

Sermon Text for February 17, 2019

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Exodus 3:1-6, Acts 7:30-34

“Looking in the face of God”

We have lived through and continue to be in a turbulent week. But how much of the turbulence that we are experiencing actually affects you directly? I remember a few years ago I wrote an enews article about what keeps me up at night and it was the neighborhood kids who used to come around our church. Some of you rightly so sent me emails that explained how what happens in our government and in our culture may not affect us directly, but will have a major impact upon people that we don't often have contact with while we live here in this neck of the woods of Lancaster County. Our Food Bank forces us to come into contact with some people who are needy within our community, but besides that no one is knocking on your door asking for help.

The same is true for when we read about things that are happening in the news and we just shake our head and then change the channel to Sixers who are having a great season and have a team that is really fun to watch.

I think the reason that is, is because we live in a death denying culture. The culture likes to watch it through peep holes but doesn't want it to enter into our daily lives. We don't mind looking at it, just don't let it affect my life. We all know we are going to die, but we don't want to feel it or even think about it. We don't plan our lives around the certainty of our death. Even our streets signs are affected by this attitude as we have changed the sign from dead end to no outlet. A shock has to happen in order for us to take death, and I would argue even life, seriously.

I think much of what we say about our cultural approach to death can also be applied to God. We don't mind talking about God, even thinking about God. But for many within the culture we don't mind even going to events where God is mentioned such as going to church, even on a weekly basis, even going to concerts and other emotionally uplifting experiences. We don't mind tasting and experiencing God, it makes us feel good.

But don't let God affect my life, much less dictate the direction that my life can ultimately take, or affect my family and the decisions that we make concerning our children. We are perfectly suited to do that and what does the church know about raising children anyway? The every day events, I'll take care of that.

I hope that isn't too cynical, and I hope you don't hear yourself in that parody, but today we look at two very different people in Scripture who each knew God but were in very different places in their lives and in their understanding of God's presence in their lives. There is Stephen whose sermon we have been following now for over a month. His entire life is at stake because he has made God his reason for living and being and he keeps going in the face of death because he is not afraid to face God and listen and learn from God. Then you have Moses, kind of on his own time frame and on his own path and it takes a shock to turn him around so that he can face God and be directed and guided by the Almighty. Some of us need to be shocked to see the importance of God affecting our every day lives. Others of us need to be encouraged as we seek his face constantly.

READ SCRIPTURE

Are you enjoying Stephen's rendition of the life of Moses that we find in Acts? I hope you're coming to love the details of the stories where you see God's hand so visible that we should never doubt that God is in control. From the detail of the basket in the reeds, to the detail of Moses trying to make the ends justify the means on his terms through pre-meditated murder to today the details that you will find in the well known burning bush encounter with Moses and God.

Let's look at that encounter. The first thing that we see is that it is 40 years later when we catch up with Moses. It took him 40 years to first step out of his palace in Egypt to see his people and how poorly they were being treated. It is now 40 years after that, when he is 80 when we find him as a shepherd hired by his father-in-law to be a shepherd. Remember Moses is a PK and wouldn't you know that he married a PK. No wonder we don't hear about his kids and Joshua takes over after he does. But Moses is married into now a Midianite family whose father is a Midianite priest. The Midianites are idol worshippers and have no regard or love for the God of Israel.

How in the world does Moses go from being raised by a God loving family to growing up in an Egyptian household with all of their gods to today we find him working and living and marrying within the Midian household. Moses was one confused puppy. It reminds me a bit of the families that go from one church to the next to the next and the kids end up being a bamelupentapiscaterian. Moses didn't know what was going on in his spiritual world and I can guarantee you that his belief in God never intersected with his daily life, in fact he probably never thought about it.

Some see this stage in Moses' life as the first 40 years as the Prince of Egypt as a time when he thought he was somebody. Then the past 40 years when he thought he was a nobody. And now he learns how God can use a nobody to be a somebody in God's plan and design.

Moses makes his way to Mt. Horeb which means literally in Hebrew: a wasteland, and I think he may have felt completely empty and desolate, and dry as he looked over his life, probably still kicking himself for thinking the ends justify the means and wanting to take that day back.

Mt. Horeb which is another name for Mt. Sinai is described in the Bible in Exodus 3 as the mountain of God. Anytime you read about Mt. Sinai and Mt. Horeb in the Bible you need to know that this is an important place. This is where Elijah went to flee from Jezebel and heard that still small voice years later. This is where the 10 commandments are handed down from God to Moses.

This mountain in a wasteland would not be the last time that God would choose a nontraditional, nonreligious setting for a hearing of the Word of God and the seeing of his face. Think of the manger and its vulgar, common setting where God's face and nature were revealed.

We had the thrill of being able to climb this mountain as a family back in 2009, we were in Egypt for the week and asked a driver to take us to St. Catherine's which is at the base of the mountain. We slept for about four hours and then climbed it, a quail flew in front of us and I had to pinch myself to think that here we were at this place where Moses saw the burning bush, where Moses received the Ten Commandments, where God revealed himself to Moses. Where Moses saw God's face.

So often we set up certain parameters in our lives where God can or cannot work. We set up structures to help keep God in check so that God can only be revealed as we want when we want God to be revealed. But when was the last time that God surprised you by showing up unexpectedly and uninvited?

This is what happens with Moses. The last thing he wanted was God to show up and interrupt his mundane, structured, ordinary life so that he would be forced to face him and follow him risking his very life in service to him.

God appears to Moses in a flame, just like the day of Pentecost, and speaks to him. Moses turns out of curiosity to look at this flame and it attracts him. God calls out

and tells him who he is. Moses in the Exodus Scripture hides his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

You can take this fear in Moses in a number of different ways. One is the awe and reverence that he had for God and the common understanding that if you looked at God directly you would die. That would be a good incentive and motivation for one to turn aside.

Another is wouldn't you be afraid and not want to turn your head in shame if you had been running from God the last 40 years? Maybe some of us can relate to that. The Bible is filled with Scripture of people who were called by God and instead of saying like maybe Isaiah and Mary did Here I am Lord, send me, or use me as a handmaiden of the Lord. They hear God's call and pick up and run. Moses did it and got away with it for 40 years. Jonah did it and didn't get very far until God found him. Jeremiah when he was called said sorry Lord, I can't do it. I don't know how to speak, I'm a boy, I'm not mature enough in the faith.

But you know what else they have in common? God wins the battle in getting them to serve him. Moses agrees and leads the people out of Egypt and captivity. Jonah resumes his evangelistic crusade and the people of Nineveh are saved much to his chagrin. Jeremiah follows God's command and, okay, so the Israelites don't listen to him but 2 out of 3 isn't bad. God's face and this encounter with God changes their lives because he doesn't give up on them.

We don't always like our call. We don't always have a clear call. But when God's face shines upon you if you don't respond you will go to your grave missing an opportunity that is for you and you alone.

Stephen understood this and took his responsibility very seriously. When he talks about God's encounter with Moses you hear God say I have merely seen the mistreatment of my people who are in Egypt and I have come down to rescue them. So far, so good. Come now, I will send you. But God, I thought you said you were going to rescue them. I did Moses, but through you.

I have come down to rescue you, this should conjure up thoughts of our Savior Jesus Christ who came down to rescue us because God believes in getting personally involved with us, don't we serve an awesome God? God wants us to turn and see his face and from there go out.

We have been hearing Stephen's preaching for week after week. He never expected to be a preacher but because he was full of it he became one. I am sure that a vast majority of you never imagined that you would ever be able to speak to people about Jesus and the impact that your Savior has had on your life. Some of us may be far more comfortable tasting God and experiencing God this morning and then the rest of our week we can keep to ourselves. Oh, you are missing so much if you think that or do that.

God is calling you now today to a calling that is called preaching. In that word preaching you find the word reaching. You also find the word each and reach. Here we go again, each one of you is called to reach another with the love of God in the way that you feel God has put it in your heart to do.

Also in that word preaching is the word aching. In the next few weeks we are going to see Stephen put to death for his preaching. It is risky business being called by God and acting on that call. You could get swallowed by a whale, or chased by troops on horses and chariots.

But I can assure you that God is calling you to face Him and to take on the task of each one reaching one with the Love of God so that they can come to know this God who wants to be personally and is personally involved in our lives. Amen.