

**Exodus 33:12-23** Moses said to the Lord, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favor with me.' <sup>13</sup> If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is your people." <sup>14</sup> The Lord replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." <sup>15</sup> Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. <sup>16</sup> How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" <sup>17</sup> And the Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name." <sup>18</sup> Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory." <sup>19</sup> And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. <sup>20</sup> But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." <sup>21</sup> Then the Lord said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. <sup>22</sup> When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. <sup>23</sup> Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."

Why does God hide from us?

1. We want God to go with us
2. We want to know God better

An amber alert results in a 10-year-old dead in a field. Where was God? People dying from Covid 19. Where was God? Dozens of killings in our inner cities every weekend. Where is God? When we lose our jobs and worry about tomorrow, where is God? When it's three in the morning and your kid hasn't come home yet, and each minute drags like an hour, where is God? We pray for the blind to see, the lame to walk, the cancer to be benign. But the doctor says she's going to run some tests. We lay in bed unable to sleep wondering where our far too silent God is. Why does God hide from us?

Israel had sinned. They made a golden calf and worshiped it as their god. When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai and saw what they were doing, he was furious. So was God. After destroying the idol and sending his fellow Levites out into the camp to punish those who had continued to worship that false god, Moses climbed Mt. Sinai again to plead forgiveness for the Israelites. God did forgive them, but he also said: "Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way" (Exodus 33:3).

Moses was alarmed at these words and so were the people. While God had promised to send an angel to accompany them, he said that he himself would not go with the Israelites. Think of your reaction if moments before surgery to remove a brain tumor, you found out that the world-leading specialist and veteran brain surgeon was not going to perform the procedure as planned because he decided to stay home that day. Instead a first-year medical student was rounded up to step in and try the surgery for his very first time. Would you allow that man to cut you open? (Daniel Habben) No. And so we're not surprised to hear Moses plead with God: "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. <sup>16</sup> How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33:15, 16)

God listened to Moses. *And the Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name."* Did Israel deserve to have God go with them? No. This was an act of pure grace. They were a stiff-necked people. But God promised to go with them, not because they deserved it, but because of his grace.

We don't deserve God's presence with us. We want God to go with us through the trials of life, but why should he? We are quick to fall back into the same sins. We don't pray like we should. We get wrapped up in the busyness of life and forget about God. Why should God care about us?

But he does. And despite our sins, he gives us a promise. "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:20) "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) Out of pure grace, because of Jesus' sacrifice for us, God promises his presence with us wherever we go.

Martin Luther once said, "You need not fashion for yourself a God who cheats you by his promises. God is truthful. He gave us the certainty of Scriptures that we might be certain." (*What Luther Says*, #1352) Have you ever told someone the truth and they didn't believe you? Maybe your mom accused you of taking the last piece of pie out of the refrigerator. But you didn't do it; your brother did. But mom is convinced you did it and she doesn't believe your protests. Now, that's frustrating, isn't it? We want – we expect – people to believe us.

God wants – expects – us to believe him. Why shouldn't we? He's God! His Word is certain and so we can be certain that his promises are true. Even though God may be hidden from us, he has promised to go with us as he promised to go with Moses.

Emboldened by God's grace, Moses asked, <sup>13</sup> *If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you.* Moses doesn't ask for riches or for power. Instead he asks God to teach him his ways so that he would continue to find favor with God! Brothers and sisters, we would do well to model our prayers after Moses' example here. That's because the better we know our God the better we'll see how he does richly and daily provide for us. We'll also see how we don't need to win the lottery to get rid of daily worries. God has already said he will give us our daily bread. And we don't need to worry about the next doctor's appointment because Jesus has shown that sickness and death only lead to an eternal life free from sin for all those who believe in him. If you want to become more confident and more secure, don't keep dreaming of striking it rich, just open your ears to God's Word as Moses was eager to do!

But Moses wanted more. *Then Moses said, "Now show me your glory."* Moses wanted to see God without a burning bush or pillar of cloud. He wanted to see the essential being of God. He wanted to see God without any masks on.

Don't we too wish to see God without masks? Just a glimpse, that's all we want. Why won't he do that? "God doesn't play games with people. It's not that he wants to hide from anyone. In fact, he wants to make himself known to everyone. It's just that to reveal himself, he has to hide. If he didn't, we'd all be dead meat." Why? Sin. God's blazing glory would fry sinners like hamburgers on a Fourth of July grill. Luther said, "Since the fall, God is a hidden God. . . God is everywhere but he permits man to grasp him nowhere." (Quoted in The Foolishness of God by Siegbert Becker, NPH 1999, p. 13) You wouldn't deliberately touch a power line. The power would kill you. "God is definitely interested in making himself known to us. But he certainly doesn't want to destroy anyone in the process. That's why he hides. It seems like a contradiction, but it's absolutely true. In order to contact us, God hides himself." (Harold Senkbeil, Dying to Live, CPH 1994, p. 34)

*And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. <sup>20</sup> But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." <sup>21</sup> Then the Lord said, "There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. <sup>22</sup> When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. <sup>23</sup> Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen."* The word translated, *back*, is never used for back in all the rest of the Old Testament. It really means the after parts. As God's glory passed by, Moses was allowed to see the after parts, the afterglow.

It was good of Moses to want to see God's glory, to know God better. But he could only know God from the backside, in the afterglow, through masks. God gives us just what he gave Moses, the afterglow of his glory. He masks his glory in the grace of his Son, Jesus Christ. If you want to know God, look at Jesus. "He who has seen me has seen the Father," he told Philip. "Hear him, look at his death, cross and suffering. See him lying at his mother's breasts and hanging on the cross." (Martin Luther, What Luther Says, #1352) There you have God. There you see God. There you have salvation.

"There are times in our own lives as Christians when the pressures of this earthly existence weigh heavily upon us. Life's problems and disappointments mount with increasing fury. Our own responsibilities never seem to lessen in intensity. 'How much more can we be expected to carry?' we ask. We wrestle with the Lord in prayer. We long for some kind of added reassurance that he is truly there, according to his promise." (Ernst Wendland, Exodus, The People's Bible, NPH1984, pp. 244)

"Moses wanted this. Elijah, another of the Lord's Old Testament prophets, desired the same reassurance. At the point of despair, Elijah came to this very same mountain of God, we are told. . . The Lord also granted Elijah unusual experiences on this mountain as he caused a great and powerful wind . . . an earthquake . . . and also a fire. But the Lord, we are told, 'was not in the wind, . . . not in the earthquake . . . not in the fire.' He came to Elijah 'in a gentle whisper.'" (Ernst Wendland, Exodus, The People's Bible, NPH1984, pp. 244-245)

Elijah learned that he shouldn't look for the Lord in outward signs of majesty and power, but in the strengthening voice of the gospel. There is where we find God. In the mask of word and sacraments he reveals his glory of forgiveness and love. Here in Word and Sacrament we can lay hold on God without getting fried. We can experience rest from our burdens and peace for our souls.

Why does God hide from us? Because he loves us. To save us he hides in the masks of word, water, bread and wine. He hides himself behind the human face of Jesus. May we have the faith to believe his promises and his presence.