

SEEING BACKWARDS

Psalm 99 (responsive)
Exodus 33:12-23

Faith Community
October 16, 2005

Introduction

This is one of my favorite passages in the Bible. It rings true. This is how we experience God. We don't see God face-to-face. At best, we see a glimpse of God passing by.

The mystery of God remains, but we get a quick glance at God. We can't know God – God is beyond our ability to understand – but once in a while, out of the corner of our eyes, we catch a glimpse of God.

Actually, we wouldn't want to see God face-to-face. The powerful presence, the energy, and the mysterious strength would be too much for us. It may be that a glimpse at the back of God is the most we can handle. This is God after all.

I

Especially today, there are people who tell us they not only talk to God face-to-face, but they know what God is thinking. It seems as if almost every week someone is saying, "God told me to do this." I'm always doubtful of people who think that God whispers in their ears.

Remember Jim and Tammy Bakker? I recall seeing them on television saying, "God has told me to build an amusement park here with luxury condominiums all around it." At the time, I wondered why the God of compassion for the poor and mistreated would have such interest in amusement parks and expensive condominiums.

Later, as I recall, those were the same projects for which Mr. Bakker was arrested served time in prison. Perhaps he didn't hear those voices as clearly as he originally thought! We still hear today people who say, "God told me to do this," or "God spoke to me and said I should do this." I think every time we hear a comment like that a red flag should go up.

II

I wonder if those who want to talk to God face-to-face know what they're asking for. God is enormously powerful. God is not just a bigger, stronger human; God is beyond what we can imagine. God's ways are not our ways. God isn't one of us.

Romans chapter 11 tells us, "Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For, who has known the mind of the Lord?"

One person has said that most of us think of God as just like us, only nicer. That isn't who God is. A hundred times more powerful than a tsunami, more brilliant than the sun, God is not an upgraded version of a really good person. This is the Creator of the universe.

Don't take the presence of God too casually. God is awful in the original sense of the word: one who fills us with awe. God might not only shake up our lives, but our whole world.

The great writer, Annie Dillard, has written about how we should prepare to come into worship, into the presence of God.

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may awake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

In the Old Testament, people were afraid to see God’s face. People knew that if they ever saw God face-to-face they would die immediately. The actual presence of God would be so frightening, so powerful, and so overwhelming that a person would die.

III

We don’t see God directly; we catch a glimpse of God’s back sometimes. We experience moments when we just get a glance of God passing behind us. “Was that really God?” we might ask.

Sometimes we only realize what we have seen later on. A series of events happen and we look back and say, “Look how that worked out! Do you suppose that was God?” We just catch a peek out of the corner of our eye.

A good friend of mine had an experience of God that changed his life. It was almost like a vision. He had no doubt that it was God’s presence. It wasn’t God face-to-face, but the shadow of his back passing by. He will cherish that experience for rest of his life.

IV

Of course, there is a sense in which we have seen God face-to-face. God came to us directly. This all-powerful force came into our world in a tiny, helpless infant born in a small town miles anywhere important. God came as one of us – God in human form.

As Mary held that little baby, she had no idea what changes he would make in the world. The most powerful force in existence came to us as an infant who needed to be fed, changed, and bathed. Hidden in the little town of Bethlehem as a helpless infant, was the most powerful person alive. His power was surrender. His victory was death.

Conclusion

We don’t see God face-to-face. If we’re smart, we won’t want to. This powerful force would overwhelm us. His brilliance would blind us. God is a tsunami of love. Be careful of its force.

And yet, this same God comes to us in subtle, often hidden ways to show us how to care, what it means to sacrifice, and how to really love. Be careful of this God, he may change your life forever.

Amen.