

Exodus 33: 12-23  
I Thessalonians 1: 1-10  
Matthew 22: 15-22

The Glory of God and the Glory of Empire  
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Everybody struggles with theological language. You know theology literally means “words about God.” But, as one writer wondered, “If human words are incapable of describing the distinctive aroma of coffee, how can they cope with something as subtle as God?”

So today I have a question for you: who decides what we use to name God? Or how would you define the glory of God? We sing hymns that make some attempts, like *Immortal Invisible God Only Wise*, which takes 4 verses to describe an experience of inaccessible light. Or we sing about the mighty power of God that made the mountains rise, or the fact that all plants and flowers below make God’s glories known. Much as we sing and talk about it, it is clear that words fail us...theology fails us at times. We shift and move and dance around the name of God, trying to find a way to talk about a glory that is too powerful and immense for mortals to describe...though we are pretty sure it’s at least as real as a cup of coffee. No easy task.

So, of course we look for ways around this by reasoning, if we think of God as Creator, we might find some clues in the created world or some correspondence between things in our physical experience. We do not reduce God to the level of a created object, but we allow things and words to be signposts to God. We make analogies; we use metaphors. And we do all this work in this place, I believe because we are pretty sure that getting some clarity about our relationship with God will give us some insights into how we should live in the world.

We can learn something about how to speak about God from other faiths. The followers of Islam use the name of Allah, which is the Arabic word for “the God.” But they also have a helpful teaching which is actually a devotional practice. They recite the 99 names of God, things like the Wise, the Good, the All-Knowing, the Place Where Peace Comes From. But always they stop at 99: to go on would imply that the one praying knew all about God. God is always more than we can grasp. Of course, that doesn’t stop us from going on and on about it...

When God first appeared to Moses, calling from a burning bush, Moses asked for a name for the mystical fiery presence before him. The presence in the bush spoke and said, “*ehyeh asher ehyeh*.” Fine ☺ The meaning of this answer is one of the most widely debated questions in the Hebrew Bible. Our translations often give, “I am that I am.” Others say, “I am the cause of all things,” or “I will always be there.” In any case, the name was considered so holy, so touched with God’s glory, that pious Jews never pronounce it. The name came to be represented by 4 letters in the text, and whenever they come upon these 4 letters, they substitute the spoken name “*Adonai*,” which means Lord. The current practice of some Christians of casually using the name “Yahweh” when speaking of God is actually rather offensive to many religious Jews.

“You cannot see my face,” says God, but “I will cause all my goodness to pass before your face, I will call out the name of *Adonai* before your face.” What a strange passage this is! Here we see the wrestling of the storyteller to say something essential about God within the poverty of

human speech. So many of the repeated words seem heavier, more loaded, than their literal meanings: “see,” “I know you by name,” “favor in your eyes,” “presence,” “glory,” “face.” By the way: whenever our reading says “presence” when God speaks, it is literally saying “faces of me.” For a passage that seems to be saying that God’s glory is utterly unlike that of human glory, there are so many references to parts of the body: eyes, face, hand, back.

This story is set in an absolutely crucial moment in the life of Moses and the salvation story of the Hebrew people. They have been freed from slavery in Egypt. They are on the long road to a promised land, sustained by water and manna given by this mysterious, liberating God. At this time, the presence of God (or face of God) with the people is represented by pillars of cloud and fire. This was another name for the divine, the *shekinah*, meaning both glory and presence. This God had attempted to form a covenant with the people, whereby a permanent relationship of trust, obedience, and justice can begin. But, before Moses can even present the tablets of the covenant, the gift of divine law, the people change their minds and start to worship a golden calf. They make an image (a glorious, golden image, true) of an animal and say, this is what our liberator looks like: a magical symbol borrowed from the surrounding powerful, empire culture. Now, for us, this may not seem like such a crime. We are used to seeing statues as works of art, or even statues in a church. We can understand how it might be useful to have a physical representation to aid us in worship. But for faithful Jews, this came to be seen as the ultimate crime: idolatry, blasphemy, a belittling of God, a confusion of God’s glory and human glory. The worship of the golden calf at Sinai was the “original sin” of the people of Israel. It almost puts an end to the special relationship they have with *Adonai*. But Moses, the mediator, intercedes for them, argues with God, and mends the broken bond. Divine wrath is turned away, and the people are commanded to take up their journey once more, to enter the land of promise, Canaan.

This is where our story begins. Moses speaks with God in the tent of meeting, which is a sacred place that no one else may enter. The conversation centers around Moses’ worry that God’s presence (or face) will not go with the people on their travels. Using personal influence, so to speak, Moses gets God to agree to stick with the Hebrews. But Moses wants more in this negotiation: “Show me your glory, I pray.” Doesn’t that seem like an odd request? Hasn’t God already demonstrated divine power and glory when the Red Sea parted and the people were fed in the wilderness? Doesn’t Moses already speak to God “face to face,” as a neighbor or a friend would? What exactly does Moses want *now*? More power, a deeper insight, more security, proof that God is really there?

God’s reply is just as odd. It says that “the goodness of God” will pass before Moses’ face. And the name of God will be called out before his face, along with a new definition of that name: one who shows mercy, one who shows favor, and loyalty and steadfast love. This was the name of God that Moses and the Hebrews needed to hear at that crucial moment. They already knew that it was in God’s nature to be a liberator: they had traveled from slavery to freedom. They already knew it was in God’s nature to be nurturing: food had appeared when they were starving. At this moment, when they were reeling from the fallout of sin and idolatry, *this* is what they needed to hear: God is gracious. God’s nature is merciful. This word, mercy, has an interesting connotation in Hebrew. It comes from a root that means “womb.” God feels a maternal “womb-love” for us. So another body part is brought into play to try to describe, imperfectly, who God is for us. And we get the feeling that these qualities, if we could feel the full import, the full glory of them, would be too much for us. We would be overwhelmed if we really “saw” how tenderly God cares for us; if we understood the depth of God’s thirst for justice and peace.

But Moses is given a glimpse, under the protective palm of divinity, of what the glory of God might look like, after it has passed by. And we might ask ourselves today, do we ever get this kind of glimpse of God? After the glory has passed by, can we see a footprint where God has walked, can we feel the hand shielding us, can we hear echoes of a voice? We speak in the realm of the senses because we are mortal. What partial revelation of glory has been given to us, and where does it send us?

When we turn to our reading from Matthew, we are presented with the competing claims of God and Empire. We seem to be turning from the world of abstract theology to the world of practical ethics. We turn from a divine-human conversation in the wilderness to a very human (and rather malicious) conversation in the city. Jesus' enemies are pretty sure that they can trap him into either blasphemy or treason. Jesus treads a clever middle road, it seems, by his answer, based on the actual coin of taxation used at the time. But though his answer seems to silence his critics, it hangs in the air with questions for us that are still provocative and relevant: What belongs to God? What belongs to the emperor? We are not talking about coins here: we are talking about allegiance, loyalty, worship even. Jesus recognizes what we know in our hearts: there are times when there is a conflict between what our faith tells us to do and what an empire or a state or a political leader demands.

The Roman Empire, under the leadership of Tiberius Caesar, was, as you know, the most powerful state system that had ever controlled the Mediterranean region. Its power was expressed in many ways: of course, its armies, its systems of taxation and administration, its system of roads. And then there was the pageantry, the parades, and the idolization of the emperor himself as divine. It was a glorious regime. They had a lock-down on the hearts and minds and bodies of all the many subject peoples and tribes within their borders. Or so it seemed.

By casually telling the Pharisees and the Herodians (who were not natural allies, by the way) that the coin with the head of Tiberius could go right back to the imperial coffers, Jesus is staking out another territory for a life of faithful resistance. Yes, your god has the coins, the roads, the armies and all the human glory money can buy. But we are created in the image of the invisible God, the one whose glory appears as mercy and loyalty and nurturing and liberation and justice. That's where Jesus points out the scales, where that one coin is weighed against all those qualities we truly value in our hearts. Surely Jesus knew that there are times when there is a conflict between what the empire demands and what our faith tells us to do. We need only look again to the cross to see what happened to Jesus when the empire demanded worship and Jesus would only obey the law of his God. In the same way, sometimes the church has chosen to disobey, or individual Christians have chosen to disobey, the law of the state for a greater law.

We all know what the glory of the empire looks like. It is often expressed in domination, in demeaning other, supposedly lesser powers, in magnificent buildings and well-trained troops. But perhaps we need to bring to mind the glory of God. If we were to pray, with Moses, "Pray let me see your glory..." maybe it would be too much for us. Can we handle the blinding, demanding overwhelming face of God, or do we turn away because we can handle the implications of what that powerful love means for us.

Somewhere deep inside, maybe we don't want to believe that God is so overwhelmingly merciful. We turn our faces away from that glorious possibility, because it implies that we could be more forgiving of others. But each time we forgive and allow a relationship to rebuild, the glory of

God passes by in our own lives, and we catch, from the cleft in the rock, a glimpse of God's loyal and forgiving nature.

Somewhere, deep inside, maybe we don't want to believe that groups with long histories of conflict can ever resolve their differences. The ethnic and racial clashes of recent decades seem to bear this out. We can't believe that God could work in the hearts of people to behave differently. We turn our face from that glorious possibility, because it would mean that we can drop our prejudices and privileges as well. But each time we simultaneously recognize the humanity and "otherness" of the former stranger, the glory of God passes by, and we catch, from the cleft in the rock, a glimpse of God's expansive and liberating nature.

Somewhere, deep inside, maybe we don't believe that God notices all the suffering that goes on in hospitals and homes. Pain is everywhere, and healing can seem rare. We can't believe that God could be present in a place where all the efforts of medicine fail. I remember, long ago, seeing a nurse pick up and cuddle an infant in the NICU who was comatose and dying. Love and tenderness were demonstrated in the face of a tragic death. I had to turn my face away. God's glory had come so close, it passed by, and I caught a glimpse of God's merciful maternal face.

Ever since Moses, people have been praying for the presence of God to be with them, and to be revealed. Well, if you pray that, this is what you get: glimpses of glory, glimpses of power that dwarf the sham pageantry of the empire, glimpses of mercy, glimpses of liberating justice....and a demand to follow. We cannot pray comfortably for the presence of God unless we are willing to demonstrate the meaning of God's name with our lives. If each of us tries to live a facet of the names of God, God will be described, not in tomes of theology, but in the actions of our community. We will be revealers of the name of God. The *shekinah*, the glory of God will hover about this place. Do we even dare to pray with Moses?