

DON'T GIVE UP ON GOD

10/18/20 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 24 (A): Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

Remember the "Footprints in the Sand" poem that was so popular a number of decades ago? It describes how the author is reviewing their personal journey with God. Suddenly, they notice that where there had always been two sets of footprints in the sand—theirs and God's—there was only one.

So, they say to God, "Lord, you said once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life, there was only one set of footprints."

And God replies, "there are only one set of footprints during those challenging times, because that's when I carried you."

Which is where we find the Israelites in this morning's reading from Exodus. They've been out in the wilderness for years, trying to faithfully follow Moses as he answered God's call to lead them out of slavery. But they're looking around saying, "Okay, God. You were supposed to be here with us. Where are you?"

In another generation, they'll realize this journey wasn't wasted. But, can you imagine waiting an entire generation for change to happen? So, right now, they seem like a whiny bunch of petulant children, demanding that God show up and take better care of them. In their defense, they've left behind all that is familiar—the public places where they gathered, the friends they used to visit, even the spaces in which they worshipped.

And they try to follow the new rules God has given them. But, let's face it, we all know it's much easier to slip into the old routines instead of establishing new ones—even if the practices might be healthier and better for us. So, when God says, "I know each of you by name," they respond, "And how is that supposed to help us? We've been denied our creature comforts and we're getting on each other's nerves!" Sound familiar?

What I love about this portion of Exodus is that God is doing two very important things. 1) God is claiming the particularities of each and every one of us: "I know each of you by name," and 2) God doesn't say, "Knock it off. Don't question me. This is for your own good!"

Instead, God negotiates with Moses to better help the Israelites understand that—even though they don't seem to be aware of God's presence—God's got them! The message Moses is instructed to take back to them is essentially: "Don't give up on God, because God won't give up on you!"

This sense that God's basically "left the building", during challenging times, is something people of deep faith have been exploring for millennia. In fact, the great mystics—including St. John, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich and countless others—all write about this—about longing for God and not feeling God's presence.

Many of those same writings propose that it is in that very yearning that we are drawn closer to God. We've all had comparable experiences with our loved ones; when we're with our loved ones all the time, we don't have the chance to miss them; we might even start to take them for granted. But, when they're away for an extended period of time, we begin to remember all the reasons they're so dear to us, and we can't wait for them to return.

If we intensify that feeling by adding to the scenario that, while our loved one is gone, we're also in the midst of a life crisis, we yearn for that person's company even more, and may even start to feel angry that they're not around to help out. One of our more contemporary mystics, Mother Theresa, wrote about her dark nights of the soul. Some people were shocked when she admitted her doubt and feeling of being removed from God.

But like other people of deep faith, this feeling didn't deter Mother Theresa at all. She understood that this sense of God's absence is simply part of the journey. Instead, she let her yearning deepen her faith. I'm guessing she would've given the same advice Moses gave the Israelites: "Don't give up on God, because God won't give up on you."

Another contemporary mystic points out that as we move through similar dark nights of the soul experiences, we develop more compassion for others, and will be better equipped to support someone else during their doubt-filled times. And aren't we in a time when doubt seems to be at an all-time high? We're weeks away from what promises to be a very tumultuous election; we're still trying to figure out how to balance COVID safety with the economy; and the impacts of climate change seem to be raging.

And, yet, God is here—among us and with us. The image on the cover of your bulletin today is reassuring to me. The cleft in the rock is not a tiny little crevice, but a huge space in the midst of a massive rock formation. That's what God promises us—that God's love, support, peace, mercy, grace, etc. is massive and unlimited. In that cleft, may your soul find comfort—even when you think God has abandoned you .

Don't give up on God, because God will never give up on you!

-AMEN

COLLECT OF THE DAY:

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations: Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Exodus 33:12-23

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.' 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." He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. 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."

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." Moses said, "Show me your

glory, I pray.” 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. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And the LORD continued, “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.”

Psalm 99

- 1 The LORD is King;
let the people tremble; *
he is enthroned upon the cherubim;
let the earth shake.
- 2 The LORD is great in Zion; *
he is high above all peoples.
- 3 Let them confess his Name, which is great and awesome; *
he is the Holy One.
- 4 "O mighty King, lover of justice,
you have established equity; *
you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob."
- 5 Proclaim the greatness of the LORD our God
and fall down before his footstool; *
he is the Holy One.
- 6 Moses and Aaron among his priests,
and Samuel among those who call upon his Name, *
they called upon the LORD, and he answered them.
- 7 He spoke to them out of the pillar of cloud; *
they kept his testimonies and the decree that he gave them.
- 8 O LORD our God, you answered them indeed; *
you were a God who forgave them,
yet punished them for their evil deeds.
- 9 Proclaim the greatness of the LORD our God
and worship him upon his holy hill; *
for the LORD our God is the Holy One.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

2 We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.