

At the Threshold

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Texts: Exodus 33: 12-13, 17-23

Beloved, I want and need to be gentle today. For you, for me, for the wider community and world. In addition to the prayer I just prayed aloud, I prayed one that I almost always pray silently before I preach. God, help me to do no harm. A part of me is longing for quiet, for a space to think, feel, and be, and be held with you by God whose love and hope are always greater. No more talking at. No more statements. No did you read this or that about the crisis? No more words on top of words when they can so easily cause pain, however unintended.

I was reminded this week of the ASL sign for grief [show sign] It's two hands over one's heart, wrenching, as if wringing a towel or a fabric full of tears. And, too, the ASL sign for *grace*, [show sign] which I imagine as a gentle, soothing shower, and a blanket or covering, some protection. Perhaps that's sermon enough, and if you like me are reaching something of a threshold these past two weeks, you have my full permission to tune out what follows, close your eyes, and just be still for a time.

And yet our lectionary – strange thing that it is, a handful of the prescribed readings over a three-year cycle from which preachers can choose their texts – sometimes has a way of meeting us right where we are, with a curious, timely offering of God's word for our world-weary souls. So, I invite us to enter into our scripture together and see what emerges.

First, a brief story that captures for me some of why this week has felt so impossible. A local rabbi colleague who has been in Israel since before the war broke out two weeks ago shared with a small group of us this week a short video clip he had taken from a funeral he attended for one who had been killed in the Hamas attacks. The only reason he was able to film was because an air raid siren went off and interrupted the ritual. The footage he shared was of an outdoor setting wherein the people gathered appeared remarkably calm and quiet. It was clear they had been through this before. In the video, they were silently crouching down, many with heads covered or arms tenderly draped over the heads of loved ones, seemingly just waiting for the siren to stop. He then pointed the camera upwards to a cloudy sky, and after about 30 seconds, with the siren still blaring, one could hear in the distance several bombs explode, presumably ones that were deterred by Israel's so-called "Iron Dome" defense system. The video clip ended. My colleague assured us that the air raid siren soon after ended, that no one there was hurt, the funeral proceeded. He also played us a clip of a wedding that went on last week if only to remind us that there were moments of joy even amidst the sorrow. Still, watching that first clip though was one of several times this week when I found myself weeping, and in part because I knew such mourning rituals were surely being interrupted on both sides of the conflict. I know you have stories too, of what you encountered this week that tore at your heart. And yet in that clip, I saw something else I needed to see. A resource.

Yes, there was this terribly tragic reality of people struggling to find a moment to honor their dead, to grieve amidst ongoing violence and bloodshed happening in Israel and Gaza, and let's not forget this is happening in Ukraine and Russia and Haiti, too. But I also saw in that clip a metaphor for what I know I

and many others are experiencing, however less acutely. First, I saw how in a parallel way our own experiences of grief and heartache are also continually being interrupted by an incoming barrage, albeit of an entirely different sort. I'm talking here about the breaking news, the compounding global tragedies, the competing narratives, the closer-to-home hate-filled activities, and even the day-to-day demands of our own lives, many of which seem to require *some* kind of response at a time when we are already overwhelmed! Are you with me? And yet I also saw there and wondered: how in the midst of our need to pause long enough to grieve and feel and resource ourselves can we find some semblance of protection, some tender, gentle hand on our head or heart, some sheltering arm across our shoulder or our front, to prevent further harm, however unintended. This theme of protection - not defense, mind you - but protection - spiritual and emotional, divine and communal, has been alive for me this week, and it's part of why I find our text so timely. Let's turn there now.

It seems Moses had hit his limits one day. Just hear how he starts his sentence to God "*See!*" he says to God" We know something's off or up about his energy already! "*See!*" he says. 'See - you've asked me to do this thing - to bring your people through. I'm already up to here by the way. So, God, you tell me, who's coming with me? And if it's you, God, and it better be you, I want and need to see you first cause I haven't actually seen you yet, and this...this is a lot! It's too much! We need to remember here that Moses and God already know each other pretty well by this time in the story. I mean they've been through the whole burning bush thing together, through the parting of the Red Sea, they've been from slavery to freedom, and most recently through that ordeal with the Golden Calf. In turn, the text tells us that God knew Moses, too. God knew him by name. Moses had already found favor in God's sight. What's more, in the passage just before the one I read, the Bible tells us that God and Moses could talk to each other as friends talk. Not, bad right? A strong foundation! Given all of the times that God had revealed Godself to Moses, given all those theophanies (as such divine-human encounters are called) we may be surprised Moses is asking for more here, but sure 'nough he does! He says, "God, show me your presence!" In Hebrew, the word for presence - *panim* - can be literally translated as "face." Moses is saying "God, show me your face?" The last time I preached this passage many years ago, I thought Moses was just being audacious here. He wanted to see more of God! It was an entirely different sermon. This time, I think his plea is out of desperation! He needs to see more of God!

To be clear, Moses isn't looking for proof as we so often are, for some rational, empirical evidence that God exists. Ask me, I think he's looking to deepen his already secure connection with God. He needs more bars! He wants to look at God in all God's fullness, goodness, and glory. We get the sense that Moses needs this before he goes further. Maybe somehow, he knows the promised land is still a long way off, and he's going to need all the help he can get for the road ahead! Whatever the case, it's a beautiful instinct, this asking God for more!

So, what's God's response? God meets him, at least part way. It's as if God says: "Ok. I hear ya, but we are doing this on my terms, and it's for your own good because there is no way you can handle all that I am! The text makes it clear, "whoever shall see the face of God will not live." So, God says, "Go . . . go stand in the cleft of that rock over there and I will come close." The cleft of the rock! And then my presence will go with you. I will pass by you. But I will put my hand over you until I have passed. Then... then when you're ready, you can take a peak, and all you will see is my back-side."

I've wondered with confirmation classes and youth groups over the years, was God throwing Moses a moon? Did Moses catch a glimpse of the "Blessed Behind," of the "Divine Derrier." Forgive me! A) I confess I do love me some juvenile humor from time to time and B) I had to work in some comic relief

somewhere. But the fact is all this talk of faces and hands and backsides is misleading. It misses the point! But God can't give Moses all that he wants or thinks he needs, it would be too much for him, too much for us, and that's the point, that God knows our human threshold! God will draw near to us! When we ask, God will offer a hand of protection, a covering of our souls in those moments when we feel stuck in a gap, needing to cower, enclosed in a cleft of darkness unsure of where we are or what we do, but God meets us Moses (and by extension) us at the threshold of our limits and experience, with protection, compassion and mercy!

In the coming week especially, I invite us to sit with this curious and timely message. Our scripture is telling us that God knows we have limits, knows it's sometimes too much, even and especially when we think we are ready to lean in and ask for more. That's just when God will come close, settle us down in some protected place, offer us some covering for our own good, lest we experience more than our systems can handle!

I wonder if you know this proverbial cleft of the rock. A time when you've been up against it yourself, when you've hit a wall, when your system lights are flashing on overdrive! I wonder if you've ever let yourself consider what kind of protection your soul needs in those moments! When I'm there, I know I'm fragile a vessel and I could use some bubble wrap before I break and cut myself or someone else! So again, what kind of cowering? What kind of covering? What blanket of grace, hand of love, and protection do we need that says it's too much and it's ok?

I've heard a mentor, Resmaa Menakem, who studies and teaches about generational trauma use the following phrase probably about a hundred times: "Not Defective, Protective." He's referring in part to our central nervous systems, to the way they kick into gear when we encounter something that overwhelms or surprises us or traumatizes us. Our emotional systems are elevated and activated to "fight, flight, or freeze" and we may start saying awful things, doing awful things, or not doing or saying things when we should be doing or saying something, but we get stuck. Rather than labeling these so-called "triggered" behaviors as defective and so dehumanizing others when we do, he calls them protective. Not defective, protective! As I see it, God gave us our central nervous system to signal to us when we have hit our limits, when it is time to seek out the cleft in the rock. Because it's all too much and we are liable to do harm to ourselves or others if we don't leave ourselves open to God's protection from our over or underreaching, from our over or underreacting.

Our responses of overwhelm? Not defective! Protective! They are warning us to find refuge for a time, find a cleft in the rock and let God's presence draw nearer to you than it's ever been before, though you won't see it! "It's ok, man," God says to Moses. "Steal away for a time, before you hurt yourself or someone else! I've got you!" Can we hear God saying it to us! Not defective, protective! Reaching out a hand to place us in a safer space, to cover us for a time.

And then...after the overwhelm subsides, check out what happens next. Rather than the image of a backside, which lends itself to all kinds of crude jokes, I prefer to think of what Moses saw when he came out from the cleft as God's afterglow – a brilliantly fading light, a trace of what has already been, an assurance that God was there all along, even when it was too dark to see. In the darkness of the cleft, we have no idea what is going on. It's ok! But, when the darkness lifts, when the divine eclipse passes over us, it is the afterglow of God that leaves its trace on the long horizons of our lives! May it be so!

For today, as we come through this Sabbath day, may we find rest in God. As look ahead to a new week with new challenges that surely await, may we take our scripture's invitation and recognize our limits, and know that God does too! May we pause when we can to grieve and let our hearts wring out! May God's gracious powers cover us and protect us, and our every neighbor, near and far. Amen.

