

Exodus 33

Chapter 33 begins where the previous chapter left off, with God commanding the people to begin their journey once again to the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This time the command comes with some good news and some bad news. The good news is that God will drive out all the people who inhabit the land. The bad news is that God will no longer accompany the people on the journey. God will not go with them because God is ticked off at the Hebrews and may destroy them. This news comes as such a shock to the Hebrews that they not only mourn God's choice, but they obey Moses/God's command to strip off all their ornaments. We might wonder at this point if the action of stripping the ornaments was necessary not only because some of the ornaments had been melted to form the golden calf, but because they were one of the last connections the people had with Egypt (remembering that the ornaments were gifts from the Egyptian women). In some ways this stripping of the ornaments is a stripping of the old life.

The question that now confronts the people is, "Will God be available at all?" The answer to this question is yes, God will be available, but outside, rather than inside, the camp. God will make God's presence known not in the beautiful Tabernacle, but in the Tent of Meeting. The tent of meeting quickly becomes a portable Mt. Horeb/Sinai. Only Moses (and perhaps Joshua) is allowed to approach God at the tent/mountain. There the cloud of God's presence descends on the tent and the people remain at a safe distance (not wanting God to destroy them) and worship. Moses, on the other hand, enters an intimate friendship with God, where they can both speak frankly.

Though we are not sure what was discussed between these friends, it is evident that Moses is not pleased with this new arrangement. So, Moses bargains. Moses begins by pointing out that while God knows Moses, Moses does not really know God; especially the "ways" of God, meaning what God wants for Moses and the people. Therefore, Moses wants more insight into God and God's ways. God ignores this request and simply reminds Moses that God will be with Moses, so Moses is not to worry about knowing God's ways or about what will happen to the people. Moses is undeterred. He feels for these people. His retort to God is that unless YHWH is willing to "go with" Moses and the people, then Moses and the people will be no different than anyone other group of people. We can assume Moses' argument makes sense, and so YHWH gives in and promises to do as Moses requests.

Though many of us might have been satisfied at this point, Moses is not. He continues to press his luck and his relationship with God. And Moses does so by asking to see God's glory...God's very presence. This request is only partially granted. God will show Moses only a glimpse of God's self or glory. Just as in the garden where Adam and Eve, as limited human beings, are overwhelmed by the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil; God knows that Moses cannot "know" God's ways/glory fully either. Moses would be overwhelmed and die as well. Even so, Moses receives a bit of insight. God is a God who can and will show mercy and compassion, though God will not reveal the why and the wherefore of such grace. The story ends with Moses being promised only a glimpse of God's glory.

Reflection: Human beings are filled with curiosity. We want to know the answer to questions such as how? and why? We want to know what makes others do what they do. This curiosity often extends to God. God, why is there suffering? God, why is there evil? God, what do you want me to do and how do you want me to do it? Unfortunately, God is often silent, allowing us to try and make sense of the world and our choices in it on our own. However, we have been given a gift that the Hebrews did not receive. We have been given the gift of seeing God, in and through Jesus. In this way, we can more fully discover who God is and what God desires of us. Though the answers to our questions are not always clear, we may be able to see more of God through Christ, than Moses could even speaking with God face to face.

Questions:

1. Have you ever had to make a break with your past? Why did you and how did it change you?
2. Have there ever been times when it seemed as if God was playing favorites? How did you deal with those moments?
3. How do you go about trying to know God's ways better?