

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Exodus 33:12-23 by Patty Friesen

Minnesota Public Radio host Garrison Keillor would begin his show, “Well, it’s been a quiet week here in Lake Wobegon, where the women are strong, the men are good-looking and the children are above-average.” I’ll begin my sermon with, “Well, it’s been a great week here at Osler Mennonite, where the elders are wonderful, the children and youth are amazing and everyone else totally cool.” If I knew interim ministry would be this fun, I would have done it sooner.

We are all finding our way through this interim time, this in-between place. You all are in between pastors and I am in between jobs. You have said farewell to 10 years with Gordon and Leslie and their family and are in the process of visioning next steps and next pastoral leadership for OMC. I have said farewell to six wonderful years at the Mennonite Nursing Home and am in the process of trying to figure out what to do with the rest of my life. This is kind of a gap year for all of us – a year of discernment, like young people do between high school and university. We are all waiting for the Promised Land – a new pastor for you and retirement for me.

In-between times can be unsettling. I like certainty, to know what’s happening next. I had a good rhythm at work at the nursing home, I knew

what needed to be done and how to do it and now I'm sometimes scrambling to prioritize time and desperately trying to get to know people. You all are stuck with some uncertainty as to how this interim pastor thing is going to work out and how the visioning process is going to work out. It takes a lot of trust and patience and praying our way through in-between times.

Moses and the children of Israel are in an in-between time, a 40-year gap year where they have left Egypt and are wandering around the wilderness waiting to get into the Promised Land. These are incredibly important years for them. They are tested and they make mistakes and have to learn to trust God. Their relationship with God and their identity as a people of God is forged in this in-between place.

Looking back, they remember what God did for them in the past – how Yahweh dramatically led them with signs and wonders out of slavery and out of Egypt. Their first lesson was to trust the One who was leading them even up to the shores of the Red Sea with the Egyptian army on their heels. God's first word to them was "Do not be afraid. Stand still and see the deliverance of the Lord." Do not be afraid. Stand still. This is the first lesson of in-between times, to let go of certainty and self-reliance and let God lead in new ways.

Chinese theologian, Watchman Nee puts it this way, “God is waiting for you to give up control. When you give up control, God will begin. Have you ever tried to save a drowning man? The trouble is that his fear prevents him from trusting himself to you. When that is so, there are just two ways of going about it. Either you must know him unconscious and then drag him to shore, or else you must leave him to struggle and shout until his strength gives way before you go to his rescue. If you try to save him while he has any strength left, he will clutch at you in his terror and drag you under and both he and you will be lost. God is waiting for you to give up before God can deliver you. Once you cease to struggle, God will do everything.”

Nee is describing the basis of faith – when we give ourselves, our trust, our hope up to God. In that release, God can come near to us and deliver us. By standing still, we are saved, not by our own efforts but by the grace of God.

Once the children of Israel are safely delivered into the desert, they become thirsty and tired from all that singing and dancing with Miriam and so begins the litany of crying out to the Lord for water and bread and time and time again, God provides water and manna and places of rest for them. There are no clearer signs of God’s presence with them than in these wilderness years, and yet they say, “Is God with us or not?” The clincher is

when God tries to make covenant with them on Mt. Sinai while they are in the valley worshipping the golden calf. It literally becomes the breaking point for Moses as he throws down the 10 commandments, shattering them and God tells them he won't be going into the Promised Land with them after all.

It is a disaster and in today's scripture, Moses steps into the gap between God and the people in a negotiation that is reminiscent of Abraham and Hannah and others who have negotiated with God. Moses says, "You have been telling me to lead these people but you have not let me know who will go with me. You have said you know me by name and have found favour with me. If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways that I may know you. Remember that this nation is your people." God responds and ups the ante, "My presence will go with you and I will give you rest." Moses counters, "How will we know you are with us? What will distinguish us from the other nations?" God replies again going the extra mile, "I will do the very thing you ask, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name." Moses throws his final card on the table, "Show me your glory."

Moses wants to know God but he can only know if God lets him. Moses wants to know God but it is Moses who is known by God. Four times God has reassured him of presence and rest and favour but now Moses

goes too far in asking to see God's glory or face. To which God replies, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name, the Lord but my face must not be seen." God puts Moses in the cleft of the rock and covers him with a hand to protect him as God passes by, leaving Moses to only see God's backside.

Later in chapter 34, it is Moses' face that will shine with the glory of being in God's presence. But there is a limit to accessibility to God, even for Moses. God both shares but also withholds. We can never have complete access to God or assume to know God fully. There will always be the tension of mystery and unknowing with God, relying on those brief glimpses along the way and never full sight.

This encounter with God becomes the turning point with Moses and Israel in their in-between place. From that moment on, things look up. The covenant is renewed and the children of Israel build the beautiful space called the Tabernacle for worship and ongoing encounters with the presence of God.

Next week's scripture takes us further into Israel's leadership transition as Moses passes the torch to Joshua at the edge of the Jordan River. Let's pray for ourselves in the midst of our transitions...