

EXODUS 33:12-23

PSALM 99

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-10

MATTHEW 22:15-22

Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 22, 2023; Year A

**(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)**

***Two Sides of the Same Coin!***

**A first glance at Exodus and Matthew this morning appears to reveal that these readings have nothing in common. Their content really does seem to stand alone, as some texts do. But upon further review, giving both texts a closer reading, we begin to see, at least somewhat, perhaps, what the lectionary editors saw as they paired these twolections along with the two others selected for this day. Like a fine wine accompanying a sumptuous meal, we can, just maybe, see the method to their madness as they connected these very rich narratives. In Exodus we read the story of Moses' bold request as he asks the Holy One to allow him more than what had become a usual private audience, the liberator privileged with these interactions in their one-on-one encounters, but to dare see the very face of God, to lay his eyes on God's glorious presence. Moses now wanted more, an understandably addictive intoxicant, a yearning that only grows when any perceived experience with the Divine has taken place. The audacity of asking for something that was considered far more than taboo but was strictly forbidden lest the unfortunate recipient be struck dead on the spot, smote in what would have been a very transparent, but not at all transcendent moment. In the Gospel of Matthew, we read of one of the numerous encounters in which Jesus'**

**ofttimes adversaries were seeking to trap him with his very own words, hoisting him by his own petard as it were. They ask Jesus about the appropriateness of paying taxes to Caesar, knowing full well that everyone had to pay the man or else. Jesus asks to see a coin and asks whose likeness, whose image, was on the denarius. Well, of course it was Caesar's mug proudly displayed on the coin for all the world to see. And according to Roman mythology, Caesar was a God, described with divine attributes that the early Church would recalibrate and retrofit as they defiantly claimed these traits for Christ. Jesus was at his best. We would expect no less. His quick response was simply to give the coin in question to Caesar because it certainly appears, by all accounts, to belong to the emperor, the ruler's face adorning the coin as the imperial monarch of Rome. Just what do these texts have in common? What do they share? Well, let's do a little digging as we explore this morning. And our homiletical journey is once more underway!**

In many ways Moses' desire to see God, to visually experience the awe and wonder of transcendent mystery, was not unlike what any of us who seek after the Holy think we would like to have. Imagine, an existential encounter with the Holy Other, the Ground of All Being, the Great Spirit of the Universe. Moses simply wanted what we all claim we want in our God seeking, our search for the creator, the One we place our beliefs and faith, our ultimate trust. Yes, we would love a close encounter of the George Burns and John Denver variety as portrayed in the now dated "Oh God!" movies! That would just be so cool, God in technicolor, the real thing more than three dimensional! But as with anything related to faithfulness in who or what is unseen and unknown, Moses' request was complicated, not nearly as simple as what it seems when given a surface reading. Moses' question dared to go, dared to tread, where human beings were not permitted, a no-fly zone indeed. It was believed by the Hebrews that to see the face of God was indeed a death sentence, an impermissible access that could never be granted

under any circumstances lest the recipient become something akin to Lot's wife as she was permanently reduced to a pillar of salt. Of course, when we read these ancient texts, we know that the writers, editors, and compilers lived in a mythological world in which they presumed literal conversations and interactions between God and humans. God was an anthropomorphic being, personified to the max! In other words, God's presence was manifest in human form, walking and talking as if a flesh and blood personage, call it perhaps, a reverse incarnation. This understanding constitutes far more than subtle nuance, far more than mere semantics, but is an acknowledgment that literally drives the text.

**God answers Moses' inquiry, responding quickly to his loyal servant's audacious request, reminding Moses that if the divine One made this exception, that Moses would not survive the encounter. He would not live to tell about it! But the Holy One came up with a solution, finding a compromise, no doubt wanting to please this faithfully obedient former adoptee, once the apple of Pharaoh's eye, silver spoon trust baby turned shepherd of herds then people. Moses had been an obedient servant, doing God's bidding, willingly liberating this chosen people. God would indeed grant this one wish, agreeing to allow Moses a visual, making a way out of no way for the Law giver to see, up close and personal, what is textually portrayed as a physical manifestation of the great I am, Yahweh, the "I am that I am" of eternal proportions. God acquiesces and gives permission enabling Moses to see only the backside of the Holy One, hiding this inquisitive seeker in the cleft of a rock, a means designed to preserve both God's mystery and Moses' life, not to mention his insatiable curiosity about the One he first experienced in a bush that burned but did not. Mission accomplished! The metaphors about Moses' seeing the hind parts of God are endless, Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel painting even depicting Moses staring at God's cheeks! Talk about artistic license! Who knew, at least at the time? I am amazed that graphic image vulnerably portraying God in that manner was allowed. Some today**

might move to ban it because of questionable content, calling it religious porn! Questions abound! Was God wearing a white robe or any robe at all? What does God wear when hiking the mountainside? Only Moses and the biblical writer knew!

**I have pondered the prospect of seeing the face of God, God's glory as the Bible calls it, and not living to tell the tale. In Isaiah, the prophet indicates that he, despite his inherent misgivings about doing so, did indeed see God's face in that fascinating story from the sixth chapter that begins, "In the year that King Uzziah died," and tells of the prophet's mystical experience in a graphically detailed dream, including worship, complete with praise, confession, forgiveness, and call. It seems to me that the problem was not with seeing the face of God, per se, but in the danger of idolatrizing what no doubt has to be the most perfect, very beautiful and special image. Once you have seen the face of God, you never forget. It is a moment frozen in time. And yet, imagine the possibility, even the probability, the very idea of God, Godself, becoming an idol, an image in and of itself. Yes, that is what I believe was at stake in this mythic writing, that God would be reduced to a likeness, an image, holy though it might have been, and thus all transcendent mystery killed in that brief transaction. Despite the fact that the God of the Hebrew Bible is described with physical human traits, God, in God's mystical presence, holiness beyond all description, God is always wrapped in mystery, the essence of Spirit, described in the Hebrew Bible as Ruah, as wind, evasive yet real. This intuitive human "feeling" can never be captured fully, perhaps even partly, by any sensory awareness, and yet all our senses serve as pointers, giving indication, verifying our intuitive perceptions. Moses would not have died if he had seen God's face but would have experienced the death that always comes with idolatry, the cheapening or minimizing that which is pure spiritual holiness. **To see the face of God would have simply reduced God to another Golden Calf, the threat of a facsimile, a poor imitation at best, always a sure and****

certain failure, always the greatest risk. No, Moses was privy to a huge gift, seeing far more than mere mortals are ever allowed, but only enough to maintain his imagination, to protect his wonderment, to preserve the very mysterious image of God, the word God itself limiting as all language is. We refer to God as who or that or what, knowing all our vocabulary comes up short. And yet our words speak to something real, a spiritual presence, a longing, that comes from deep within our being, the very spark of the Divine imbued within us all, graciously and gloriously stamped on our being. All that we know, and we know so little, is that whoever, whatever, God is, that God is cloaked in mystery on steroids. Idolatry in any form, even and especially crafted in our minds or in artistic formulas, always kills. Yes, the writers, editors, and compilers of the Hebrew Bible walked a fine line in their imaginative characterizations of God, sometimes perhaps, in our opinion, leaning way too heavily into human perceptions. Maybe so! We have no other option with many of these texts! What we have is what we have, whatever God is! But their goal was to always interpret divine mystery, to conceptualize as best they could an elusive but pervasive God always accessible but always beyond, always shadowed, shrouded, in mysterious awe and wonder. And so it is, with and for us! We think, “oh, if only we could see God, how emboldened, empowered, our faith would be!” No, our faith would be shattered, no longer necessary! We might even be disappointed because of unreasonable expectations! Besides, faith by sight is never faith at all! Moses was granted what he could handle and so are we. And think of all the ways we see God every day in everything and with everyone! It is enough!

The other text I mentioned this morning also contains some limited imagery, the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Herodians and the Pharisees, constant nags who sought to trap him with his words. As usual, Jesus faced his version of the inquisition, his questioners never fully showing their true colors. Some days these annoying religious

leaders who would never admit that they were intrigued groupies of the rabbi, seemed collegial, other days not so much! These connivers thought surely in their shortsighted planning and plotting that they could corner him, posing a not-so-hypothetical quandary, the ongoing dilemma, the controversial conundrum about whether to pay taxes, the alternative a sure and certain death sentence under imperial Rome's occupational control. As we know, local tax collectors, Jews who had sold out to the Romans, suck-ups who were granted coveted licenses to carry out this cushy but demeaning job, were most despised because of their methods, their "salaries" depending on the fleecing of the flock by squeezing more dollar than was required from those whose resources were limited and controlled. No cash cow in this herd! As we know, Zacheus was the quintessential example of a tax collector in the Gospels. After asking to see a coin, a denarius, Jesus asks his interrogators to name the image on the primary side, who cares about the other, the equivalent of the "B" side of an old 45 record. They quickly and astutely respond that it is the likeness of Ceasar, brilliant deduction. So, therefore, give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. Simple enough, maybe! Jesus' answer, his seemingly simple solution, is more complicated than we first think. Sometimes, perhaps, figuring out just what belongs to God is no easy task, because God is not on a coin. As we learned with the conversation between God and Moses back in the day, we have no idea what God looks like, and it will remain that way. So, either God owns nothing, or God owns everything and there is no middle, no gray area, whatsoever. Once again, we must make choices based on whatever amount of faith, great or small or something in between, that we place in God and that gets us through the day and through this life. Our giving is a private matter supporting a public cause that always comes down to our dictates of conscience. Every day we flip our coins, deciding where they go, how they are used. It is no small thing! Of course as images of the Divine, created as

**a reflection of God, we know that we thus give of ourselves and ourselves to the Holy One.**

Like most human beings we would like some easy answers, some simple solutions, to all life's complexities, all doubt removed in every decision, no matter how huge or insignificant. Who among us would not want such security, especially in times like these? But that is not how the world works, not how the universe operates, not the way that God put this whole creative enterprise into being! Jesus' response to the Pharisees and the Herodians back on a certain day definitively answered their question, yes, with clarity, and yet left a lot of wriggle room, frustratingly not fully satisfying their demonically motivated inquiry at all. Or did it? As with us, Jesus' answer left the decision in their hands, capable or not. Jesus knew full well that the Temple, as an institution, based in a building that represented that religious enterprise, needed coinage to run the show. He understood that every coin in the coffer that rung in those very large trumpet-like vats, no doubt making a noisy clang as they bounced to the bottom, what Jesus critiqued as their form of "melody without much compassion," revealed the head of the likeness of Caesar. No way around it! A question might have been raised about why it was so easy for a Pharisee or Herodian to reach into a purse and pull out this symbol of Rome's oppression?

**As people committed to the cause of Christ we realize, we know full well, that every form of legal tender has the capacity for good, sometimes not so much. Money has the unfortunate potential to become its own form of idolatry, temptations and greed becoming the ruin of many. Money may be the root of all evil, along with all the other slogans of monetary import, but our coinage can be a source of unlimited good. As I sat briefly sat with our unofficial mission group this past Friday morning, as they deliberated about recommendations from the Maggie Ball fund, how moved indeed I was at the level of commitment, of participation, as they contemplated funding a host of**

**causes local and global. Our mission-giving is a testimonial to our beliefs about social justice, putting our money where our mouth is and vice versa. Outstanding! Jesus was telling the Pharisees and the Herodians that very thing without using words, or at least employing a minimum. His succinct words demanded, required, that they give some critical thought to the way society works, including the intersection of religion and state. And it all begins with one simple coin! Elsewhere, the widow would prove its true worth! Nothing new here! The more things change the more they remain the same. There are two sides to every coin and our decision about them is far more than a mere flip to see if they come up heads or tails. In the final analysis, they are both the same! Every coin has the potential to reflect the image of God based on the way it is used, even as it reflects our image as well, yes, every side of who we are, created in the divine image!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and grants us holy presence in more ways than we can ever imagine!  
Amen and amen.**