

“God’s Backside”  
Exodus 33: 12-23

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For those of us who take a smartphone with us wherever we go, we are used to having questions pop into our minds and then having the means to answer them. When I hear a song on the radio that I like and I wonder who sings it, all I have to do is Google a few of the lyrics. When I wonder how I'm going to find the new restaurant I want to eat at, I open up Google maps and it gives me directions. When I need to know whether to wear short sleeves or long sleeves, bring an umbrella or leave it at home, before I even look out the window I remind myself, “There's an app for that!” and pull out my phone.

With technology, we suddenly have answers to more questions, and more quickly, than we have ever had. As a kid I used to write down lists of things I wanted to know and then had to wait until we took a family trip to the library before I could look them up in an encyclopedia. Sometimes I would wait weeks to get to the library to find out what I wanted to know and after all the waiting, they wouldn't even have the right answer. But now we do! Google knows practically everything....Practically everything, but not everything.

There are still questions I have that I would like the answer to, but Google and other technology and even encyclopedias have not been helpful. Recently I asked Siri, the lady living in my phone, what the meaning of life was. She replied: 42. I asked Siri how I could achieve balance. She recommended that I listen to a Van Halen album called Balance. I did. I felt more rock and roll but I didn't feel anymore balanced. Finally, still optimistic that I would find the answers I was looking for, I asked Siri if I would always be as happy as I am right now. She said, “That's an interesting question, Liz.” It seems there are just some questions that we will never have a concrete absolute answer for.

Even with a world of information available to us at our fingertips, there are some questions that cannot be answered quickly and neatly. There are some questions that, depending on who asked them,

would have totally different answers. Some questions might have different answers for the same person depending on the day or the week or the decade. There are some that have answers so abstract and so complex that we will never have a satisfactory answer for them.

This is all to say that I can relate to Moses when he is talking to God and he asks God, “Show me your glory, I pray.” Show me your glory is code for What do you look like? I want to see your face. Moses feels close to God, wants God near him, and especially wants to fully understand God. Moses thinks if he can just see the Glory of God in person—face to face—that all will be revealed. Moses might have even been thinking, if I can see the glory of God for myself, I will have all of my eternal nagging questions answered.

But even though God has given Moses quite a lot, and even though God has journeyed with Moses and the Israelites for a long time, God says no. God lets Moses down gently. “You can't see my face. No one can see my face and live. It's not you, it's me.”

God knows how important this is to Moses so God continues, “I'll tell you what. If you hide over there behind that rock and cover your eyes, I'll go by you. When I'm gone, I'll uncover your face and you will see my backside. It's not my face, but it is still a part of me. You'll see the place I just was. That is the best I can do.”

I can imagine that Moses would have been frustrated knowing he would never really see God's face. Heck, even I'm frustrated knowing that there is no chance we can fully understand or comprehend what our Creator looks like.

What I take from Moses encounter with God—or the haziness of his encounter—is that maybe there is something more important in our lives than clarity. Maybe there is something more powerful than knowing for certain. Maybe there is a reason we don't always have the answers we are looking for.

I think the reason Moses does not see God's face and why thousands of year's later we still are still seeking answers to questions that have no answers can be summed up in one word: wonder.

Wonder is the ability to fill in the blanks when we are faced with uncertainty. Wonder is the way we draw on our experiences, our feelings, our history, and our stories to create an answer even knowing

that answer may not be absolute or may not be able to be verified. Wonder is the ability to sit in the uncertainty with a combination of curiosity and amazement. When we don't have the answers, wonder is the ability to marvel at all the answers we do have. Most of all, wonder is the ability to imagine, and imagination is a powerful tool. It is one of the most powerful tools that humans possess.

I think that when God created such a vast variety of animals and creatures on this planet, God did so for a reason. I think every species has something that sets it apart from the rest. Birds have wings that allow them to soar over our planet, giving them a perspective that is uniquely theirs. Fish have fins that allow them to explore depths unknown by any other living creature. Worms are able to wiggle into the dirt and know more about the different layers and kinds of earth than anyone else.

And humans? We were given imagination. I can't be 100 percent sure—maybe cows daydream in fields and maybe my cat really is plotting my demise—but I am as certain as I can be that imagination is what most fully sets us apart from all of the other creatures. Other animals are smart. Other animals show love and compassion. Other animals walk on two feet. But we have the power of imagination. I believe that the ability to imagine was God's gift to humanity. It has allowed us to go from clans to civilizations and from mud huts to brick houses. It allows us to transform the resources in our world into new innovations. Imagination is the common link between science and engineering and art and music and literature and medicine and economics and law.

Imagination and wonder gives us the ability to perceive things even when we can't fully see them. Imagination and wonder takes us deeper into knowing—it keeps us unsettled and intrigued when we are faced with a question that does not yet have an answer. Imagination isn't about making things up out of no where—it is about making connections where there previously were none.

When God walked by Moses, Moses didn't really see God, but he felt God. Moses may not have seen God's face, but Moses felt a vision of who and what God was. All five senses—sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste—were enacted to help create a vision of a God that was loyal and loving and steadfast and powerful. Because of his ability to use his imagination and connect all his past moments with God and everything he knew about God--without fully seeing God, Moses was able to fully

experience God. God walked close by Moses, and that triggered his senses and his memory and his knowledge and his sense of wonder so that he could better understand who and what God was, even without really seeing God.

What a tremendous gift that Moses was given! What a wonderful gift that we have all been given. The gift of wonder. The gift of awe. The gift of creating meaning. The gift of being able to experience God even when we can't fully comprehend the immensity and greatness of God....

The question I think we most often ask each other at South Church is “Where have you seen God?” We ask this so often it could be our mantra! We ask each other this on retreats, on mission trips, in Bible studies and over meals. “Where have you seen God?” After hearing the story of Moses not-quite seeing God, I think of this question in a different way. It doesn't fully capture what we mean when we ask it. What we are really asking is “How close has God come to you and what can you compare that to? What sparked that feeling that makes you feel like God has just walked by you? What images come to mind when you feel God's presence brush past you?”

Asking “Where have you seen God?” is a fairly concrete question. I know it is hard for some people to answer because we think, “Well, if she saw God over there, and I didn't, does that mean I am blind? Or not faithful enough?”

But it's not meant to be a concrete question with one answer. It is not meant to be something that Google could answer for you. It is meant to spark your sense of wonder. It is meant to create deeper meaning in your life, to name the moments when you connect your professed belief about God with an experience in you have had. So maybe that is when you encounter serenity and peace. Maybe it is when your whole body overflows with joy and laughter. Maybe it is when you feel loved completely by a friend or neighbor. Or filled with compassion for another. Or witness to a powerful act of justice. These moments are God's backside, walking past you, alerting your senses and bringing you to a state of wonder. Not a state of knowing for certain or of knowing without a doubt, but a state of wonder. A state of imagination of what God could be doing in your life. A state of awe that even though we haven't seen the face of God, God is right there. God is right here. Uncovering our eyes. Willing us to

see. Willing us to question. Willing us to wonder.