

SEEING THE FACE OF GOD
EXODUS 33: 12-33

October 19, 2008
University Church of Chicago
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

Suppose I began this sermon by standing here in front of you holding a .38-caliber revolver in my hand, and as I preached, I kept rolling the chambers of the gun, putting a bullet into one of the chambers and taking it out, cocking the gun and twirling it by the trigger card. Chances are that you would be somewhat distracted by my actions and pay even less attention to my words than you usually do.

Or, suppose I had my cell phone in my hand and kept stopping my sermon either to answer a call or to make a call. Again, you would be more than a little distracted and would probably think that I wasn't too interested in bringing God's Word or following my call to preach.

Every week the preacher stands in front of the congregation and preaches from the text, God's Word, the Bible, the lesson for the day. But the context in which the preacher preaches is important also, and the context of preaching cannot be ignored. Text and context go together, are simultaneous in their application and while the text precedes the context, the context in which the text is preached and heard cannot be ignored.

You and I are living in very, very perilous times. In the last eight years, five million people have fallen into poverty. The number of Americans without health insurance has grown by seven million, while average premiums have nearly doubled. The principal domestic achievement of the Bush Administration has been to shift the relative burden of taxation from the rich to the rest. For the top one per cent of us, the Bush tax cuts are worth, on average, about a thousand dollars a week; for the bottom fifth, about a dollar and a half.

It is conceivable—indeed, it is entirely possible—that the painful, yet necessary, efforts to rescue the credit markets will end up preventing the rescue of our health-care system, our environment, and our physical, educational and industrial infrastructure.

Whoever is elected President of the United States on November 4 will inherit two wars and the realities of limited resources, flagging popular will, and the dwindling possibilities of what can be achieved by American power.

Our late, great senator from Illinois, Paul Simon, wrote a number of insightful books. His last was entitled "Pandering," and it is one more of us should have read and every presidential candidate should not only read but take to heart. A willingness to pander and

even lie has come to define political campaigns and their televised advertisements. A contemptuous duplicity, a meanness pervades so much of what you and I have to endure in these last days of this campaign.

The comfort in numbers is that they all add up,” writes the wonderful Christian Thomas Lynch, that undertaker/poet/essayist from Milford, Michigan, in his book, *Bodies in Motion and At Rest*. “There is a balm in the known quantities, however finite. Any given year, 2.3 million Americans will die. Ten percent of pregnancies will be unintended. There’ll be 60 million common colds. These are numbers you can take to the bank. Give or take, 3.9 million babies will be born. It’s Biblical. They’ll get a little more or a little less of their 76 years of life expectancy. The boys will grow to just over 69 inches, the girls to just under 64. Of them, 25 percent will be cremated, 35 percent will be overweight, 52 percent will drink. Every year 2 million will get divorced, 4 million will get married and there’ll be 30,000 suicides. A few will win the lotto, a few will run for public office, a few will be struck by lightning. And any given day, par for the course, 6,300 of our fellow citizens will get breathless and outstretched and spoken of in the past tense”

But there’s another side to the farewell that we cannot joke about. Last Wednesday night Marilyn and I had dinner with one of my best friends from college days. He and his wife have remained close to us, and we have gone through many trials and triumphs together over 45 years. They spent two nights with us, and as is, I suppose, typical of friends our age, we compared surgery stories. Five years ago, my friend had major surgery, after which the doctors declared that all malignancy had been removed, no lymph nodes were affected and he could expect full recovery. Our prayers were answered.

Then, he went back to the doctor for a four-week checkup. And the doctor, who happens also to be a close friend, said, “We were wrong. The lab tests show that you have a probable life-span of two years.” So our loved ones have spent months in prayer and contemplation while telling only their sons and us about the prognosis. And yet, they believe—they have indeed had what they consider a revelation from God—that all will be well. They experienced a luminous moment at exactly the same time on an ordinary day on an ordinary street in Greenville, South Carolina.

But they know about farewells, about having to say goodbye. We know about farewells, everyone of us. We have had to say too many good-byes. We have stood at too many gravesides, gone to too many wakes, tried too many times to say the right thing in the face of death.

Today’s First Lesson, like so many others, cannot be fully appreciated without reference to its larger context. God is saying farewell to the Israelites and telling them that they will now have a new relationship to Yahweh. Yahweh has ordered the people to leave Sinai and to continue their journey to the Land of Promise (Ex. 33: 1-6). They will be protected

by an angel and will successfully make their way into “a land flowing with milk and honey.” But Yahweh will no longer accompany the people, for the simple reason that their sinfulness would result in their destruction. “You are a stiff-necked people; if but for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you” (v. 5).

But Moses, always the mediator, is not willing to permit Yahweh to withdraw from the presence of the people. Since Yahweh has promised to be the God of Israel and has further assured Moses that he is still regarded benevolently by Yahweh, there is no reason for Yahweh now to abandon the nation. Moses’ principle imperative statement, “Show me your ways” (v. 13), seems to mean something like, “Come clean with me on this one, Yahweh. Explain yourself.”

But Yahweh will not relent. The people will go on their way and they will find the Land of Promise. An angel will accompany them. God will not be with them, but the presence will continue.

Having successfully received from Yahweh the promise of a continuing presence in the life of the people, Moses now requests of Yahweh personal confirmation that Yahweh is who Yahweh has been represented to be and that Moses is indeed God’s agent. “Show me your face,” Moses demands.

“But,” God says, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live” (v. 21). But, Yahweh says in effect, I will make a deal with you: go hide in the cleft of that rock over there, “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” (22-23).

At this point Moses is a Methodist. One of the doctrines of John Wesley was what he called “assurance.” Not only do Christians experience salvation from God, but they are also offered assurance that they are chosen, anointed by God. One moves to the experience of having his or her heart “strangely warmed.” An assurance is given that we are “saved from the law of sin and death,” as Wesley characterized his own experience of May 24, 1738 in Aldersgate Street in London.

Among my literary heroes, William Faulkner ranks first among American writers. That gentle, misunderstood, very private genius was attending a dinner party in his hometown of Oxford, Mississippi one night when a polite man pulled a dining chair out for one of the women, who, talking with another guest, was unaware that he had done so. She fell to the floor, surprised and chagrined. Faulkner sat down on the floor with her. “The gesture—noble, tender, humane—was much in character,” Larry Levinger wrote about him. “He preferred to get down on the floor with the fallen. That’s where he found his muse.”

That is where God find us: on the floor, in the alleys, in the gutters as well as at the height of success and fortune. And God in Christ sits with us.

I plan to go to McCormick Days at McCormick Theological Seminary next week to hear a couple of lectures by Diana Butler-Bass and Brian McLaren. I remember being at Montreat Retreat Center in North Carolina several years ago, mecca to our friends, the Presbyterians. I was in a group of one thousand preachers, 782 of whom were Presbyterian with a scattering of other denominations with only 29 Methodists. You can imagine how that was: all the “in” jokes, the Presbyterian language, and truly awful hymns. As Walter Brueggeman said, “Black Methodists still sing lustily, White Methodists sing pretty well, but when you hear Presbyterians, you can’t tell what verse they’re on, and Episcopalians pay people to sing.”

But I learned one thing about being in somebody else’s gathering. You don’t join a family. You are adopted into a family, and it takes time for you to be accepted. It’s an important lesson for the church. We are part of Jesus’ family, and all of us are adopted children of God. That’s an image the Bible uses over and over again: adopted children. God chooses not according to our talents or merits or wisdom or money but according to grace. And God adopts the most unlikely people: Mother Sarah and Father Abraham, the Twelve composed of illiterate fishermen and IRS agents and anarchists with prostitutes and first-century feminists bankrolling the operation.

Because we are adopted into God’s family, two truths become paramount. First, since we’re all adopted, we must be those who adopt others. This is not an exclusive organization, this thing called the church. Nobody came in because we were so great and perfect, although the church like any other organization has a few people who think they’re better than others and have the secrets and will decide who gets adopted. Second, and this is the most important, since we are God’s children, we are in God’s hands and God will never let go of us. We are held always within God’s providential love.

We are, therefore, not frightened children left alone in the world. The church is not an orphan in the midst of alien forces. We have not concocted a religion from huddled rumors and popular superstitions. We are God’s people. And if you need to examine our credentials, here is truth’s pedigree: from God to Christ to the apostles to the church.

Marilyn and I were speculating the other day about what our grandchildren will remember with the most fondness. It set me to thinking about my two grandmothers, women in whom I put ultimate trust because I knew I was loved by them totally and unconditionally. My maternal grandmother lived on a rice farm south of DeWitt, Arkansas, and her back yard was haunted by a huge, vicious Tom Turkey. That turkey used to follow me around the farm, pecking at me, chasing me, bloodying me with its talons and beak. At the age of five I took a .22 caliber rifle out to kill it, but Nanny stopped me. She took me in her arms and held me tightly and said over and over again,

“Everything will be all right.” Her words still echo in my heart, and I believe them still.
“Everything will be all right.”

Like the people of Israel so long ago, like Moses himself, we want assurance. We want to see God’s face, but all we can see is God’s back. However, the promise remains: All is well. All is well. All will be well.