

Speak up, God: Exodus 33:12-23

## **We cannot return to a pre-calf existence when the fullness of God could be seen more clearly.**

by [Martha Greene](#) in the [September 25, 2002](#) issue

In the *Front Line* television documentary “Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero,” an angry man who has lost many friends expresses rage toward God. “I don’t have problems with the Son,” he says, “but I have real problems with the Father.” This denouncement of the first person of the Trinity is evidence that there is still, as there was for the Israelites, an unbridgeable abyss between God and humanity. Even though God has revealed himself fully in Jesus Christ, there is the sense in which God remains hidden.

As I read the dialogue between Moses and Yahweh in the Hebrew scripture, I envy Moses’ intimacy with the Holy One. It is an intimacy that is rare for believers today. The scripture lesson is oddly woven; there are threads of intimacy and distance, threads of the overt freedom of God and the self-limitation of God. The intimacy lies in Yahweh’s longing to be with his people, so much so that Yahweh cohabitates with them in tents and speaks to Moses face to face, as a friend speaks to a friend. Yet Yahweh also places his hand over Moses’ face so that Moses cannot behold his face. And Yahweh extends favor to Moses even as he says, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious,” underscoring the freedom of God.

Moses’ third intercession occurs in the “post-calf” period, when he requests that Yahweh once again “go up,” or lead the Israelites out of the pit of idolatrous sin and dwell with them. Yahweh is reluctant to accompany Moses and the Israelites to the land flowing with milk and honey, but when Moses pleads with Yahweh to consider Israel as his people, Yahweh relents. So much for the immutability of God!

The fourth intercession is Moses’ daring, brash demand to see Yahweh’s glory. Moses knows that seeing the glory will be reassurance of Yahweh’s presence. “Show me a sign, a neon sign, anything,” a young woman said to God in a counseling session, when she wanted to know God’s will in an agonizing decision. We want

unambiguous signs, but today's theophanies are more subtle. And yet I wonder, what faith would there be in a world where the Creator intruded so powerfully that we would have no choice but to believe? What freedom would we have if we were coerced into faith?

Yahweh tells Moses that his face will remain forever hidden, for anyone who sees the face of Yahweh will not live. This statement is often cited as a universal description of the holy otherness and imperceptibility of God, but anyone familiar with other texts will hear the soft whisper of a reply, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8), or "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!" (John 14:9). Our inability to see God or, even more, to know God is related to covenant infidelity and covenant betrayal. Yet we hope to live with a beatific vision of God and life even if we cannot see his blinding glory.

Walter Brueggemann suggests that the primary condition for reentering into relationship with God and experiencing his presence following covenant betrayal is the "stripping of ornaments." We are blinded by "commodity fetishes" and by our assignment of status to ornaments and the material world. Religious vision is found in unfettered simplicity.

God tells Moses that he will be known through proclamation. "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you." Knowledge of God is facilitated by *hearing* the word. Sight, it appears, does not tell us much about either divine or human behavior. When someone appears at my office door, I often learn more from the voice than the face, which is frequently a mask.

We cannot return to a pre-calf existence when the fullness of God could be seen more clearly. We are left instead with the task of knowing God through our obedience. Knowledge of God becomes a volitional matter.

"How shall we begin to know who You are if we do not begin ourselves to be something of what You are?" asks Thomas Merton. "We receive enlightenment only in proportion as we give ourselves more and more completely to God by humble submission and love. We do not first see, then act: we act, then see. . . . And that is why the man who waits to see clearly, before he will believe, never starts on the journey."

We all go through periods in life when, like the Israelites, we feel that the presence of God has been withdrawn. The structure of faith remains, but it feels like an uninhabited structure. When this happens we try to fill the void by buying things or browsing through travel magazines. The void reminds us that God is not at our beck and call and cannot be domesticated by our wishes or demands. When we are in a dilemma or a crisis, we will not always see what God is doing. But years later, we may come to understand the quiet and hidden things God has been doing in our lives.