

**The Glimpses Are Enough, Rev. R.G. Wilson-Lyons**  
**Exodus 33: 12-23**

“You know, today felt like we weren’t living through a global pandemic.”

My wife, Mary Page said these words to me one August night while we were sitting by our campfire. We had taken Nina and Julian camping to Tully Lake, an hour and ½ west of Boston. The lake was lovely and our campsite was perfect. We pitched our tent about 20 yards from the lake. We began each day and ended each afternoon with a swim right outside our home for those three days. We hiked to gorgeous Doane Falls. We canoed to the lake’s islands where wild blueberry bushes grew. I felt more relaxed than I have at any point since we realized the severity of this pandemic back in mid-March.

Our camping trip was a nice break from the reality of the world right now, a reality that I’m sure weighs heavily on all of you. We are living through the worst pandemic in 100 years. Thousands of people are putting their lives on the line every day to work on the frontlines in healthcare education or just to try to make a living for those whose jobs don’t have the flexibility to work from home. Many have experienced loss of income or even lost their jobs altogether and it looks like no more help from the federal government is coming, at least not until after the election.

And in the midst of this pandemic, we are also living through the most politically divisive time at least in my lifetime and many people are afraid that the divisions and distrust in our country are so great, that our very democracy is at risk. Time and again, we hear stories of another unarmed person of color unjustly killed by law enforcement officials or armed vigilantes. LGBTQIA people are living in constant fear of those who would strip them of their right to marry, mock their love for their spouses and partners, and legalize discrimination against them. And our West Coast is on fire while hurricanes batter the southeast as the threat of climate change continues to grow at an alarming rate.

The world is a scary place right now.

And yet, if I’m honest, the truth is that sometimes, I just become numb to all that’s going on in the world because the more immediate challenges of day to day life simply take up all my energy. Those of us who are parents are faced with choices for which there are no good answers – do we send our kids to school or try to do all remote learning? We love our families more than anything in the world and, if we’re honest, after 7 months of quarantine, we are a little sick of them—and then we feel guilty about that. Those who have aging or sick parents or grandparents have to balance the need to see them with the possible risk of exposing them. And way too many people have lost loved ones without being able to say goodbye to them in person.

And I don’t know about you, but I’ve found myself asking one question over and over again:

God, are you even with us right now?

If you are asking this question, you’re in good company. From the cross, Jesus, quoting a Psalmist, cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Elijah from his cave wanted to die because he felt God had abandoned him.

And then we have Moses.

The conversations between God and Moses throughout the book of Exodus are some of the richest literature we have in all of our Scripture. From the very beginning of Moses’ encounter with God, he wants to know something over and over again – God will you be with me? God will you be with us?

Moses had good reason for asking that question. God was only asking him to confront the most powerful man in the world, a man who had shown himself to be a ruthless tyrant willing to enslave an entire people and even commit genocide. Even after their liberation from Egypt, Moses and the people often found themselves in precarious positions—there was no food, or no water, or an enemy was about to attack. And each time, Moses and the people begin to doubt if God is really there with them.

“Did you lead us into the wilderness only to make us starve to death?”

“Have you abandoned us?”

“Are you even with me? Are you even with us?”

And every time Moses asked a variation of that question, “God are you with us?” God emphatically responded with, “Yes,”...except for that one time.

The Old Testament lectionary this week is a story where the relationship between God and the Hebrew people had been strained. The people had just made the golden calf. Moses pleaded with God to forgive the people. In one of the more interesting passages in all of Scripture, God says to Moses, “Your people who you delivered out of Egypt have made an idol.” God’s trying to pass the people off onto Moses—these aren’t my people Moses, they’re your people. It’s like a parent saying to the other parent, “You’ll never believe what your child has done.”

But Moses won’t let God off the hook. He reminds God, “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?”

In one of the more striking passages in all of Scripture, the Exodus writer tells us that God’s mind was changed. God forgives the people. But God is not ready to just go back to how things were, and so God says to Moses, “My angel will go before the people.” Before this, it was the very presence of God that would lead the people, not an angel. But God had been hurt. God was angry. And it seems like God is too hurt to be with the people anymore—an angel will have to do.

But that’s not good enough for Moses—not with the task at hand, not with leading this people through the wilderness into their own land. Moses cried out to God, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here.” Moses is saying to God, “An angel is not good enough. You, God. It has to be you. You have to be with us. Otherwise, we won’t go at all.”

If we learn anything from the relationship with Moses and God, it’s that Moses doesn’t let God off the hook. He holds on to God, demanding that God be with him, demanding that God be with all the people. For Moses, the hardship of the wilderness is only bearable if he knows that one thing—that God is there with him. And that is the very thing he demands of God over and over again.

It’s an interesting thing, I guess, to make demands of God, and, yet, if the story about Moses’ relationship with God has any truth for us today, maybe it is in that. Maybe it’s the invitation to hold God accountable to what God has promised, to demand that God go with us.

I wonder what Moses would say to God today, right now, in 2020.

I bet it would be something like this, “We can’t make it through this without you. It’s too much; it’s too hard. It even feels like too much at the times when I’m certain you are right beside me. So God you better show up right now because we can’t go on without you.”

And once again, God's mind is changed. God agrees with Moses' demand. No matter how angry, how hurt God is with the people, God agrees that it won't be the angel who leads. God says, "My very presence will go before you."

And I think maybe, or at least I hope, that God says the same thing to us, "My presence is with you. No matter how hard 2020 has been and no matter how hard it will be, I am right here."

And friends, that's enough...sometimes.

But if I'm completely honest, there are times when it's not. There are times when I want more. I not only want the promise that God is going to be with me, I want to know that everything is going to be ok. I want to know that the people I love won't get sick. I want to believe that we will reject division, will reject fear-based politics, will reject demonizing those considered "the other." I want to believe that everything will be ok.

You see, what I really want a lot of the time is not just a promise that God will be with us. I want proof. I want proof that God is with us and I want proof that God is going to make everything right.

And so did Moses.

Early on, when God first spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, when God first asked Moses to go back to Egypt and set the people free, Moses asked for a sign and God said, "Sure, Moses. I'll give you a sign. After you have delivered the people, you will worship me on this mountain." I don't know about you, but that has to be the worst sign in the history of signs. The only way Moses got the sign was by first going back to Egypt and setting the people free. He would only get the sign if he first trusted God enough to do what God was asking him to do. There was no proof that everything was going to work out—not on the front end.

In our Exodus reading this week, Moses also wants proof. He asks that the full glory of Almighty God be revealed so that Moses could see God exactly as God is. When Moses asked God to forgive the people, God said yes. When Moses demanded that God's presence and not an angel go before them, God said yes. But when Moses asked to see the full glory of God, God said, "No."

As much as Moses wanted, as much as we want, to see the full glory of God, as much as we want to have complete proof that everything is going to work out and that all will be well, I'm afraid God doesn't oblige that request. And so we are left with the same thing Moses was left with—a promise and a glimpse.

A promise that God will be with us and glimpses of God's glory.

You see, our faith doesn't offer us certainty. If it did, then faith really wouldn't be faith. But rather faith invites us into the transcendent mystery of the glory of God and the hope that this transcendent, mysterious God has come near to us. Faith invites us to question and make demands of this God, but also to take time to pay attention to the glimpses of God's glory all around us.

Back on our camping trip this summer, we got lucky. We were there during the peak viewing window of the Perseid Meteor shower. As we sat around the campfire watching the shooting stars above us, Nina asked us, "Why are these stars shooting?" I told Nina that we were watching meteors from comets that burned up, causing streams of light when they entered the atmosphere.

She then asked how they were different than stars. And while I'm not an astronomy expert, I did my best. "Well, stars are great balls of gas in the sky. And the gas burns so hot and so bright, that we can see them all the way here on Earth. And what's really amazing is that some of the stars we see don't even exist anymore. The star burned out, but the star is so far away, it took that long for the light to reach us. Light can travel 186,000

miles every second, but the universe is like trillions and trillions of miles. It's bigger than you or I could ever imagine or understand. And yet, we get to see it."

Nina was silent for a few moments. And then she said, "That's really cool."

She's right. It is really cool.

Later that night, everyone went to the tent to sleep but me. And I thought about the last few months. And I thought about the shooting stars. And I thought about the sun shining on the lake. And I thought about wild blueberry bushes. And I thought about Mary Page looking at me with a knowing smile as our kids played and laughed and simply took in the wonders of nature.

And I wept.

But they were not tears of grief. Nature reminds me how small I am—not in a way that makes me feel insignificant but rather in a way that makes me feel comfort like I'm a part of something and held by something so much greater than I. There is a universe out there where light travels 186,000 miles every second. There are mountains that have been standing for millions of years and valleys and canyons that have been carved by a river or by wind working relentlessly to remove a millimeter a year since before humans existed. And there are lakes that are calm and have this way of steadying the fears and worries around us. And as I sat by that fire, I remembered that God is the God of this creation. I remembered that creation is wild and dangerous but is so very good. And I remembered that no matter how hard the last 7 months have been and no matter how hard the next 7 months might be, there will still be stars shooting across the sky and lakes to swim in and wild blueberry bushes to find.

I thought about how we may not always get the proof we'd like about God and how we don't get to see the full glory of God's presence. But we sure do get a lot of glimpses. And in that moment, I knew that one way or another, the glimpses are enough.