

## AWE-FULL

*12 Moses said to the LORD, 'See, you have said to me, "Bring up this people"; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, "I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight." 13 Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.' 14 He said, 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.' 15 And he said to him, 'If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. 16 For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.' 17 The LORD said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.' 18 Moses said, 'Show me your glory, I pray.' 19 And he said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The LORD"; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. 20 But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.' 21 And the LORD continued, 'See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; 22 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; 23 then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.'*

(Exodus 33:12-23, NRSV)

Back in the latter half of the seventeenth century, Puritan minister Augustus Toplady wrote the following about Methodist founder, John Wesley: “I believe him [Wesley] to be the most rancorous hater of the gospel system that ever appeared in [England]...Wesley is guilty of satanic shamelessness...of uniting the sophistry of a Jesuit with the authority of a pope” (Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories*, p. 216). A Calvinist, Toplady was upset by some of John Wesley’s teachings and let him have it with both barrels. Ironically, in his fiery repudiation of Wesley, Toplady wrote a hymn entitled, “A Living and Dying Prayer for the Holiest Believer in the World” (Ibid.). He wrote it out of anger and malice. He even included swipes at Wesley’s beliefs in the hymn’s text. And yet today the hymn can be found in most Christian hymnals, even Methodist ones. We know it as “Rock of Ages.” “Rock of Ages, cleft for me. Let me hide myself in Thee,” we sing without ever realizing the motivation of the lyricist. The hymn has been a blessing to countless Christians through the years. What a perfect example of something good coming out of something bad.

Today’s scripture lesson about God hiding Moses in the cleft of a rock was part of the biblical inspiration for the hymn “Rock of Ages.” And this event, Moses personally witnessing the glory and presence of God, happened only because the Israelites made a terrible mistake. Here’s the story about how God brought something good out of something bad.

As you may recall from Chase’s sermon two weeks ago, one of the lowest points in Jewish history happened when the Israelites, in Moses’ absence, made a statue of a gold calf to worship. How could they forget their commitment to God and God’s commitment to them so quickly? It happened after God afflicted Egypt with plagues. It happened after God secured freedom for them. It happened after God parted the Red Sea to help them escape.

The Israelites experienced God's direct protection and intervention. And yet, not long after Moses hiked up Mt. Sinai to get the Ten Commandments, the Israelites melted their gold jewelry, built a statue of a calf and worshipped it.

When Moses came down the mountain holding the two tablets he could not contain his anger. Shattering the stone tablets on the ground, Moses let them have it. And so did God. Moses and God were both angry and hurt over the peoples' religious infidelity. They had broken the covenant with God and there would be a severe price to pay. Moses called forth any who were willing to take a stand for God and ordered them to draw their swords and kill all the men who participated in the worship of the idolatrous golden calf. Terror ensued and some 3,000 were killed.

While not the main point of today's sermon, this bloodshed must be addressed. Clearly Moses believed that God wanted this retribution. Thousands of years later those of us gathered in this sanctuary cannot imagine worshipping a God who would give such horrific orders. How can we interpret this text? I believe that Moses got it wrong. He ordered executions not on the basis of a divine mandate, but out of his own anger and sense of outrage. I do not doubt that Moses believed he was doing God's will. But him believing it and the reality of it being God's will can be two very different things. We know too well that even today some political and religious leaders act violently and promote killing in the name of God believing it to be God's will.

The God of Jesus would never order such action. The God of the New Testament is the same as the God of the Old Testament so either God mellowed through the years or those who interpreted God as violent and vengeful got it wrong. I believe the latter. As Gerd Ludemann states in the book, *The Unholy in Holy Scripture*, "At the heart of Jesus'

picture of God is not the figure of a vengeful, zealous God but one of a God who turns to men and women in mercy...Jesus' preaching is orientated on non-violence and on love of enemy, which mixes up the existing order and breaches the principle of retribution regardless of its effect" (pp. 128-129).

Back to our story. Following the executions, God okayed the departure of Moses and the people for the Promised Land...alone. While God would send an angel to accompany them, God wouldn't be making the trip. Why? Because God was still too angry with the people (33:3). Moses interceded and begged God to go with them, reminding God of all that the Israelites had endured. Eventually God conceded saying God's presence would go with them. Moses is still not 100% settled and entreated God to be more specific saying in effect, "Now God, you are really going with us and this proves that we are still the chosen people, right? Because if you don't go with us then we're just like everybody else and we're not special at all." Again God promised to do as Moses has asked.

Apparently Moses still felt a bit insecure because the divine promise wasn't enough. Moses wanted more. He wanted a sign. He wanted to see God with his own eyes. He wanted assurance, concrete assurance that God was with him, now and always. He said to God, "Show me your glory." While this may seem an unusual request, coming from Moses, it makes sense. I read between the lines Moses asking God to remind him of how he got into this business of leading the Israelites in the first place. It began decades ago when Moses encountered God in the burning bush. God revealed the divine name and gave Moses the mission of leading the Israelites out of Egyptian captivity. So following the golden calf incident, Moses needed some confidence building, some assurance, a reminder of God's holy presence.

Recently a couple in our church asked me to lead them in a renewal of their wedding vows. As couples reach milestones in their relationships, it can be meaningful to remember what brought them together in the first place. It can be meaningful to speak again the sacred vows and solemn promises to one another. For some people this renewal of vows may be more profound than the first time. Years ago when the two lovebirds were wide-eyed innocents unaware of the rigors of marriage the vows had not been tried and tested. But now, having lived “for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health” the vows are affirmed with eyes wide open. In essence the couple says, “Despite all the ups and downs we’ve been through, I remain forever committed to you and our marriage.”

I think after all the ups and downs that Moses had been through with the Israelites he was saying to God, “Let’s renew our vows. Let’s recommit ourselves to a shared future.” In asking to see God’s glory, Moses was asking God to help rekindle the fire of commitment that began at the burning bush.

God agreed to reveal the divine glory and name, with one provision, Moses would not see God’s face. There’s a strange line about no one being able to see God’s face and live. We’re not going to unpack this verse today; rather we’ll take it at face value (pun intended). To protect Moses, God hides him in the cleft of a rock, in a large crack. God then passes by and Moses is allowed to view God’s glory from behind.

What is Moses hoping to see when he asked to see God’s glory? As a theological term, “Glory is best defined as the outward shining of God’s inner-being...This is the Old Testament way of ascribing worthiness to Israel’s God, whose glory calls out human awe and worship” (*The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*, p. 394). Another word that describes God’s

presence is *shekinah*, a Hebrew word meaning “to dwell.” *Shekinah* is associated with a bright light and represents God’s immanence or divine presence. Moses witnessed God’s *shekinah*, the bright glory of God’s presence in today’s story. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul encountered God’s *shekinah* when he experienced the risen Christ on the road to Damascus as “a light from heaven, brighter than the sun” (Ibid. p. 968). A central image of the Holy Spirit is light or flame. The candles burning on our altar remind us of God’s presence.

I do not know anyone who claims to have experienced the *shekinah* presence of God. However, I have experienced intensely spiritual moments that I attribute to the presence of God.

It’s difficult to describe experiences like these. It’s like trying to explain color to someone who’s never seen it. How does one describe the color red? It’s very difficult. Carl Jung “used the term ‘numinous’ for the description of experiences that feel sacred, holy, or out of the ordinary (in the sense of a special feeling of ultimate meaning or reality)” (<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bos/bos209.htm>). Someone has written, “Spirituality characterizes individual relationship to the universe and does not necessarily require a formal structure, collective ritual, or mediation by a priest or other external authority figure” (Ibid.). Theologically God is often described as being immanent and transcendent. God’s immanence refers to God’s continual presence both with and within us, as well as God’s presence throughout the world. God’s transcendence refers to the fact that God is beyond us. God exists beyond the world, the universe, and time itself.

A few times in my life I have experienced God’s immanence or at least gained a spiritual insight accompanied by a sense of heightened joy. The few times I recall happened when I was outside alone in the wee hours of the

morning. Staring at a star filled sky, my mind filled with the wonder of God's creation and my place in it. My heart sang for joy at the beauty of it all and the belief that God was present then and always. I felt in awe of our eternal God. I felt a oneness with all creation, the singing birds, the gentle breeze, and even the twinkling stars. I've never met God in a blinding light or heard God's voice in any audible way. But I do believe I've felt God's nearness and experienced the nudging of the Spirit in my heart.

John Wesley, the minister under attack by the Puritans at the beginning of the sermon, had an experience of God. The year was 1738 and 34-year-old Wesley questioned his faith after a discouraging mission trip to America. He attended a worship service one evening in London that changed his life. He recalled it later saying, "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death" (<http://www.gbgn-umc.org/aldersgate-wheaton/aumcname.html>).

Many of us can probably better relate to Wesley's experience of a warm heart than to Moses' encounter with the blazing glory of God. Both are authentic and valid spiritual experiences. It is helpful to recall that both men experienced these moments following times of brokenness and discouragement. God can bring good out of bad and joy out of sadness. And sometimes even when we are in a vengeful mood, God can bring something out of us that will bless others. As Toplady wrote, "Rock of Ages cleft for me. Let me hide myself in Thee." AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only  
The Congregational Church of Manhasset (UCC)  
October 23, 2005

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

God, creator of the world and our creator, lead us all into ways of justice and peace that we may respect one another in freedom and truth. Strengthen all who suffer in body, mind, or spirit. May they know the power of your healing love. Comfort all who mourn this day. Fill their hearts with grace and peace. Loving God, source of all blessings, we praise you for all that is good in our lives and in the life of the world. Grant, O God, that we may serve others in your name, with your love in our hearts, your truth in our minds, and your strength in our wills; until, at the end of our journey, we know the joy of our homecoming and the welcome of your embrace; through Jesus Christ we pray.  
**AMEN.**

Parts of the prayer were adapted from the *Book of Common Worship*, pp. 118-119.