

SERMON

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Talking to God

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Exodus 33:12-23; Philippians 4:4-7

A true story - a woman entered a Haagen-Dazs store on the Kansas City Plaza for an ice-cream cone. After making her selection, she turned and found herself face to face with Paul Newman. He was in town filming the movie Mr. and Mrs. Bridge. Newman's blue eyes caused her knees to buckle. She managed to pay for her cone, then left the shop, heart pounding. When she gained her composure, she realized she didn't have her cone. She started back to the store to get it and met Newman at the door. "Are you looking for your ice-cream cone?" he asked. She nodded, unable to speak. "You put it in your purse with your change."

There were film crews in Ayr this week, and I checked, but didn't see Paul Newman! But this story makes me wonder, have you ever been so excited to be in God's presence, that you forgot what you were doing? So filled with awe?

Our dramatized reading today, from Exodus, shows us how Moses wanted to be in the presence and glory of God.

In the last few weeks we have been following Moses journey as he led the Israelites out of Egypt. Again, and again, we have seen Moses come to God in prayer. Moses listened to the Israelites complain at the Red Sea because they were afraid of the Egyptians, in the desert because they didn't think they had enough to eat, and then they didn't have enough to drink. And each time, Moses has come to God in prayer.

Moses even went to God in prayer when God became mad with Israelites: they had made a golden calf to worship, knowing that it was a direct violation of the 2nd commandment that had been proclaimed to them a little over 40 days before!

God tells Moses: "I'm going to wipe them off the face of the earth and build a new nation around you." And Moses was so convinced that God intended to do as threatened, that Moses immediately spoke to God with an intense prayer that convinced God to decide NOT to destroy the Israelites.

The Exodus story has example after example of Moses talking to God. Clearly Moses had no problem praying. But in our scripture today, Moses takes it to another level. Moses prays for God's presence v.15-16. God has told Moses that he would send an angel to take Moses and the people on to the promise land, but that isn't enough for Moses. Moses says he doesn't want to go on with the mission if God isn't with them. He would rather stay there on Mt. Sinai, rather than to go on without God and experience the promise land.

Then, in verse 18 Moses prays to see God's glory.

What Moses is really praying for, is to see God's face. Having gotten as close to God as he has he still hungers for more. He wants to see God, to know the Divine even more intimately.

How many of us truly long for that?

How many of us truly pray to be in the presence of the Divine?

Perhaps when we pray, we are more like our picture on the bulletin cover – 'Hey God, it's me again!'

When we pray do we seek God's Face or God's Hand?

In all honesty, I suspect that in most of our praying we are not seeking God's Face, but rather we are seeking God's hand, looking for God to provide something for us. After all, isn't that what Paul's letter to the Philippians says: ⁶

"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (Phil. 4:6)

And, didn't Jesus instruct us to pray, "Give us today our daily bread." (Matt 6:11)

But, God intended our prayers to become something more than a presentation of our "shopping list" of needs and wants. If that's all we pray about, it is no wonder that we become disappointed with God, and disinterested in prayer because God does not always give us what we ask for.

When we pray, do you seek God's Face or God's Arm?

In some of our prayers, if we are honest to God, we will find that rather than seeking God's Face we are simply seeking God's Arm. We pray because we find ourselves in a position where we need God's strength, God's comfort. We believe that "...nothing is impossible with God."

And there is nothing wrong with that. But, imagine how much greater it would be if we truly prayed to speak with face to face with God. If we truly prayed to be in God's presence. Do you pray for that?

There's a story that is told in book called "Encounters with God" that tells of how a man's daughter asked the local minister to come and pray with her father. When the minister arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows. An empty chair sat beside his bed. The minister assumed that the old fellow had been informed of his visit.

"I guess you were expecting me," he said.

'No, who are you?" said the father.

The minister told him his name and then remarked, "I saw the empty chair and I figured you knew I was going to show up."

"Oh yeah, the chair," said the bedridden man. "Would you mind closing the door?" Puzzled, the minister shut the door.

"I have never told anyone this, not even my daughter," said the man. "But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At church I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it went right over my head. I abandoned any attempt at prayer until one day four years ago, my best friend said to me, "Johnny, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here is what I suggest. Sit down in a chair; place an empty chair in front of you, and in faith see Jesus on the chair. It's not spooky because he promised, 'I will be with you always'. Then just speak to him in the same way you're doing with me right now."

"So, I tried it and I've liked it so much that I do it a couple of hours every day. I'm careful though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm."

The minister was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the old man to continue on the journey. Then he prayed with him, anointed him with oil, and returned to the church.

Two nights later the daughter called to tell the minister that her daddy had died that afternoon. "Did he die in peace?" the minister asked.

"Yes, when I left the house about two o'clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me he loved me and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him. But there was something strange about his death. Apparently, just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on the chair beside the bed. What do you make of that?"

The minister wiped a tear from his eye and said, "I wish we could all go like that."

Do you speak to God face to face?

God wants to have intimate encounters with you and me. We just need to look for the Divine and seek God's presence.

Some of us may have hundreds of friends on Face book, but we all know that they don't count as real friends. Our real friends are the ones that we want to spend time with, face to face. In our culture we have a way of keeping close with people and one of those is to invite someone to have a coffee with you – or if you're British, invite them for tea. It's a way of saying, "I want to be close to you." I want to be friends. Face-to-face. It's not necessarily a time to ask for a favor, or say thanks for something. It's a time for relationship-building.

It's exactly what we might need – coffee with God. We need time to be together, sitting down to talk – to maintain a good relationship. This is the kind of closeness to which God has invited us.

I don't want to give you a formula for prayer. There are no three simple steps to better prayers, although there are many books written on the subject. Effective prayer is not found in the mechanics of the prayer, prayer is only effective if it connects with the heart of God.

I also don't want to do is present myself as a model of what a prayer warrior should look like. I struggle with prayer just like you do. But I do know, that when I take time to meet with God, when I truly enjoy the presence of the Divine, then my prayers change. Like Moses, I begin to pray:

"I need You with me God, I want Your presence going with me, and I'm not going anywhere without You."

I invite each of you, to take time to seek God's presence and glory.

I invite you to take time today to speak to God face to face. To take time to allow God's Spirit to move to a place of awe. As we move into a time of meditation, I invite you to find your own way to come to God. There are candles at the front and back table, and I invite you to take the time to light a candle in God's presence. Take your time. God will wait. You may sit in silence, or sing the Call to Prayer:

Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying.