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Lent 1 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Seeing God from Behind”

Text: Exodus 33:12-23; John 9:1-7

Show me! Moses said. Show me, Lord, so I will know you will be with us. So I can be sure you will be with us. *Show me your ways*, Moses said. *Show me . . . your glory!*

One has to wonder why Moses was so unsure . . . and so demanding. After all, what had God done to make Moses doubt Him?

First, God had called Moses into His service from a burning bush, and had revealed His name to him there. He was, if you want to think of it this way, on a first name basis with Moses!

Then, when God sent Moses down into Egypt to rescue His people, He kept His promise to Moses and was with him in Egypt, performing great signs and wonders in bringing the people of Israel out in the Exodus. *And then* protecting them from the pursuing Egyptian army. *And then* providing water and manna to eat and drink in the wilderness.

And just now, Moses had spent 40 days and 40 nights with God on Mt. Sinai. One-on-one, face-to-face, receiving the Law and the instructions for the building and worship of the Tabernacle.

What had God not done that would call His faithfulness into doubt? What made Moses so uncertain and unsure that God would be with them now?

Well, it's not what *God* had done . . . it's what the *people* had done. It was the golden calf. When the people replaced God's Divine Service with their own bovine service. Idolatry 101. And faced with this spectre of sin and rebellion, Moses wondered. Moses doubted. Moses wavered. Because of this, will God *still* be with us? Will He still be faithful to such faithless people?

So *show me!* Moses said. Show me! Prove it! Convince me! I *need* to know.

It is a demand that sounds very much like us today, does it not? And we want to know too! For we are sinful, and live amongst a sinful people and a sinful world. So **show me, God**, that you are with me and love me. Show me! Prove it! Convince me! *I need to know*. Show me by answering my prayer. Show me by healing me. Show me by making things go my way. Show me by making me healthy, wealthy, and wise. I know what you have said, but . . . show me! *Show me your ways! Show me your glory!*

But God wouldn't do it for Moses, and He won't do it for us.

Instead, God does this strange thing of letting Moses see Him from behind. Now, a great deal of ink has been spilled across the centuries trying to determine what exactly it was that Moses saw there – what it means to see God's "back." But one thing's for sure – *it's not what Moses wanted*. It wasn't the fool-proof, fail-safe, rock-solid, no more doubts and fears assurance that Moses asked for! Because, Moses, your assurance will never be in what you can **see**, in God's *visible* glory – but in His **promise**, in His *hidden* glory.

For, in fact, Moses had *already* seen God's glory – in the burning bush, in His mighty and miraculous acts, in His booming voice on Mt. Sinai – and *still* He doubted. Another glimpse of God's glory wasn't gonna do it for Moses! Oh, maybe it would for a short time . . . until sin entered the picture again. Until sin would again make Moses unsure.

And for us too. Glory will never do it. For maybe we see God's glory in the greatness and majesty of creation, or in some great event of deliverance and rescue in our lives, or in how our lives are improving. OK. But what then happens, when sin enters the picture for us? What happens to our faith when the glory of creation turns violent in hurricanes and floods and tsunamis? What happens if we are not delivered from a tragedy in our lives? What happens when our lives do not improve, but struggles and suffering descend on us instead? And when *my sin* again rears its ugly head! When *I* fall into idolatry, selfishness, and other great shame and vice. . . . How then can I know if God is still with me? That God still loves me?

How can I be sure?

You see, this *theology of glory*, this founding your faith on knowing, on seeing, on proof, will always leave you, in the end, empty-handed. Grasping for answers. Groping for security. Searching for assurance with an appetite that can never be satisfied.

But – for Moses and for us – there is a “side” of God that *can* be seen. That side that He wants us to see. Not the side of glory and greatness, power and majesty – but His *back* side . . . the *opposite* side . . . the side of His humility, grace, service, and love. The side that He showed Moses, to assure him that the sin of Israel would not cause Him to disown them and leave them, but that He would have mercy on them and forgive them. It is the side of God we see on the cross.

For as the apostle John wrote: “No one has ever seen God; the only-begotten God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.” (John 1:18) And as St. Paul would write: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ – a great and glorious thing to be sure! – has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Cor 4:6)

And so the answer to our “Show Me’s,” the side of God that God wants us to see, is Jesus. *And it is the cross where Jesus shows us the hidden glory of God.* For the cross is where we see, most surely and truly:

God’s love, in coming to be with us in our flesh;

God’s mercy, in not rejecting us, but coming to die, for us, in our stead;

God’s faithfulness, in keeping His promise to save us;

God’s steadfastness, in that He would let nothing stop Him; and

God’s forgiveness, that because our sins are upon Jesus on the cross, they are no longer on us.

And what greater thing could we see than that? Miracles leave us perplexed and the naked power and glory of God leaves us in awe – but it is the cross that leaves us assured and secure. Assured and secure that God *does* not and *has* not left us in our sin, but has come to us to bear our sin and be our Saviour.

And so it is only in the light of Christ and His cross that we see the glory of God.

As like the man born blind, we are washed in His water and given the eyes of faith to see. To see God on the cross for me. Suffering for me and dying for me, that He might also rise for me. That I may be His own. That I can be sure, with an assurance *greater* that what I can see - with the assurance of faith. The assurance that my sins are forgiven. The assurance that my God is not only *with* me, but *for* me.

Show me your ways! Show me your glory! Moses asked, and we ask. And God has. Look at the cross, and see!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.