses knew that the only basis for rebuilding the broken covenant relationship between God and people rests on who God is. The people's hope does not rest on who the people are or what the people do. All that God desires from us is an authentic, vulnerable relationship. The rest is up to God. Moses was able to get God to give in to almost all his desires simply by holding God accountable and telling God exactly how he feels.

God wants our complicated, messy, erratic, emotional selves. And it doesn't have to be difficult. Unfettered simplicity can be enough. Sitting in silence. Taking a deep breath. Listening to music. Singing. Noticing a cloud formation or the changing of the colors of fall leaves. Thanking God for another day of unfettered simplicity.

Moses was privileged to see something no other human has seen about God. Yet even Moses will not see or know all there is to know about God. This is an amazing and unprecedented encounter between a human and God. But a part of God's ways, glory, and goodness will remain unknown, unseen. Dimensions of God's ways in the world will remain mysterious, elusive, and incomprehensible. What we do know of God's supreme love and mercy, however, is sufficient for the journey to continue.

There is a wonderful Elizabeth Barret Browning poem that I think about often because it is so striking to me. It says:

*"Earth is crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only the one who sees
Takes off their shoes –
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries."*

The invitation today is to find the time to take off your shoes and let God know the true desires of your heart. It doesn't have to be eloquent or even kind. It just has to be authentic. Don't forget to look around at the wonder and majesty of our creating God and give thanks. Give thanks that God continues to be in relationship with us when we fail. Give thanks that God's grace is truly enough. Give thanks that God goes before us to make our paths clear and to give us rest. Give thanks for rituals and sacraments and that the simple is always holy. And give thanks that because of all of this, we can be a people of hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.