



**Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Phillip A. Jackson Sermon Transcript**

A Glimpse of the Mystery of God

"Some texts are so rich with the mystery and presence of God that even just to read or hear them brings us into their mysterious and ineffable meaning." The Rev. Phil Jackson, Priest-in-charge and Vicar, shares why Exodus 33:12-23 is one of his favorite scriptures. "Only a glimpse of the divine reality is possible. We like to think we possess, own, see, participate in the totality of God, but we do not. This is a mystery we must acknowledge and embrace." Watch the sermon.

Sermon Transcript:

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated, everyone.

Good morning to you and good morning to everyone watching us online. It's good to have you. It's good to be with you and to feel you, even though you are not present here with us, we feel your presence with us. It is good to have everyone here alongside. The Gospel lesson that I just read, would of course be a perfect segue into preaching something political given these days. But I'm going to forego that because today we have one of my favorite texts in all of scripture in the Old Testament or in the Hebrew scriptures from Exodus 33. I'm going to start by telling you where I want to end up or at least what I'm positing. Because what I'm about to say to you, I cannot prove, at least on this side of the veil. Maybe on the other side of the veil, I will be shown to be right. But right now I have no hard data to prove what I'm about to say, but it's a strong intuition I have and one that I will share with you. It's this: There are some texts in scripture that when we read them and hear them, they are so rich with the ineffability and the majesty of God and the mystery of God, that when we read or hear them, we in fact come near to them and participate in their meaning and in their depth. "What?" You say. "Yes," I say that.

There are some texts in the scriptures that are so rich with the mystery and presence of God that even just to read them or to hear them, brings us into those mysterious and ineffable meanings. Exodus 33, where are we? This takes place almost immediately after the golden calf incident. You may recall the golden calf incident. Moses goes up the mountain to get the tablets. He's gone. The Israelites ask Aaron to fashion an idol, a bull, an idol out of gold for them, which does not please God in the least bit. As a matter of fact, it so displeases God that he threatens his absence. He says, "You all are on your own. I will not be with you." Meanwhile, Moses, who has then set up what he calls his tent of meeting outside of the camp where he goes to meet with God. It says, in the section immediately before where we began at Chapter 33, Verse 12 and Verse 11, it says that Moses would go out to the tent of meeting. He'd go inside, a pillar of cloud would come down and envelop it, and it says that he and God would converse. Listen to the language. It says, "Thus, the Lord used to speak to Moses face-to-face." It says, as one speaks to a friend. Just picture that for just a second in your mind's eye.

God and Moses speaking to one another in a tent of meeting. What a touching and yet profoundly significant little detail that their relationship is such. It is so close, it is so personal that they speak to one another as friend to friend, picture speaking to one of your friends. You shooting it, and what's going on? How was your day? What'd you do? Moses and God have that relationship. That establishes where our text begins. It establishes the nature of Moses' unique relationship with God. Then our text begins at Verse 12 to 23. Moses says to the Lord, "You've said to me, bring this people and now you're saying that you're not going to do it. You're going to make yourself absent from us." Moses says, "I have two requests. First, I want to know who's going to lead us?" By that he means, are

you going to still be with us? Are you going to lead us? Because, if you don't lead us, there is no way this whole project is going to work. Are you going to lead us? Then he has a second request. The second request we'll come to in just a minute. Let's stay with the first one. Moses says, "You've said to me, I know you by name and I have found favor in your sight." This Hebrew idiom, I know you by name, which is a throwaway in English, this "I know you by name," it actually has real rich Biblical significance, because it's applied to no one else in the Bible. About no one else does God say, "I know you by name." It connotes a close and exclusive relationship with God that Moses has. He says, "I know you by name." Then he says, "You have said, God, you have said also that I have found favor in your sight."

The only other person about whom God says that or the scripture says that in all of scripture is Noah. Moses, all that we know just by these two little hints. He's got this special relation. We know this already, but we know this. Now God answers this request, the first request, which is, will you still be with us? Will you still lead us? God says, "My presence will go with you and I will give you rest." That word presence could also be translated to glory. Depending on the context, could be different meanings, but God says, "My presence will go with you." Their relationship is such that God changes his mind in response to Moses' entreaty, changes his mind. He says, "I'll go with you. My presence will go with you." Now Moses then has a second request. He says, "Show me your glory." "Show me your glory, I pray. Show me your ways so that I may know you. Show me who you are." Moses asks, ready? Imagine this. Moses asks God that he might be allowed, that he, Moses, might be allowed to comprehend the essential nature of God's personality. Well, "Show me your ways that I may know you. Show me your glory, I pray." It's quite a request.

At that moment, perhaps, only Moses in all of humanity, only Moses could make such a request because of the nature of their relationship. Moses, let's be clear, is taking their friendship to the limit on this one. He's taking it all the way. He says, "Show me who you are that I may know you." The glory or the presence of God that he wishes to see is the manifestation of God's essential nature. Who He is. How He behaves. What's He like? Moses says, "Show me that." The Lord says, "There are four things I will affirm," right here in the text. He says, "There are four things I will affirm." He says, one, "I will make all my goodness pass before you." Second, "I will proclaim before you the name of the Lord." Third, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious." Fourth, "I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." Those are the four affirmations. But then comes a no. God says, "But you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live." "But," God says, "Go up the mountain, and when you're up on the mountain, I will place you in a cleft in the rock. While you're in that cleft, I'll cover you." These are all obviously anthropomorphous. "I will cover you with my hand."

He says, "While my glory passes by, my hand will cover you while I go by. Then when I have passed by, I will take away my hand and you will see my back. But my face, you cannot see." Why? Because humans cannot see the face of God and live. It's too much for us to handle. To see the face of God is too much for us to handle. This is indeed what happens. Moses is covered, God passes by, His hand or cloud is moved aside and Moses sees God's back. What we learn from this is that only a glimpse of the divine reality is possible even for Moses. Only a glimpse of the divine reality. We like to think somehow that we possess, own, see, participate in the totality of God. We do not. This is a mystery that we must acknowledge and embrace. Matter of fact, most of us go through life, not even seeing the back of God. I like to say personally, sometimes I feel like I have never seen God nor His back, but sometimes I feel like I've heard the rustle of His garment under the door as He passes by. Even that sound, even that sight is enough to make you want it again, and again, and again. Moses' relationship is personal and direct, and yet it is unmediated by visions or dreams.

The relationship between the two of them is always plain and direct, straight-forward, and to the point. It is a relationship that is unique in scripture. Moses doesn't get to see the face of God. But then comes Jesus. When we look at Jesus' face, who do we see? God. When we hear Jesus' words, who do we hear? God. What I suggested earlier was that in this passage, which is so profound in its mystery, that is opening the window for us to a reality in which we also participate. We participate as Christians when we see the face of Jesus. We see that shadow going by, but we see it face on. It is the face of our Lord. It is the face of Jesus. Not only can we be like Moses in the tent, like friends, we can participate with Him as well in the life of God. Amen.