



# GOD'S FACE: FRIEND OR FOE?

*SERIES: THE TABERNACLE: GOD'S PRESENCE WITH HIS PEOPLE*

Exodus 33:1-17

Eleventh Message

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*Come, Holy Spirit, our souls inspire, and lighten us with your celestial fire. For if you are with us then nothing else matters. And if you are not with us, then nothing else matters. Be with us we pray in the name of your Beloved. Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

If God is with us then nothing else matters. And if God is not with us, then nothing else matters. Do we really believe that? Is the presence of God all-important to us? Or does it matter only on Sunday mornings and on some other special occasions when we invoke him and his presence?

The Hebrew word translated “presence” is the word for “face.” Imagine God’s face turned toward you. What do you see? Is it a friendly face, a face that looks on you with pleasure? Is it a face that brings you joy and comfort? Or is it a frowning face, a disapproving face, a face that isn’t sure about you? Is it a face that arouses anxiety or fear? Or is it an angry face, a face that strikes terror into your heart? Is God friend or foe?

In his hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” William Cowper penned the line, “Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.” Is God’s face turned toward you ever a smiling face? David prayed, “Hide your face from my sins...Cast me not away from your presence (face)” (Ps 51:9, 11). Many of us fear it’s the other way round: God hides his face from us but keeps our sins ever before his face. Maybe that’s because we’ve superimposed someone else’s face onto God’s face.

Do you want to hide from God’s face, like Adam and Eve “who hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden” (Gen 3:8)? Do you want to run away from that face, like Cain who “went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (Gen 4:16)?

Today is Sanctity of Human Life Sunday on which we affirm that all human beings are special, including the unborn, no matter their country, no matter the color of their skin, no matter their socioeconomic status. There are no [blank] people. All human beings are in the image of God. But what distinguishes us humans from animals? We’re made of the same stuff. We share almost all our DNA with chimpanzees. Animals can outperform us. Among the domestic animals the ox can carry heavier loads. Among the birds the eagle can soar higher and see farther. Among the wild animals the lion is stronger. Animals can run faster, jump further, carry more. We now know that some animals use tools and have remarkable intelligence. So wherein lies our difference?

Unlike animals, we image God. We represent God in the world. We are his image in the world. Genesis 1 depicts us as the image in God’s temple which is the cosmos. Because God has made us to represent him he has made us capable of being in relationship with him. We are his people on whom he gazes and with whom he relates. We are capable of God, meaning that we are capable of conceiving of God, of contemplating God, of being in relationship with God.

We’ve just sung, “O great God of highest heaven occupy my lowly heart.” We read of David in his passionate longing for God (Psalm 63). Humans can conceive of the transcendent. We understand that there is more to life than food and drink, sex and offspring, survival and death. Like animals, we engage in these activities. But unlike animals, we can conceive of ourselves doing these things under the gaze of a transcendent, supernatural God. This is what makes us human.

But humans can also turn their back on the transcendent. This is what Cain did when he voluntarily exiled himself from God. Both Cain and Abel had brought offerings to the Lord, offerings from the physical realm to the transcendent realm. God had turned his face toward both the offerers and their offerings. Toward Abel it was a face of pleasure and approval because Abel’s face was turned toward God. Toward Cain it was a face of disapproval because Cain’s face remained anchored in the material world. Eventually Cain could tolerate that face no longer. He fled from it to wander east of Eden, the realm of the physical with no transcendence.

But God called Israel out of the world of the merely physical into a transcendent relationship with himself. He heard their groaning in Egypt; “God saw the people of Israel—and God knew” (Exod 2:25). He looked on them with compassion and favor. He delivered them from Egypt and brought them to Mt Sinai to meet with himself. He entered into covenant with them: I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.

But within forty days, while Moses was enjoying God’s Presence atop Mt Sinai, the people at the foot of the mountain were feeling his Absence not his Presence. They rejected the transcendent and returned to the merely physical, the world of man-made idols, the world of the golden calf. They ate and they drank, they danced and they sang under the gaze of that golden calf which they themselves had made. But the calf could neither see nor hear.

Moses alone remains capable of God. Mediating between the two realms he intercedes for sinful Israel before a holy God. He has asked God to change his mind about destroying the people, and God has granted this request. He has asked God to forgive the people for sinning a great sin, but God has not granted this request. How can Moses make these daring requests? He has an appetite for God’s presence; God’s face is approachable. He also remains one with the people.

Moses has not yet finished petitioning God’s face. We pick up the story in 33:1.

## I’m Not Coming with You (33:1-6)

**The LORD said to Moses, “Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give it.’ I will send an angel before**

you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. For the LORD had said to Moses, “Say to the people of Israel, ‘You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.’” Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward. (Exod 33:1-6 ESV)

“It’s time to move on,” says the Lord to Moses. The exodus from Egypt had two destinations. The intermediate destination was Mt Sinai, here to meet the Lord and worship him. The ultimate destination was Canaan, the land God had promised to Abraham four hundred years earlier, there to live in rest in a land of plenty. God was still willing for the people to reach this final destination. He would send his angel or heavenly messenger ahead to drive out the native peoples of the land.

But all is not well. The Lord expresses his displeasure by again refusing to identify the people as his people. They’re *your* people he says to Moses: “the people whom *you* have brought up out of the land of Egypt.” Furthermore, the Lord will not accompany Israel on this journey: “I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” In the Old Testament the distinction between the angel of the Lord and the Lord himself is a fuzzy one. The angel of the Lord whom the Lord will send ahead of the Israelites does represent the Lord’s presence, but it’s a limited presence. What the Lord here announces that he will withhold is his fuller presence, his presence *among* the people. This is his tabernacling Presence.

Moses has spent forty days and nights atop Mt Sinai receiving detailed instructions for the tabernacle: “let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst” (25:8). The tabernacle was to have been a movable shrine that transferred God’s Presence from the top of Mt Sinai to the Promised Land, to the site where God would choose to put his Name as a permanent presence in the midst of his people. The tabernacle was to have been a portable Mt Sinai. But now this Presence will not go in the midst of the people. The tabernacle will not be built. This is why our tabernacle exhibit is shrouded in black and why the high priest does not wear his colorful vestments.

The Lord’s Absence is for the people’s protection: “lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” Even a single moment of the Lord’s Presence among them would finish them off. Again we have the problem of how can a sinful people survive the presence of a holy God in their midst. As stiff-necked people it’s their backs not their faces that they’ve turned to him. How can there be any relationship if they can’t turn their faces to him? This is the second time God describes Israel as a “stiff-necked people.” The first time it was grounds for why he wanted to consume them, finishing them off. Now it is the reason why he can’t come with them, tabernacling in their midst.

Israel must leave Sinai, the place where they have known Yahweh’s Presence, and they must journey forth in a way to have been graced by his Presence to a place to have been filled with his Presence with

no hope of his Presence ever again.... The great narrative of promised Presence and the great narrative of the Advent of Presence are thus to be brought to an abrupt and empty conclusion by a narrative of Absence.<sup>2</sup>

The people rightly understand this as a disastrous word. There’s been no emotion from the people since they cavorted around the golden calf. Now they mourn and refrain from putting on their ornaments, the gold and silver jewelry which the Egyptians had given them on their exodus from Egypt. Is this repentance? I doubt it. More likely, this is simply remorse.

But there is a note of hope: “...that I may know what to do with you.” The Lord is as yet undecided on what to do with this stubborn, difficult people. Does this leave the door open for Moses to intercede yet again? Before we get an answer to that question, we are given a glimpse of how Moses relates to the Lord.

### The Tent of Meeting (33:7-11)

**Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent. (33:7-11)**

This paragraph is detached from the storyline of the narrative. It uses customary language: “used to... whenever... would.” Moses used to pitch a tent outside the camp where God-seekers would go. This tent is not the tabernacle; that has not been built and at this stage looks like it will never be built. But there was an appointed place for meeting with God. Whoever sought the Lord would go there to meet with him. But who at this time in Israel’s history did seek the Lord?

Since this paragraph describes customary behavior, it stands outside of time and outside of the narrative flow. It could have been placed anywhere in these chapters. Why has it been placed here? This is not accidental. It is here to show that there is one God-seeker in the camp: Moses. I think that “everyone who sought the Lord” consists of just this one person Moses. Moses regularly and repeatedly went outside the camp to the Tent of Meeting to seek the Lord. This was his customary behavior. Each time he did this the people followed his every move. Each standing at the entrance of his own tent in the safety of the camp, they watched intently. They saw him walk far beyond the camp. They saw him enter the tent. Then they saw him no more, for the pillar of cloud descended and took its stand at the tent entrance. This cloud both represented God’s Presence and shielded the people from that Presence. But inside the tent, Moses was in the Presence. The people knew that Moses was in the Presence, the Presence that terrified them. And so they prostrated themselves in worship each at his tent door. That’s the appropriate thing to do in the Presence: bow down in worship.

But inside the tent, in the Presence, Moses didn't bow in worship. Instead the Lord would speak with him, face to face as one speaks to his friend. Of no one else is this said. What a beautiful picture of intimacy between God and his friend Moses. Moses was there as both one of the people and God's friend.

We are privileged to now listen in on a conversation between Moses and his friend, the Lord. We return to the storyline which picks up from v. 6.

### Moses's Intercession (33:12-17)

Moses said to the LORD, "See, you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?" And the LORD said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." (33:12-17)

This is one of the most remarkable conversations in the whole Bible. It well illustrates the intimacy of Moses and the Lord talking face to face as friends. Moses begins by directing God's attention to his difficult situation: "Look! You've been telling me to bring up this people, but I can't do it on my own, and you haven't made known to me who you're sending to help." Now the Lord has told him twice that he's sending an angel, but, evidently, an angel is not good enough for Moses. He wants to know more. His request for knowledge is based upon how God sees him, that he looks on him with favor. These are the key themes of the conversation. In vv. 12-17 the verb "know" is used six times, and the phrase "find favor in the sight of" occurs five times.

Moses is not asking for facts. Certain languages have different verbs to distinguish between knowing a fact and knowing a person. In French, for example, it's *savoir* for a fact and *connaître* for a person. Knowing a person is mental, intellectual. But knowing a person is relational. In Hebrew, the verb "to know" is relational. Its most intimate use is for sexual relations. Moses's request to know God is predicated on relationship, on finding favor in God's sight, on the fact that God looks on him with pleasure.

So what is Moses asking to know? "If I have found favor in your sight, please show me (cause me to know) now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight." Moses asks the Lord, "Cause me to know your ways so that I might know you." The Lord has to make himself known to Moses so that he can know him further. This is part of what makes us human, that God is able to make himself known to us, and we are able to receive that revelation. We are capable of God. Finding favor in God's sight is both the grounds of Moses's request and the goal of his request: "if I have found favor in your sight...in order to find favor in your sight."

"Make known to me your ways." What is Moses asking for? The Lord had told Israel, "...that I may know what to do with you" (v. 5). Moses is now making yet another daring petition, asking God to

make known to him his intentions, what he will do with Israel. Lest God be in any doubt what to do with this people, Moses reminds God that this is not just any people: "See, this nation is *your* people." Just like in his first intercession he rejects God's attempt to offload the people onto him.

The Lord's response to Moses is very brief; just four words in Hebrew, which require twelve words in English. He makes two statements: "My Presence will go with you," and "I will give you rest." My Presence will go with you, my tabernacling Presence. I will give you rest: I'll satisfy your concerns and pacify you; I'll relieve you of all your anxieties.

Moses replies to the Lord, showing that the Lord's Presence is all-important: "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here." "If you are with us then nothing else matters. And if you are not with us, then nothing else matters." We cannot journey on with your Absence; we must have your Presence. It is this Presence that distinguishes Israel from every other people. Only Israel has the great privilege of the Lord dwelling in their midst. This Presence is evidence that the people finds favor in God's sight.

Moses is God's friend, but he continues to express his solidarity with the people. "I and the people...I and the people," he says twice. He doesn't want the Presence just for himself. No, "I and the people." He doesn't want it to be just himself who finds favor in the Lord's sight. No, "I and the people."

The Lord replies to this second speech from Moses: "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." We are on holy ground here, listening in to this conversation between God and his friend Moses. "My Presence will go with you." The tabernacle can be built. When the people do move on from Mt Sinai, God will be in their midst; he will be among them.

The tabernacle was built. The Lord did go with his people through the wilderness. His Presence eventually was transferred to the temple that Solomon built in Jerusalem. Israel was to live in the land conscious of his Presence. Three times a year they were to go up to Jerusalem to have a festival in the Lord's Presence, to eat and drink under his gaze. When they were in trouble they were to pray toward the temple, which was a conduit to God in heaven, where his ears, eyes and heart were open toward the temple and toward his people. But Israel again turned its back not its face toward the Lord; it stiffened its neck and hardened its heart. God withdrew his presence and sent his people into exile, first the northern kingdom Israel, then the southern kingdom Judah. We do not read of the Lord's presence returning to the people after their return from exile, until...

Until, "The Word became flesh and dwelt (tabernacled) among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). This Word, who is the Son eternal, in the Father's closest embrace, in his bosom, came and made his Father's face visible on earth among his people Israel. But Israel again turned its back, rejecting this presence of the Lord in their midst, putting him to death. But the risen Lord Jesus Christ has returned to the Father's presence, and God has poured out his Spirit on his people to be his abiding Presence with us and his empowering Presence in us, transforming our stiff necks into supple ones, our hard hearts into soft ones. Through his Spirit God is present in us individually and in us corporately as the Church.

God's intent is that now all that we do in all our life we do under his watchful gaze. There is an expression for this, long used in the

church. It's the little phrase *coram Deo*, a Latin phrase that means "before the face of God" or "in the presence of God." We live out our lives *coram Deo*, before the face of God. In all that we do we are conscious that God's face is turned toward us, conscious of his gaze upon us. We partake of the life of this material world conscious of the transcendent world, of God gazing upon us. We don't diminish the world; we affirm it. We affirm that God loves the world he made. As the Psalmist said, "The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof" (Ps 24:1).

Before the material world was created, in the transcendent realm there was a relationship of love between the Father and the Son. The Father gazed upon the Son in love with pleasure and affection. That's the primary role of a father: to gaze with affection on his son. The Son returned that love to the Father. God created the world as an expression of his love, doing so through his two hands, the Son and the Spirit. He loves the world that he made, declaring it very good. He put us humans in the world to image him, to represent him in the world, to be capable of him. Just as he gazed with affection on his Son, so he gazes with affection on us. He has adopted us through his Spirit to be his children. So his face toward us is of a Father who loves his sons and daughters—the same Father who gazed upon his own Son and said, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:1:11).

We seek to live out our lives under the gaze of this loving Father. The problem is that so many of us have put someone else's face onto the Father's face. For so many, that face is the face of their own earthly father, which has not been a friendly face. I've twice heard Paul Young, author of *The Shack*, speak. Both times he said that it took him fifty years to wipe the face of his father off the face of God. *The Shack* is the story he wrote for his kids about that.

God loves us in Christ. Moses was conscious in all that he did that he was under the gaze of God. For him the Lord's Presence was all-important. For him God's face was not an angry face or a scrutinizing, doubtful face. It was the loving face of a friend. It was a face that could be approached, so Moses interceded before that face for his people. We now have an intercessor before God's face on whom he looks with even more favor than he did on Moses. Through him we have access to the throne of God and to that face. And so, we seek God.

All that we do, our food and drink, sex and offspring, life and death, what are sometimes called the animal instincts, we do *coram Deo*, in God's presence and to his glory. This is sacramental living, viewing every aspect of our lives as a sacrament to God, as holy. The Reformation 500 years ago recovered the sanctity of ordinary life, of work, of family, of marriage. It healed the separation between material and spiritual categories of life. We have the great privilege of engaging in our daily lives under his loving gaze, conscious of his presence, to his glory, and knowing his pleasure.

C. S. Lewis wrote,

How God thinks of us is not only more important [than how we think of God], but infinitely more important... It is written that we shall "stand before" Him, shall appear, shall be inspected. The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God. To please God...to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness...to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can scarcely sustain. But so it is.<sup>3</sup>

*The LORD bless you and keep you;  
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.  
(Num 6:24-26)*

1. Prayer by Barbara Brown Taylor. The first sentence is drawn from a 17th century translation of the 9th century hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*: "Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire, and lighten with celestial fire."

2. John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1987), 437, 438.

3. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York (Simon & Schuster, 1996), 34.