

Sermon | The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
Exodus 33:12-23, Matthew 22:15-22 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusunur | Oct 22, 2023

In the Exodus story, Moses and the Israelites, seek God's appearance in the natural world. And God does show up in the fire of the burning bush, in the pillar of cloud, in the thunder and the storm.

The immanence or nearness of God was essential to them. It was essential for Moses and the Israelites to know that God was with them and had not abandoned them. While camped in the wilderness around this mountain called Sinai, the community needed confirmation that God, the LORD, who they knew brought out of Egypt, out of Pharaoh's oppression, was still with them. They were afraid to journey on without the knowledge that God was with them. Moses tells God: "If your presence will not go [with us], do not carry us up from here." He wanted to be sure that God's favor was upon him and the people. And therefore, he asks God, "Show me your glory, I pray." Moses is saying, I want a confirmation in the here and now. A confirmation which I can see, and hear, and experience. A confirmation to know that you are with us.

And God responds: "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'... But... you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live... See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

To modern readers, this passage seems fantastical. God having a face, but a face one cannot see and live. God having a hand, with which he would cover Moses to protect him for destruction. God having a back, which Moses is allowed to see, and which indirectly allows Moses to see God's glory.

But all this is fantastical only because we live in a world and time where we deem God imagined in human form as outdated. We still allow such imagination of non-human entities in human form in our time, but not so much in religious contexts. For instance, in animation, animals or creatures of our imagination, like Winnie the Pooh or Simba, end up behaving like humans, sometimes dressing up like humans, speaking like humans, and experiencing human desires and conflicts.

Moses and the Israelites likely shared with the people of their region and time a worldview where they expected concrete divine appearance, preferably a divine appearance with human like features. It was essential for them to know God as one who was accessible. One who was near to them in the natural world. One who was intimate with his people. God tells Moses, I know you by name, indicating that this a very personal relationship.

While holding on to this intimacy, the Exodus narrative reminds the reader that yes God is close, but God is not limited to this world. God cannot be wholly experienced through our senses. One cannot see the face of God and live. God's glory is infinite and transcendental.

God as near and God as beyond. We live in the merger of these two worlds. There is no easy favoring of one over the other. May we not abandon an intimacy that God desires with us, in favor of a God who is wholly other. But in the same way, may we also not domesticate God to our finite perceptions of this world and forget that God's glory and ways are beyond us.

Unfortunately, there is no neat way to know the exact extent of how God shows up in God's nearness and God's otherness. And so, we live in these two worlds of finding God close to us, knowing God's love for us intimately, but also finding peace in the otherness of God, and worshipping in humility this God who is beyond.

But these are not the only two worlds we straddle. The Gospel today, talks about another set of worlds which we as Christians are required to navigate. One is the world of the emperor, the earthly ruler, the governing power that determines the structure of our daily lives. And then there is another world, the world of the reign of God. A sovereignty that extends over all our lives and over all creation. A God whose expectations can put us in conflict with emperor's world.

The first century Jewish disciples in Matthew's Gospel despised the Roman rule of Israel. For centuries they had constantly been under the rule of one empire or the other. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and now the Romans. Many of the followers of Jesus were hoping that Jesus would be the new emperor who would deliver them from this constant subjugation to other empires. They also despised those among them who partook in the Roman regime and helped the Roman empire collect taxes. These taxes were often oppressive for the poor.

Some of the members of those who partook in this Roman governance come to Jesus to try and entrap Jesus with a question. They start with a lot of flattery about how Jesus is sincere, teaches the truth, shows no partiality. The purpose of the flattery is likely to energize Jesus to make a bold statement without any fear of consequences. So, they ask: "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

The reason they believe this question will trap Jesus, is because if Jesus says no, it is not right to pay taxes, then Jesus is openly courting treason charges from the Roman Empire. That would be a good way to do away Jesus. And if Jesus answers yes, it is just to give taxes to the emperor, he would be completely upsetting his followers for whom the taxes constantly reminded them of their subjugation.

These are the two worlds with their demands on us. Jesus says: "Show me the coin used for the tax." To those that came to Jesus asking the trick question, Jesus says, if in the worldly order, things belong to the emperor, then give to the emperor what belongs to him. But

likewise, if in the created order things belong to God, then give to God what is God's. Obviously, the created order surpasses human empires. Jesus is raising the stake higher for those asking him the question. To whom does your ultimate loyalty belong. Jesus has subsumed the specific question of tax into a principled decision that one must make.

But just as there were no neat answers to the extent of God's presence in nearness and otherness of the worlds we navigate, here too Jesus does not provide us with concrete answers that are applicable in every situation. What does giving God what belongs to God mean? Could it sometimes mean paying the tax and at other times not paying the tax? The specifics will be a constant negotiation. But each time we go back to the principle that ultimate obligations are to God and his reign of justice and righteousness.

We straddle these multiple worlds. As we journey through these overlapping worlds we hold on to Jesus. Jesus who was near to us in incarnation but also belongs to the otherness of the triune being. We hold on to Jesus who inaugurated the reign of God on earth but who also has important implications to the earthly political order. May God help us in this journey of life to hold on to our savior and Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.