

Is God among us or not?

God's presence to people on the way

HOWARD WALLACE

Illuminating Faith

About *Illuminating Faith*

Illuminating Faith is a Christian educational ministry auspiced by the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist, North Melbourne, Australia. Reflecting the Congregation's own interest in thinking deeply about Christian faith, these studies offer a range of different reflections on Christian confession intended both to illuminate that faith, and to show how Christian faith can itself be illuminating. The study materials derive from a range of different sources and will appear in an increasing range of styles. The congregation as a whole contributes through study groups in which the material is tested, in proof-reading, by composing questions small groups might consider when using the studies, and in giving its minister time to oversee the project. For more information, further studies, to provide feedback or to discover ways of supporting this ministry see:

www.marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au/illuminating-faith.

Howard Wallace is a retired minister of the Uniting Church in Australia. He taught Old Testament/Hebrew Bible studies for 28 years in Uniting Church theological colleges in Sydney and Melbourne before in semi-retirement becoming minister of the Mulgrave Congregation in suburban Melbourne. His research interests focused on the Books of Genesis and Psalms. In full retirement he pursues his interests in art, calligraphy and as a voluntary guide at the National Gallery of Victoria.

© 2018 Howard Wallace and the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist. Permission is granted to print and distribute this material in its present form for non-commercial purposes.

© Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

About these Studies

These studies had their first life in presentation to the 2011 meeting of the Uniting Church in Australia's Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. They have been adapted slightly for publication in this form.

The studies in this booklet lend themselves well to either individual or small group use; in the case that it is used by small groups, committing to reading the material before gathering together will maximise the time for the important work of discussing it in the group.

Further comment on the focus texts for each study can be found on the author's Old Testament Lectionary Resources web site

<http://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/WebOTcomments/ContentspageYearA.html>.

The studies conclude with a psalm which, in the Revised Common Lectionary, is matched with the focus text for each study. The psalm picks up some of the themes of the focus text and may serve as a meditative closure to the session, followed by a brief prayer from someone in the group.

Works Cited

Several commentaries are referenced in the studies; the details of these works are as follows:

Boyce, Richard N, *Leviticus and Numbers*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, c2008

Brueggemann, Walter, 'Exodus' in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, (Vol 1), Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994-2004

Childs, Brevard S, *Exodus: a commentary*, London : SCM Press, 1974

Durham, John I, *Exodus*, Waco: Word Books, c1987

Fretheim, Terence E, *Exodus*, Louisville: John Knox Press, c1991

Propp, William H C, *Exodus 19-40: a new translation with introduction and commentary*, New York : Doubleday, 2006

CONTENTS

1. Worship, Mission and Identity	1
2. Promise and Trust	8
3. Craving (and) Leadership	14
4. Facing God.....	21

1. WORSHIP, MISSION AND IDENTITY

Focus Text : Exodus 3.1-15

Read the following, marking the text for recurring themes and ideas

¹ Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³ Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹² He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

¹³ But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'the God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."¹ He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'the LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.



WORSHIP, MISSION AND IDENTITY

Exodus 3 stands as a major milestone in the early books of the Old Testament. It not only sets the course of the action that will be the focus of the Book of Exodus, but also of the Books of Leviticus and Numbers to follow. Indeed, it introduces us to what is arguably the major event and theme of the Hebrew Bible – the Exodus. Given that, of course, it also sets the agenda for the life of Moses.

We are introduced to Moses at the start of Exodus. As the Egyptians sought to eliminate the male children of the Israelite peoples in their land, Moses was hidden and discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, no less (Exodus 2.1-10). He grew up in Pharaoh's house but, after killing an Egyptian for beating one of the Hebrews, he fled (2.11-15). He settled in the land of Midian and married Zipporah. A long time passes. The Pharaoh who sought Moses' life dies, and the conditions of Israel's slavery in Egypt become even more oppressive but we are told that God 'looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them' (2.25). That short verse, that brief look by God, makes all the difference and sets the course for the story to come.

As our text for this study opens, we find Moses going about his ordinary shepherding duties for his father-in-law (v.1). There is little hint that all of life is about to change for him. We are told that he leads his flock 'beyond the wilderness.' In ancient thinking this description already signals an element of otherworldliness to the story. Moses then comes to a mountain. He is apparently blissfully ignorant of the significance of this mountain but we know it is Mt. Horeb, a mountain readers know in another tradition as Mt. Sinai: 'the mountain of God.' A strange sight confronts him, a bush burning but not destroyed. Moses does not understand and approaches, unaware that his curiosity will lead to a change in vocation (v.3). There is an interesting mixture, at the start of this passage, of an innocent lack of awareness on Moses' part and of the power of the divine presence, which makes even the ground upon which Moses stands holy and dangerous.

This seemingly chance meeting introduces what is essentially a 'commissioning narrative,' in which God sends Moses to free the Israelites from their slavery, a task that turns out to be a life-long mission. The story takes the shape of other similar accounts: there is a charge to complete a task (vv.7-10), some reticence shown by Moses (v.11), assurance by God (v.12a), and a sign to confirm it all (v.12b). Yet this commissioning is anything but a divine fiat in which Moses is given his marching orders and we wait to see him carry them through to the letter. We will examine the episode through two foci: the words which frame the story and the relationship between God and Moses.

IS GOD WITH US OR NOT?

Words which frame the story

At the beginning of the story the words 'see' or 'look' stand out, used eight times in a few verses. The messenger 'appears' (in Hebrew, 'lets himself be seen'); Moses 'looks' at the bush and goes 'to see' what is happening; the Lord 'sees' him coming, etc. The story only starts properly when the two parties involved in this encounter 'see' each other. In one sense, this is a very physical encounter between Moses and God: it is all about seeing and being seen. The parties that meet are embodied in this material world, albeit that God is embodied in a symbolic way. At the other end of the story, the word 'send,' and its counterpoint 'come' dominate, used seven times in a few verses, each time in relation to Moses going to Egypt to deliver the Israelites.

The two great themes of the book of Exodus are the liberation of the Israelites from captivity in Egypt in the first half of the book and, in the less well known second half, the construction of the tabernacle – the place where God's presence was encountered, the focal point of worship in the wilderness. Those two themes are present in our study text: the liberation of the people and the encounter with God's presence, which is clearly connected with worship in v.12 where Moses is told that after delivering the Israelites they will worship God on this mountain.

In modern parlance we are talking about worship and mission – about seeing and being sent – but especially about the relation between the two. In a church struggling with its own existence and faced by many difficult issues in a rapidly changing world, a focus on these two fundamentals – worship and mission – over against any potential disaster we might imagine, is essential not just for the church's survival but for the integrity and faithfulness of the people of God and of the Gospel which shapes our lives. So often a dichotomy is set up between the two: inner piety versus outer activity, quietism versus activism. Attention is often given to one side to the detriment or even neglect of the other. Sometimes we make that distinction ourselves unconsciously or otherwise. Sometimes government regulations and other constrictions placed upon the church's work demand a separation. Sometimes the wider public appreciates our activism but does not understand our piety and theology, and we respond in various ways to that. But if there is a lesson to be taken from Exodus it is about the inextricable link between worship and mission in which the one leads to the other, and back again, and so forth.

What do you understand to be the relationship between worship and mission? How does worship feed mission and mission feed worship? How is this apparent in your congregation?

The relationship between God and Moses

We noted earlier that the relationship between God and Moses is no simple matter. It is rather complex, a relationship which:

WORSHIP, MISSION AND IDENTITY

- is open on both parts to newness;
- grows through mutual exploration and understanding;
- is built on a vigorous engagement and not simply dominance and passivity; and
- has the breadth and depth to embrace and work with human weakness, reticence or incapacity, all of which we will witness in Moses as he queries God's commission and suggests possible obstacles to the plan.

The discussion between Moses and God is framed by two elements. The first is a set of two questions asked by Moses:

- 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?' and
- 'What is your name?'

That is, Moses asks, 'Who am I?' and 'Who are you?' We have already learnt something about Moses and we learn more about him over the next chapter as he continues to question God. We also learn of his fear and reticence as we read between the lines of his questions.

How do you answer the first of these questions for yourself, and how has God answered the second in your experience?

What questions would you ask of God?

We learn, also, more about God in the conversation between God and Moses. As well as being framed by Moses' questions, the conversation is also framed by two references to God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In other words, this is no new God who speaks to Moses but one closely concerned with the story of Moses' and Israel's ancestors. The story of which Moses is a part is also the story in which God has a stake: it is God's story too. We hear God saying: 'I have observed [seen] the misery of my people ... I have heard their cry,' and we understand this declaration to be voiced by one who shares the suffering of those who are observed.

Yet the old familiar formula for God's name as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not enough for Moses. In pressing the question 'Who are you?' further Moses finds himself showered with a whole series of divine names: 'God of your ancestors,' 'I am who I am,' 'I am,' 'Yahweh' [or 'the Lord'], 'God of Abraham,' etc. Terence Fretheim has remarked here that 'the more one understands God, the more mysterious God becomes' (Fretheim, 63). It has been suggested that the best translation for the enigmatic 'I am who I am' might be 'I will be who I am/I am who I will be.' That is, 'I will be God for you,' with the force more on God's presence than on who God is in abstraction. Fretheim also remarks that this 'name shapes Israel's story, and the story gives greater texture to the name' (Fretheim, 63).

Naming entails distinctiveness and character in the Old Testament. The divine name tied to the ancestors of Israel defines a God tied to Israel's story. Further name-giving and -

What do you make of God being "tied" to Israel's story? Does God *limit* Godself in this way?

IS GOD WITH US OR NOT?

receiving deepens the intimacy in that relationship, but also entails greater vulnerability and openness to hurt.

In a church struggling with its own existence and faced by many difficult issues in a rapidly changing world, surely Moses' two questions ('Who am I?' and 'Who are you?')

remain primary and take us back to the relationship at the heart of our faith – a relationship that is the substance of God's story too. So often we seem to face an uncertain future by inventing a new adjective for ourselves: evangelical, conservative, contemporary, traditional, confessing, emerging, messy, progressive, and there will be some more before long. While there may be something of substance behind some of these adjectives, none of them will ever be a substitute for giving our attention to the relationship which shapes both our story and lives and God's story. In that context the immanent future will unfold as it will for both the church and God.

How might God's 'who' and 'how' for you have been shaped by your own engagement with God?

What is the difference between an 'immanent' future, and an 'imminent' one? In what sense is God's future immanent?

Summing up

We can conclude this study with three comments.

First, as Fretheim remarks, 'Human questions find an openness in God and lead to fuller knowledge' (Fretheim, 52). This story is about divine revelation to Moses and, ultimately, to God's people. It is about the part we humans – the recipients of revelation – play in that revelatory event. Moses is keen in the latter part of the passage to know who this God is who sends him on the task. As the story unfolds he will be more concerned about this God being with him and the people. For now it is simply the question of 'Who?' and that question needs to be constantly on our lips as we stand open to more revelation: 'Who sends us?'

Second, what we notice in this passage is that whatever understanding of God Moses takes in, it does not come simply by divine initiative. God enters into relationship with Moses and within the bounds of that relationship revelation and understanding take shape. It takes a questioning human party in interaction with an open God for revelation to emerge. God's work is not simply dictated by God's will and word (Fretheim, 53).

Third, while the freedom of the human in this situation is honoured, the emphasis is still on divine initiative. The God who remains a mystery in this narrative is at least known as one that does not remain safe and secure but engages with human suffering. If we are to read this narrative at the start of the book of Exodus as a continuation of the story of the ancestors in Genesis concluding with Joseph's tale, then we notice one important point. In Genesis God does not directly encounter the human heroes and heroines of the story outside the Promised

WORSHIP, MISSION AND IDENTITY

Land. The one exception is Abram when God initially calls him to go from his homeland (Gen 12.1-3). When Jacob and Joseph leave the Promised Land for various reasons, we do not hear of God encountering them or speaking to them until, in Jacob's case, he returns home. It is telling that Jacob encounters God first in a dream and then in a wrestling match, only at the boundary of the land, never outside. Yet in Exodus we find that that same God has left the Promised Land, having heard the cry of God's people in a far off country. Before any great and wondrous event of deliverance is described, with walls of water and pillars of cloud and fire, there stands a God who hears from afar and shares in the suffering of the oppressed.

What is your 'far-off country,' in which you don't expect to encounter God?

Summary questions for discussion

Who are you?

Who is God?

In what ways are these identities related, and how is that relationship expressed or manifest for you and your church?

Closing devotion

Read the following psalm slowly, perhaps responsively, or each member taking a verse in turn, or with just one voice.

Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45b

¹ O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples.

² Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works.

³ Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

⁴ Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually.

⁵ Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered,

⁶ O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones.

²³ Then Israel came to Egypt; Jacob lived as an alien in the land of Ham.

²⁴ And the LORD made his people very fruitful, and made them stronger than their foes,

²⁵ whose hearts he then turned to hate his people, to deal craftily with his servants.

²⁶ He sent his servant Moses, and Aaron whom he had chosen.

^{45b} Praise the LORD!

IS GOD WITH US OR NOT?

Share together anything which the psalm evokes for you.

Have a single voice read the psalm slowly again, and then one of the group closes the session with a brief prayer.

2. PROMISE AND TRUST

Focus Text : Exodus 17.1-7

Read the following, marking the text for recurring themes and ideas

¹ From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² The people quarreled with Moses, and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” ³ But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” ⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” ⁵ The LORD said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”



Our text for this second study ends with a rather brazen question: Is the LORD among us or not? (v.7). If this were asked by a desperate people seeking reassurance in difficult times, one might have some sympathy. But it is more than that. This people’s discontent is endemic. It is hard to recognise these people as the ones whose misery God had seen, whose cry God had heard and whom God had rescued from oppression.

This passage follows immediately the story of God’s provision of food in the form of quails and manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16) but the end of that chapter speaks of ways in which the people disregard the compassion and provision of God. The story about the people’s thirst picks up where the one about food ended and unfolds in much the same manner. The people appear not to have developed much trust in God from the earlier episode, for again they complain that Moses has brought them out of Egypt only to kill them. The complaints and disregard of God’s provision will only grow worse as the story unfolds. As one writer puts it, the perennial question probed by Exodus is ‘How can God and [humankind] coexist?’ (Propp, 606). But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

IS GOD WITH US OR NOT?

Our text opens with the people moving on in their journey through the wilderness. Two things should be noted at this stage. First, they move on ‘as the Lord commanded.’ This journey is at the Lord’s directive and so when things look grim we can assume there is some divine responsibility involved. Moreover, the people who complain about their journey are not totally self-centred and unresponsive in this calling. Our views of both them and God need to be nuanced. After all, these people have a serious challenge before them. They are ‘stuck between promise and fulfilment’ (Fretheim, 187) and that is not an easy place to be. The wilderness is not just a harsh place to be physically; it is a difficult state of mind to endure. Second, the mention of Rephidim, where they camp, signals to the close reader that the people are nearing the holy mountain where Moses will receive the law. It will be their last stop before Horeb or Sinai (cf. v.6, also 19.1-2; Numbers 33.15).

The people begin to thirst on their journey. In chapter 16 they longed for the so-called ‘fleshpots of Egypt,’ as they grew hungry. Their memories were more than a little selective. The rhetoric in chapter 17 is then inflated: it is not only they who will perish from thirst but also their children and even their livestock (v.3). Moreover, they make Moses the singular subject of their accusation: ‘Why did *you* bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?’ There are echoes here of Moses’ own act of murder back in Egypt and of the last plague on Egypt which saw the death of the Egyptian children. Do the people imply not only that God had no part in their exodus but that Moses betrays them?

When are your memories selective, in crying out to God?

Moses’ response to their ‘Give us water to drink’ is in the form of two questions: ‘Why do you quarrel with me?’ and ‘Why do you test the Lord?’ To what degree is Moses responsible, and are they not ultimately testing God in this? Moses’ use of the words ‘quarrel’ or ‘contest’ (Hebrew: *rib*) and ‘test’ (Hebrew: *nasa*) in his questions will be echoed at the end of the passage when Moses names the place Meribah and Massah. Thirst may be the presenting issue but it is not the real issue. In questioning Moses’ provision, they are in effect questioning God’s faithfulness and providence. It is a matter of trust and presence – trust in God and in God’s presence with them. The underlying issue is about what God had said in Exodus 3.

In the story preceding our focus text, Moses and God became annoyed only when the people tried to gather manna on the Sabbath, which had been prohibited (Exodus 16.27-30). In our focus text, Moses complains immediately to God with some highly-charged rhetoric of his own. His patience has worn thin: ‘What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me’ (17.4). It may be a little comfort to present day church leadership to note that having a whinge about the recalcitrant flock has ancient antecedents.

PROMISE AND TRUST

In vv.5-6, the Lord instructs Moses in what he is to do. He is to take some of the elders and go ahead of the people, taking in his hand the staff with which he parted the Nile (Exodus 7.20), and go to the rock at Horeb. The Lord promises to go ahead of him and, when Moses strikes the rock, to give water so that the people may drink. It may sound like a simple act but there are layers of meaning hidden here. First, there is the choice of staff: the very one with which Moses had struck the Nile in the first plague, turning the water to blood and making it undrinkable. What robbed the Egyptians of life-giving water will now be used to provide water for the Israelites. By implication, the One who acted to deliver in such a dramatic way can again be counted on to deliver the people from threats to life. If the people's complaint to Moses of their thirst was meant to recall events in Egypt, namely Moses' act of murder and the final plague, then this new act by God through Moses recalls the people's deliverance and rubs their noses in their lack of perception.

Second, the instruction to Moses still leaves lots of issues to be pondered. One writer says: 'God's leading does not always move directly towards oases' (Fretheim, 188). Moses is still required to obey and trust, as are the people who will follow. Moses moves ahead of the people with some elders. The people will not, we might presume, see this 'miracle' but only benefit from its outcome. For its nature they will need to rely on the witness of others. And how will Moses, who has not been allowed to see God so far know the rock on which God stands? The focus of the story remains on God's promised presence with Moses and the people, rather than on any suggestion of magical powers vested in Moses or the staff. It remains on the need for trust and obedience rather than on convincing evidence. That is the way of relationships. The people are not taken to a place where water is present but to a rock from which God will bring water. There is a world of difference there.

Where in your life, or that of your church, does there reside a desire for 'magical power' rather than trust?

Why might this be the case – that God does not always lead directly to oases? Or is it just 'given' that it is so?

Third, the rock to which Moses is led is no ordinary rock but has a name, Horeb. The reference to Horeb connects this story strongly with the call of Moses back in Exodus 3. This 'rock' is the same mountain on which God appeared to Moses in the burning bush. The promise of return to the mountain in Exodus 3.12 is fulfilled. But this mountain is the place where Moses will receive the tablets of law. A similar cross-link occurs in the story of water in the wilderness. Water and its life-saving quality cannot be separated from what we might term 'word.' Water and law are both associated with the idea of covenant in Jewish thought. In Christian tradition this is precisely what we hear from the lips of Jesus to Satan in the wilderness temptations, paraphrasing Deuteronomy 8.3: 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone [we could add, or *water* alone], but by every word that comes from the mouth of God"' (Matthew 4.4). And

IS GOD WITH US OR NOT?

then to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 Jesus says: 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' And later, 'Everyone who drinks of this water [the water of Jacob's well] will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (vv.10, 14).

And fourth, not only does this 'rock' have a name that associates it with the giving of law but it bears other cosmic symbolism. In the ancient world gods were seen to dwell on mountains and from beneath their residences, their temples, would flow life-giving streams of water. Within the Bible echoes of this are evident in the description of the temple in Jerusalem (in Ezekiel 47.1-12; Joel 4.18; Zechariah 13.1; 14.8, etc.) When God appears in other passages the mountains run with water (Judges 5.5; Isa 30.25; Micah 1.4 etc.). The story is cast in terms of a thirsty people needing water and God meeting the needs of the moment. But it speaks of trust in a life-sustaining presence and of a God whose response to our thirst is not simply a drink of water but rather living water that gushes up to eternal life.

In a church facing difficult questions in a rapidly changing world, trust in the life-giving presence of God is all that can sustain us.

Where might such trust be required of you or of your church?

The story ends quickly. We are not actually told that the water did come out from the rock; the emphasis is clearly not on the magic. Instead, the passage ends with Moses naming the place Massah and Meribah, the place of testing and quarrelling, playing on the people's quarrelling and testing of the Lord. Those names become legendary in Old Testament times, symbolic of the people's sin (cf. Deuteronomy 6.16; Psalms 78.18, 41, 56; 81.7; 95.8).

Summing up

We may sum up the people's rebellion in a question which is not part of the original complaint: 'Is the Lord among us or not?' This is the theological issue at stake, the people's trust in God's presence and provision. Testing God, as one writer puts it, is simply making belief contingent upon demonstration, 'turning faith into sight.' Ultimately it makes God subservient, questions God's Godness and misunderstands faith (Fretheim, 189). The people's complaint to Moses is all the more offensive in that it comes so soon on the heels of having experienced God's deliverance through the sea and faithful provision in the wilderness. The scandalous brevity of the people's memory only serves to prepare us for the terrible doubt about God's presence that will afflict them in the golden calf incident (Exodus 32). John Durham remarks on the people's doubt (Durham, 232):

PROMISE AND TRUST

Their thirst was real, but infinitely *more* real was the powerful Presence of Yahweh in their midst. The lesser reality they embraced; the more important reality they ignored and doubted: so once more, [God] dealt with the lesser reality by way of demonstration of the greater, underlying reality.

All of this builds toward a central issue in the book of Exodus. In the first study we saw that two major themes of the book were worship and liberation. Both are, however, concerned with the issue of the proof of Yahweh's presence with the people and of their rebellion born of doubt. We might wonder how it could be that God and humankind can coexist. If there is any suggestion of an answer in the book itself, then it lies in the geography set before us and the names given to places. This story takes place at the rock called Horeb. In Exodus 3 it was also called 'the mountain of God' (v.1). It is where the water of life flows from beneath the divine abode. That 'holy ground,' as Exodus 3 referred to it, is itself named by Moses Massah and Meribah, the place of testing and quarrelling. It will be those same waters in which later Moses disposes of the dust from the dissolved golden calf (Exodus 32.20; cf. Deuteronomy 9.21). God's own dwelling, God's mountain, bears the name and marks of the people's rebellion and doubt. How can God and humankind coexist? Only by the grace, as we would call it, of God's compassionate presence with us: Immanuel, 'God-with-us' This side of the eschaton, God's people must live with the dual reality of their rebellious doubt and the presence of God in our midst. It is the latter that is this people's hope.

What does divine-human co-existence look like for you today?
For the church?

Where is rebellious doubt active in your life, or in that of your faith community?

Summary questions for discussion

What divine promises mark your life?

What does your trust in these promises look like?

What does doubt look like?

Closing devotion

Read the following psalm slowly, perhaps responsively, or each member taking a verse in turn, or with just one voice.

Psalm 78.1-4, 12-16

¹ Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

² I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old,

IS GOD WITH US OR NOT?

³ things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us.

⁴ We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

¹² In the sight of their ancestors he worked marvels in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan.

¹³ He divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap.

¹⁴ In the daytime he led them with a cloud, and all night long with a fiery light.

¹⁵ He split rocks open in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep.

¹⁶ He made streams come out of the rock, and caused waters to flow down like rivers.

Share together anything which the psalm evokes for you.

Have a single voice read the psalm slowly again, and then one of the group closes the session with a brief prayer.

3. CRAVING (AND) LEADERSHIP

Focus Text : Numbers 11.10-30

Read the following, marking the text for recurring themes and ideas

¹⁰ Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased. ¹¹ So Moses said to the LORD, “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favour in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ¹² Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,’ to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? ¹³ Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ ¹⁴ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. ¹⁵ If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once – if I have found favour in your sight – and do not let me see my misery.”

¹⁶ So the LORD said to Moses, “Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. ¹⁷ I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself. ¹⁸ And say to the people: Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wailed in the hearing of the LORD, saying, ‘If only we had meat to eat! Surely it was better for us in Egypt.’ Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. ¹⁹ You shall eat not only one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, ²⁰ but for a whole month -- until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you -- because you have rejected the LORD who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, ‘Why did we ever leave Egypt?’” ²¹ But Moses said, “The people I am with number six hundred thousand on foot; and you say, ‘I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month!’ ²² Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for them? Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?” ²³ The LORD said to Moses, “Is the LORD’s power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.”

²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. ²⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.

IS GOD WITH US OR NOT?

²⁶ Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” ²⁸ And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, “My lord Moses, stop them!” ²⁹ But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!” ³⁰ And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.



We jump now out of Exodus into Numbers. Our principal passage for this study follows almost immediately upon the people’s departure from Horeb, the mountain of God where Moses has received the law. Some things do not change for this people in spite of their experiences. The very first thing they do upon leaving the mountain is complain (v.1). We are not told what the complaint is about but we know it is serious because God reacts violently. After reading Numbers 1-10, which speaks of the people’s total obedience to God and Moses, this comes as a shock.

Only as we read on do we understand the complaint: it is about food again. A so-called ‘rabble,’ or small group among the people, have a craving for meat. Manna is not enough. God’s menu is insufficient for them and they stir the whole people to weeping (vv.4-6). The menu of captivity in Egypt is remembered in fond terms – cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic.

This story about a craving for more than manna is combined with another about Moses’ difficulty in leading the people. This has already been dealt with in Exodus 18 but rears its head again here. The two issues – meat and leadership – are interrelated in the present text. We will deal with them one at a time but will come back briefly later to consider what meat might have to do with leadership and vice-versa.

Matters of meat

First, matters of meat. As the passage opens the people are weeping, presumably sharing the craving for meat by the ‘rabble’ earlier in v.4. The Lord is very angry with the people. Moses is displeased with the Lord, but we are not sure yet why. The normal processes for meeting the people’s needs in the wilderness seem to have broken down. Instead of intercession, Moses resorts to direct confrontation, complaining to the Lord. Instead of Moses’ usual close tie with the people, he sets himself over against the people.

CRAVING (AND) LEADERSHIP

Another thing about the start of this episode is that this time the people's complaint is much more specific than previously. The grumbling of the people concerns dissatisfaction with what the Lord has supplied for food, namely the manna. There is no mention of the quails which were associated with the manna back in Exodus 16. It is the daily menu that is the problem, not provisions in general. It is about placing desire before need (vv.4-9). But it is more than that. The daily manna was intended to teach the people to trust God for the provisions of the day. We might compare the saying of Jesus in Matthew 6.31-33:

³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

The request for daily bread in the Lord's Prayer makes the same point: being satisfied with the gifts God has given for daily life. At its worst it is an act of hubris – of setting oneself in place of God – to determine for oneself what is necessary. This was the sin of Eden. It is also something modern western society knows all about when our desire outstrips our need, with our acceptance of built-in obsolescence in most things we consume, with our waste of food and other goods, and our hunger for energy with little regard for the long term effects.

To what extent is God responsible for meeting desires, in addition to needs?

The outcome of the matter of meat is delayed for a time as the narrative moves on to deal with our second major issue, that of leadership. When it is taken up again in v.18 the story sounds quite regular. The people are called to consecrate themselves for the next day, as they would do before any major religious festival or event (cf. Exodus 19.10). The Lord promises meat for the people, enough not just for 1, 2, 5, 10 or 20 days but enough for a month. Such graciousness, we might presume, but it is to be enough meat for a month 'until it comes out your nostrils and makes you nauseous' (so the Hebrew) – not a nice scene by any measure. When the quails do come following our present text, the people find themselves waist deep in bird carcasses and feathers, and when God sends a plague against them, they die with the meat still caught in their teeth (vv.31-35). The place where this happens is given the name Kibroth-hattaavah, 'Graves of craving.' There is something rather petulant about God's action here but the point is clear about trust giving way to arrogance.

What makes satisfaction with enough for daily life difficult to achieve?

IS GOD WITH US OR NOT?

The matter of leadership

Second, there is the matter of leadership. This part of the story builds on two previous stories, one in Exodus 18 – a parallel to this one about leadership – and one in Exodus 33 regarding God's leadership after the episode with the golden calf.

When Moses addresses God first in our passage, ostensibly about the people's weeping, the first person pronoun 'I' or 'me' stands out in the Hebrew. Moses does not speak to God about the people's complaint but makes his own.

¹⁰ Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased. ¹¹ So Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favour in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ¹² Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? ¹³ Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' ¹⁴ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. ¹⁵ If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once – if I have found favour in your sight – and do not let me see my misery" (Numbers 11.10-15).

His complaint is all about himself – being treated badly by God, bearing the burden of the people alone, seeing his own misery. The speech is telling. This all started when God saw the misery of the Israelites in Egypt. Now Moses worries about his own misery. Both the people and Moses have failed. It is not that Moses' point about shared leadership is not genuine. The problem is the way he sees himself in the role and of his perception of God's part in all this. As one writer puts it, Moses acts as if he is the eagle upon whose wings Israel is carried. The people may be a heavy burden to bear but Moses is not the only one who bears it, and his suffering, like that of Jeremiah, can be a form of intercession (e.g. cf. Jeremiah 15.15-18; 20.7-18). As the same writer remarks, though leadership is God's gift,

...when push comes to shove, what is essential is not the character of the Lord's leaders but the character of the Lord. The One who has carried them thus far on their journey is the One, and the only one, who can be trusted to carry them home. (Boyce 149)

CRAVING (AND) LEADERSHIP

God does not simply leave the people alone even in their rebellion. Nor does God call the leaders of God's people simply to let them bear the burden alone. The greatest failure of a leader in the context of this story is precisely forgetting these things. When this journey began with Exodus 3, we noted that a strong relationship developed between God and Moses. Forgetting that relationship is disastrous.

What further does the passage say about leadership of God's people? It is not entirely clear what jobs these leaders are given. They are simply called 'elders' and also 'scribes' in v.16 ('officers' in the NRSV). The term 'scribe' suggests administrative positions or recorders in some way. After they receive God's spirit they prophesy (v.25) but only once. Maybe there is an issue about prophecy here for later editors. It need not detain us here. What is stressed and important for us is the issue of the limits of such gifted leadership and the way God's spirit operates within the community.

When, in your experience of leadership (yours, or others'), has this relational link been especially important?

By way of contrast to Moses' use of the first person pronoun ('I,' 'me') early in the passage, toward the end the word 'spirit' appears several times. It provides a balance to Moses' earlier self-pity. Leadership within the people of faith is a joint task between God (we might say, as Holy Spirit) and those charged with ministry and mission within the community.

But more than that is said. The procedure described for designating these seventy elders as Moses' assistants, and for apportioning a share of the divine spirit, makes it clear that matters of authorisation and accountability were important for leadership. Leadership was not given or accepted without authorisation and recognition of gifts. However, in spite of all the institutional trappings of gathering at the tent of meeting, encircling the tent and then the gift of the spirit, it is clear that God's spirit is not limited in any way. It moves to its own tune. Two others, Eldad and Medad, who had remained in the camp, also received the spirit and prophesied, much to the confusion of Joshua and others (v.26). It is not clear whether these two were elders or not. What is clear in the end is that Moses also recognises the freedom of God's spirit to move and call people to leadership as it will. God's spirit speaks both from the margins of God's people as well as from the centre. As he dealt with the matter of meat for the people, Moses at one moment points out that the people number at least 600,000. How could he feed them all meat? In turn the Lord asks: 'Is the Lord's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.' Ostensibly, the Lord's reply is about the number of people to be fed. But it is as much a question about the way Moses exercises his leadership as it is an existential question about God for us. How does Moses view God's power? Encouragingly, Moses' reply to Joshua's concern regarding Eldad and Medad

What do we affirm if we say that God's power is *not* limited? What *don't* we mean?

IS GOD WITH US OR NOT?

shows signs of movement from the self-pity of his earlier complaint to a more open perspective which embraces a fuller understanding of the presence of God with the community and with him (Numbers 11.29): But Moses said to (Joshua), 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!'

Summing up

A few summary remarks by way of a conclusion to this passage.

- One thing is clear as the people move on from their stay at the mountain of God. No amount of religious experience or intensity or quality can guarantee a change of heart in this people. Our focus episode in this study is but one in a series of rebellious episodes with more complaints, bitter infighting and jealousy to come.
- Moses' complaint about leadership (vv.12-15) is really rooted in a theological problem about divine guidance and presence. This whole story revolves around the question: 'Is the Lord among us or not?' This is not an existential question, at least not in the first instance, but one of faith and belief. And maybe asking the question in that vein is more dangerous than asking the existential one. 'Is the Lord among us or not?' and what difference does it make to us?
- But Moses is also faced with the problem of conflicting expectations of his leadership: those of God and those of the people. Two views of leadership clash in this passage. God advocates a leadership that is nurturing and there for the long haul. It requires a spreading out of gifts and burdens. On the other hand, the people demand meat in the present. Moses is caught in the middle. The real problem comes when a leader begins to view the persistent and overflowing 'blessing' of leadership as a 'curse.' It is easy to understand and succumb to the temptation. It is easy to lose sight of the longer term picture of what such a life of faith and leadership in the faith involves. Moses' final response to Joshua is prophetic in a way. What he wishes for is spoken of again in Joel 2.28 regarding the pouring out of God's spirit on all. It is what is picked up in Pentecost. Leadership is eschatological.
- This leads to a last point. As one writer comments on this text:

'as revealed in the Scriptures, God is engaged in a constant battle against the solitary nature of our lives; whether as individuals ... as deliverers ... or as spiritual leaders ...' Even when we know we cannot do it alone, we always seem to assume that we are. (Boyce, 150)

What does this – leadership as a curse – look like in your experience?

Where is this the case for you or your community? What has the experience of the Israelites to say to you?

CRAVING (AND) LEADERSHIP

Summary questions for discussion

Where have 'craving for meat' put unnecessary, even destructive, pressure on you or your faith community?

In what way can leadership be from and towards God's promised future?

How could church leadership, in your experience, be more hooked into its 'relationship to God' aspect?

Closing devotion

Read the following psalm slowly, perhaps responsively, or each member taking a verse in turn, or with just one voice.

Psalm 19.7-14

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple;

⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;

⁹ the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

¹¹ Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

¹² But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

¹³ Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

Share together anything which the psalm evokes for you.

Have a single voice read the psalm slowly again, and then one of the group closes the session with a brief prayer.

4. FACING GOD

Focus Text : Exodus 33.12-23

Read the following, marking the text for recurring themes and ideas

¹² Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ ¹³ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” ¹⁴ He said, “My *presence* will go with you, and I will give you rest.” ¹⁵ And he said to him, “If your *presence* will not go, do not carry us up from here. ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.” ¹⁷ The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”

¹⁸ Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” ¹⁹ And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘the LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰ But,” he said, “you cannot see *my face*; for no one shall see me and live.” ²¹ And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³ then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but *my face* shall not be seen.”



Exodus 33 arguably lies at the heart of the Exodus tradition.

Moses reveals himself as a ‘show me’ kind of guy in this text. He makes two requests of God: ‘show me your ways’ (v.13) and ‘Show me your glory’ (v.18), walking a fine line between stubbornness or arrogance on the one hand and ignorance on the other. He also walks a fine line between something that may bring life and something that may end it all. Of course, Moses is a character in a piece of literature crafted by a clever writer: Moses gets the balance right and thus serves as a model for those who consider his story.

FACING GOD

The passage is heavy with words of 'seeing' (7 times), 'knowing, perceiving' (6 times), with the word 'face' in reference to God (4 times) and we hear of Moses 'finding favour in God's eyes' (5 times). It is all about God's presence with Moses and the people and the latter's security and assurance of that. This presence is what Moses wants God to 'show' him.

The context of our focus text is important. We have just heard about the golden calf (Exodus 32). Israel has betrayed God. One writer calls that episode 'an irreversible reality that will endlessly haunt both parties' (Brueggemann, 937). At the start of chapter 33 things have gotten bad. God tells Moses to leave the mountain for the Promised Land but God will not go with them. God will send a messenger with them but for once in the Old Testament such a messenger is not a code for God's own presence (vv.1-6). We then hear (vv.7-11) of God's continued descent upon the tent of meeting but again things have changed. God will talk to Moses in the tent, but not to the people.

So begins our passage with Moses pleading three times with God for the people. Each time the issue of God's presence with them is taken deeper and we see a courageous stubbornness on Moses' part and a compassionate openness on God's. The future of God's people is something that will be worked out in that context.

Who will go for us?' (vv.12-17)

Moses' first conversation with God in our passage is fraught with tension. Twice he quotes from God's own words. The first quote is, 'bring up this people' (v.12, cf. 32.13) –the basic mission God gave Moses in Exodus 3. He then states that the Lord has not shown him who God will send with him. Even a divine messenger is not enough for Moses. Moses really wants to know if God will rescind the earlier decision and be with them.

He then reminds the Lord that the Lord has said that he knows Moses' name and that Moses has found favour in the Lord's sight. But even this is not enough, for Moses then makes the first request: 'show me your ways.' It is not totally clear what he means by this. Is Moses asking about God's intentions, or about the way he is to take through the desert, or is he using 'ways' less literally and asking about God's behaviour or characteristics? There are several possible meanings and they would all be reasonable requests.

Before clarity is reached, however, the conversation moves on. Moses reminds God of the people for whom God is also responsible (v.13). God's 'ways' involve them too even though God is totally fed up with them. At this point various interesting twists enter the conversation. Moses doubts even his own standing before the Lord in spite of the Lord's assurance. God now speaks for the first time: 'My face (or presence) will go and I will give you rest' (v.14). Some of

IS GOD WITH US OR NOT?

our English Bibles translate this, 'My presence will go *with you*,' but the last two words are not in the Hebrew. The Lord never seems to answer a question straight, and what rest is God talking about? Moses does not let the matter go. If the Lord will not go *with them* (the Hebrew does have Moses say these two words) then let them not proceed with this exodus charade any more. Moses expresses a genuine concern for the people and their distinctiveness (v.16), in spite of their behaviour.

In another twist in the story, the first conversation finishes with a concession on the Lord's part: 'I will do the very thing you have asked for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name' (v.17). Moses wants to know the Lord's presence, to be certain of it. In fact, in a subtle literary move the writer stresses that what is important and certain for Moses and the people is not his knowledge of the Lord but the Lord's knowledge of him. That is the language of covenant commitment. This raises the interesting question 'whence our security?' Does it lie in our knowledge and control of life around us, through our budgets, our strategies, mission statements, or corporate risk management plans etc. or in God's knowledge and claim upon us?

What difference does this inversion make – not knowing but *known*?

This first conversation leaves Moses with some satisfaction but still not yet totally clear on the nature of God's presence with the people (vv.15-17). At least he knows, as Fretheim states (Fretheim, 298):

God will take into account what such human beings think and say and incorporate that into a renewed shaping of the future. The future is thus shown not to be all blocked out; God is open to moving from decisions made in view of human words and deeds in consonance with the gracious divine purposes.

In other words, God's diary for the immediate future is not all filled up with immoveable appointments. God is open to our thoughts and words.

How might this influence the way in which we – *you* – might approach God?

A game of pious peek-a-boo (vv.18-23)

Matters are not quite settled for Moses. He makes a second request: 'Show me your glory' (v.18). He wants to see beyond God's ways now to another mode of divine presence – God's 'awesome, shrouded, magisterial presence' (Brueggemann, 939). He wants an even closer sense of God's presence. Interestingly, God also takes this request seriously, but does not grant it. God responds with four affirmations: God will make all God's 'goodness' pass before Moses; God will proclaim before Moses the name, 'the Lord'; God will be gracious to whom God will; and

FACING GOD

will likewise show mercy to whom God will. Moses gets a little closer to God each time and God is generous in these concessions but Moses never touches the core of divine being and life. God carefully protects that.

What God's 'goodness' is that Moses will see is not altogether clear. The word can imply 'beauty' or 'splendour,' but some think of it more as God's material blessings upon the people, or God's *shalom* which also touches on matters of peace. Alternatively, it could refer to the attributes of God rather than the person, as the Rabbis have understood (Propp, 607). Goodness usually signals activity so maybe it refers to the things God does. Is the point that it is more important to know what *kind* of God this is than to 'see' God (Fretheim, 299)? God will also proclaim before Moses the name *Yahweh*. This is about God's sovereign character, but Moses has already heard this name back at the burning bush (3.14; cf. 6.2 and 34.6-7). In the earlier episode, the giving of the name was not overly revealing in any case. At each stage Moses 'sees' a little more, but the overall scene remains a mystery.

While God closes off the discussion with these affirmations (Brueggemann, 940), God has not finished yet for, in another generous act, the Lord says that while Moses cannot see God's face, God will pass by. God will hide Moses in a cleft in the rock and, having passed by, Moses will be allowed to see the back of God (vv.20-23). It is apparently less dangerous than God's 'face.' In a paradoxical touch, it will be God's own hand which will cover Moses until the appropriate time.

There is something very physical about this scene – sight, sound, faces and backs, hiding vision by the hand before seeing. It is indeed a game of pious peek-a-boo. In that sense it echoes the mixture of physicality and mystery that was involved in the scene of the burning bush. That is the nature of divine presence. We only ever see 'in a mirror dimly' as Paul puts it (1 Corinthians 13.12). Any sense of divine presence beyond that 'would be coercive' as one writer puts it, with faith turned into sight and humankind left with no option but to believe. While Moses sees only the Lord's back and must live with the necessary mystery of God, he will have other indicators of God's presence: the law (or God's 'ways,' as it may be put), together with the means and the symbols of worship. Altogether, these are indicators of the Lord's presence and the means of knowing God's favour. The presence of the Lord, while ambiguous and mysterious in some ways, is in others tangibly evident in the midst of the people. And that is all that is needed for our faithful response: the means and symbols of worship and the word, in Christian terms understood in and through Jesus Christ.

In what sense would a full view of God be coercive?

How are the law and the symbols of worship a means of knowing God's favour?

IS GOD WITH US OR NOT?

Moses' request to see God's glory was met with a denial, 'for you cannot see me and live' (v.20). What does not threaten life but enables it within God's covenant community is what governs the nature of our engagement with God. As Walter Brueggemann puts it in relation to God's last response to Moses: 'In this last utterance, God draws a protective cover around the inscrutable mystery of God.' and further 'It is enough to notice that the struggle for and with God's presence is complicated and hard fought. It admits of and requires a diversity of articulations, none of which can alone say all that must be said' (Brueggemann, 940). There is self-disclosure by God but only with qualification. Even then we note that our passage ends with the passing of God's glory still remaining a prospect, not yet realised.

How, in your experience, has God's self-disclosure been 'qualified'?

Concluding remarks

A few points by way of conclusion (after Brueggemann, 941f):

- First, God continues in fidelity towards the people and God's people are called to continue in obedience, even in light of the betrayal of the golden calf episode.
- Second, a primary message for the church in all this is that survival depends not on strategy, on our faithfulness, or even on courageous leadership, but on God's presence in our midst. Without the recognition of the holiness that is in our midst – the One who is wholly Other, and who has compassion and mercy on whomever it is desired, the One who is the source and end of our life – then certain relationships will be precluded, or will become brutal or empty.
- Third, while a meeting between the Lord and the people is still possible after the golden calf, it does take leadership that is prepared to risk confronting God with hard questions and requests: leaders which, like Moses, risk the encounter with the Holy One in support of the people; whose prayer and proclamation is primarily theological and concerned with the presence and person of God and God's relationship with the people; who does not let God choose the limits of prayer and proclamation and theological enquiry, but who knows when and how to acknowledge both God's sovereignty and their own freedom in prayer.

How might leadership in your community be developed in this way?

Finally, only at the end of this story is a limit established on what God will reveal to God's people. God's story with Israel involves a tension between self-giving and self-reserve. That is both a model for leadership in ministry and for humanity in general. We have inherited a church in which self-giving has at times become idolatrous. We live in a society in which self-reserve is all but worshipped. In Jesus Christ, God lives out that tension in a way that offers new life.

FACING GOD

Summary questions for discussion

What does the tension between God's self-giving and self-reserve mean for discipleship?

How do you see this tension lived out in the ministry of Jesus?

Closing devotion

Read the following psalm slowly, perhaps responsively, or each member taking a verse in turn, or with just one voice.

Psalm 99

¹ The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!

² The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples.

³ Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he!

⁴ Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.

⁵ Extol the LORD our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!

⁶ Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the LORD, and he answered them.

⁷ He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them.

⁸ O LORD our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings.

⁹ Extol the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the LORD our God is holy.

Share together anything which the psalm evokes for you.

Have a single voice read the psalm slowly again, and then one of the group closes the session with a brief prayer.

IS GOD WITH US OR NOT?

For reflection on the entire study

What might the character of the relationship between the God of the Exodus and the people of the Exodus mean for your personal faith journey, and that of your faith community?

In what ways might the relationship between Moses and God affect the way you pray?

In what ways might the discussion of leadership in these studies affect your relationship and expectations of the leaders in your faith community, or your own exercise of leadership?

Also available

Bruce Barber

The Lord's Prayer: Prayer for those who can no longer pray

Craig Thompson

Reading the Creed Backwards: the Shape and Direction of Christian Faith

Forthcoming in 2018

Bruce Barber

The Apostles' Creed: The historic faith of the Christian Church in a culture of indifference

Craig Thompson

The Song of Songs: Four Advent Studies

To be notified of when new studies become available, subscribe to our email list via the links on the web site address below.

www.marktheevangelist.unitingchurch.org.au

Is God among us or not – Version Date: July 2018