

The hidden God (Exodus 33:12-23)

The God of Moses is both intimate and mysterious, known and unknowable.

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Moses has an intimate relationship with God who, in Exodus 33, tells him, “I know you by name” and “My Presence will go with you.” And yet, this intimacy also has boundaries. There is a distance between God and Moses, because God is too good, too mighty, too glorious for anyone, even Moses, to see and to know fully: “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live . . . you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”

The God of Moses is both intimate and mysterious here, known and unknowable.

I turned 40 a few months ago, and with the very beginnings of what I might dare to call wisdom, I now lean into God’s mystery in a way that I could not when I was younger. Armed with the catechism I learned in my childhood church, the apologetics of C. S. Lewis and others, and my own inquisitive and deeply rational way of thinking, I wanted to know and to defend my God and my faith. Every question had to be answered, and so my personal relationship with God was deeply tied to my defensible knowledge of God. I acknowledged the mysteries of God but did not lean into them.

Take, for example, the Westminster Confession of Faith that shaped so much of my early beliefs: “The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending to the will of God revealed in His

Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election.” Without getting into the particular claims for or against the theology of predestination articulated here, this excerpt illustrates the way “mystery” for a long time circled back to “certainty” and “assured[ness]” for me. Mystery was part of the journey to certainty, but not, for me, to intimacy.

Today, however, the unknowable, unseeable, unsayable aspects of God are a profound part of my intimate sense of being in relationship with God. The very fact that I do not have a tidy answer to every question, that nuance and paradox and doubt and revision abound, tethers me intimately to a God who I both know and will never fully know.

The imagery of Exodus 33 confesses this coupling of intimacy and mystery. The unseeable God reaches out to the unseeing man and covers him with God’s own hand. This is an intimate and protective laying of hands, a loving touch on Moses’s head, at the very same time as God’s back is turned from Moses’ eyes. God’s mystery is, here, an intimately felt thing. As Fanny Crosby wrote in a 1890 hymn, “He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock that shadows a dry, thirsty land. / He hideth my life in the depths of his love, and covers me there with his hand, / And covers me there with his hand.”