



# What Part of God?

*Exodus 33:12-23*

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Next week, millions of people could have the opportunity to witness something incredible -- Something truly amazing. This coming Thursday afternoon, weather permitting, people all across North America will have a chance to observe a partial solar eclipse. Although next Thursday's solar event may not be as spectacular as a total eclipse, the sight of the moon gradually moving across the face of the sun still fills most people with awe. But what's the one thing they're always drumming into our heads about an eclipse? That's right -- Don't look at it!

**“WARNING:** Never look directly at the sun through binoculars, a telescope or with your unaided eye. Serious eye damage and even blindness can result.” In some ways a partial eclipse is more dangerous to observe than a full one. People naturally want to look at it, and this defeats our normal reflex to look away from the sun.

I couldn't have dreamed up a better illustration for today's Old Testament lesson than a solar eclipse. It's perfect!

In this morning's reading we find ourselves smack dab in the middle of an argument between Moses and God. An argument – between Moses and God! They are having a discussion about the shape of God's relationship with the newly formed people of Israel.

I have to admit to being a little jealous of Moses. Not all the time, what with the whole 'let my people go' thing, but sometimes I envy Moses' intimacy with the Holy One. I can't think of anyone nowadays that has that kind of relationship with God – that kind of intimacy. God actually says to Moses, “I will do what you ask” Wow. But God will only go so far, as we shall see...

Today's reading comes right on the heels of the Golden Calf incident in Exodus 32. As with any argument, when you come in right in the middle you never quite get the gist of the thing, do you?

Let's see if I can get you up to snuff on all that's happened.

With Moses help, God brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, and started up a special relationship with them, telling them in Exodus 19, “...if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth

is mine, <sup>6</sup> but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” Then God gave them the Ten Commandments and some really long-winded and detailed instructions on exactly how to build the tabernacle; which is pretty interesting if you want to read it – it’s in Exodus 25. And 26, and 27, and 28, almost seven whole chapters are devoted to the tabernacle.

God had promised to dwell in the midst of them; the tabernacle was supposed to be a visible sign of the permanent indwelling of God – kind of a portable Mt. Sinai. God's glory would rest in the tabernacle the same way it rested in the cloud on the mountain. God would be present in a tangible way as the Israelites wandered through the wilderness.

The problem is that by the time we get to today’s passage, the people have really messed up this time -- pretty badly. In Exodus 32, Moses is only gone for just over a month and the people convince Aaron, Moses’ second in command, that they need gods to worship. So they melt down their ear rings and jewelry and have big party with burnt offerings and partying. By worshiping the Golden Calf, they betrayed their relationship with God. God’s feelings are hurt -- God is angry and reevaluating the shape of their relationship.

At the beginning of chapter 33, the LORD, who is still angry, said to Moses, "Go, leave this place ...and go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.... I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites... [and all the other people that live there]; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."

So The LORD will send an angel, but will not go personally. God won’t abandon the people – God will keep the covenant made with them at Sinai -- but not the way it had been laid out originally. The LORD's abiding, dwelling presence will not go with the Israelites as they make their way through the wilderness, like God had said. And Moses understandably gets a little bent out of shape. “It’s for their own good, says God.

You see, according to the theology of the Hebrew Bible, the holiness of the LORD, by its very nature, cannot co-exist with sin. Because the people are sinful ("stiff-necked" and stubborn, if you will), God's holiness would consume them on the way. So God will still be present with them, but in a less dangerous, less direct way, an angel.

That's where our reading for today comes in. "The Message" translates it really well, I think. In Exodus 33:12-13, Moses says to God, "Look, you tell me, 'Lead this people,' but you don't let me know whom you're going to send with me. You tell me, 'I know you well and you are special to me.' If I am so special to you, let me in on your plans. That way, I will continue being special to you. Don't forget, this is *your* people, your responsibility."

Moses certainly had *chutzpah* if nothing else! He's back – the recalcitrant, and reluctant, full of excuses Moses we know from the burning bush is back, and now he wants to try and change God's mind. Moses! -- thinks he can change God's mind! And after a little more back and forth – God says, "My presence will go – I'll see this through, I'll keep my promise."

Well that's not good enough for old Moses. Again, from the Message – 33:15-16, Moses says, "If your presence doesn't take the lead here, call this trip off right now. How else will it be known that you're with me in this, with me and your people? Are you traveling with us or not? How else will we know that we're special, I and your people, among all other people on this planet Earth?"

And I can just hear God now, "Fine. I'll go." Score one for Moses. But Moses isn't finished yet, "Show me your glory," he says – to God. Which brings us to the big question in this passage – the meat of the passage.

God said, "I will make my Goodness pass right in front of you; I'll call out the name, God, right before you. I'll treat well whomever I want to treat well and I'll be kind to whomever I want to be kind." God seems to feel the need to remind Moses who's in charge ... – "I'll show mercy when and where I want..." And God continues, "But you may not see my face. No one can see me and live."

And God said, "Look, here is a place right beside me. Put yourself on this rock. When my Glory passes by, I'll put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with my hand until I've passed by. Then I'll take my hand away and you'll see my back. But you won't see my face." You'll see my back. Also translated as back side. The rear, the hinder part, the end, backward, behind, afterward, and hereafter. The word *achore* is used to describe falling backward off a horse, as well as driving back the enemy.

In Proverbs 29:11 it's used this way like this: "A fool uttereth all his mind: but a wise *man* keepeth it in till afterwards." – also translated, 'a wise man holds it back.'

This 'back part of God, then, is a notorious and infamous phrase for theologians and seminary students. Who doesn't, for one naughty moment, delight the thought that God is mooning Moses as payback for his cheeky requests to know more than one can know – get it, cheeky? "You want to see my glory?"

Seriously though, what's happening here? The creator of the whole universe, the God whose glory fills the heavens, has chosen to have a relationship with us. That's amazing!

What that means – as in any human relationship – is that God is taking the risk of becoming vulnerable -- vulnerable to the pain that results when a relationship is betrayed. One of the things that's confusing about God is that while God is supposedly all-powerful, God is also vulnerable. God has feelings.

And that means that authentic face to face communication is possible, and Moses is the model.

Wait a minute – Moses and God used to chat all the time "face to face" and now God won't let Moses see his face? Well yeah...'face' is another word like backside. Adam and Eve hid themselves from the 'face' or presence of God. God gave Adam every herb-bearing seed that is upon the face of the earth. The face, the presence, and with a preposition it becomes 'in front of, to the front, before, in the face of...' It's not just this -- (*face*)

Communication face to face with God. After all, what is prayer but talking with God? Moses models prayer for us; the kind of prayer that isn't afraid to hold God to God's promises and God's love for people, even above God's holiness. And Moses, through the audacity of his face to face communication with God – or prayer as we like to call it -- succeeds. God promises to stay with the Israelites 'til they get where they're going. A promise that still stands, by the way.

I mean, we all go through periods in life where we are sure that God has left us alone – gone on vacation, stepped out for minute, we feel like God's presence has been withdrawn –

we can't see God's face. We try to fill the void with all manner of things – exercise, chocolate, shopping. But this void is a reminder for us that God, as much as God loves us, is not at our beck and call. “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious.” God won't be domesticated – can't be domesticated -- and we don't always see what God is doing behind our backs.

Moses may have won the argument, but he didn't get everything he asked for. Even in prayer 'no' is a fair answer. Moses' request is denied. God is still God. For all his *chutzpah*, Moses can't know or comprehend God completely. None of us can. All we get to see is God's – what? God's wake? God's train?

UC Berkeley Professor of Hebrew and Comparative literature, Robert Alter, calls it the “afterglow of the effulgence of [God's] presence.” We can certainly see the after effects of where God has been, can't we?

It's like looking at the solar eclipse. You can't look right at it – you won't see anything and you could go blind. But if you turn around, you can see clearly as the glorious light of God illuminates everything before you.

You see, we can experience the love of God, the compassion, the faithfulness, and the grace of God; but we can never really know anything of the name of God, the essence, the glory, or the face of God. Maybe it's a need-to-know thing. It will have to do. It's all we have.

Amen.