

*Exodus 33:12-23*  
*23 Pentecost / Proper 24 / Year A*  
*19 October 2008*  
*Preached by the Rev. David Fredrickson*

In the introduction to his book *Let Yourself Be Loved*, Phillip Bennett describes an encounter he had with a monk named Benedict when he was a twenty-two year seeker. In his quest for God, this monk gave him an image that ultimately changed his life. “Imagine that God wants, more than anything, simply to be with you and delight in your presence,” came the suggestion from Benedict the monk. Taking the suggestion seriously, Phillip Bennett set out to do just that. What follows is a description of his encounter with the Divine.

After several days of “just sitting,” very slowly, very subtly, I began to feel a Presence with me; a gentle, steady love that delighted in being with me. The Presence stirred delicately around the edge of my awareness but would seem to recede if I tried to catch a direct glimpse of it. If I tried to clutch it, analyze it, make it do my bidding, it quickly vanished from my awareness. But when I relaxed and gave up trying to make something happen, I again experienced the Presence holding me, sustaining me, loving me in wordless silence. It felt like a force both outside me and within me – a great, inexhaustible power, yet intimately near and gentle.

Such an experience of God is not unusual. Many who take time to quiet themselves and seek God in prayer experience this amorphous loving Presence lingering at the edge of their awareness. Moses certainly did. In fact, as we read through Exodus, we find that Moses had a profoundly animated relationship with God, one that few of us can relate to.

Enter this morning’s lesson. This morning we find Moses now confronted with God’s request of him to lead the Israelites from Sinai to the Promised Land. And Moses simply has it out with God. He says to God, “Look, you tell me, ‘Lead my people,’ but then you don’t bother telling me whom you are going to send along with me. Then you tell me how special I am and how special the Israelites are to you, but if I am so special to you, why don’t you let me in on your plans, for the Israelites are your responsibility and I am not taking the fall

alone if we fail. Through his prayer Moses hears God's reply, "My presence will go with you. I'll see you and my people through this journey to its end." But Moses knows his neck is on the line and he says back to God, "Let me tell you, if your presence doesn't take the lead here, count me out, this trip is not going to happen." God's reply, "Okay Moses, just as you say, for I know you well, you are special to me." But Moses still wasn't satisfied, he wanted more assurance, he wanted to see God's face, he wanted to hear from God's own lips. He knew God was present, that God was listening and he knew what God expected of him, what God wanted him to do, but Moses wanted more. "Show me your glory," he asked, show me your face and speak to me with your lips for there is too much at stake here for me to simply and blindly follow. Moses did have a unique and amazing relationship with God but his experience of God was not complete. There were questions on his mind, "Is God really here, present, guiding this whole production?" "Is the path I am being shown really the one that God wants me to take or am I being misled?" These are questions that all of us can relate to I suspect. //

Moses prayed with utter conviction, he obviously didn't hold back when he talked with God. This is a model that all of us should examine and follow. I fear that most of us don't pray with conviction, bearing our souls before God like Moses did because we fear that our prayers will get lost in the emptiness of our own doubts; "What if God isn't really here?" "What if I can't discern which path God wants me to take?" "What if I am really all alone on this journey?"

Well, the spiritual life is risky business. For most of us the best we can do is discern the amorphous and loving Presence at the edge of our awareness. Unlike the Apostles who actually did see the face of God and hear him speak through human lips in the person of

Jesus of Nazareth, you and I it seems are back where Moses was. Jesus was raised from the dead, but he is not here now in human form to hold our hand and whisper into our ears and wipe away our tears. That is what we want, isn't it? But we don't have that and so we cling to that loving Presence at the edge of our awareness, we cling to the bread and the wine, the body and blood of Christ, we cling to the water that refreshes and cleanses us in baptism.

Moses showed us through his life and Jesus made it crystal clear, that it is not only possible, but critical for all God's people to have an intimate relationship with him. But, as Moses found out, while we are here on this planet, that relationship will never be complete. Through our seeking the best we will do is join Moses in the cleft of that rock experiencing the loving amorphous Presence, the glory that passes by, covered by the hand of God seemingly putting us into darkness, darkness that is often mistaken for doubt, fear and loneliness. In this life we will never look upon the face of God, yet as the hand comes away and darkness is consumed by light, we will see that the face of God goes on before us leading us on our journey, for we are special to God and He does know each of us by name. For us, it is worth our while to take comfort in seeing God's back for that means that he is on the path with us leading us into the Promised Land where we will find hope and peace and true love.

In Jesus Name; Amen.