

SERMON: October 22, 2023 “The Moral Arc of the Universe”

Exodus 33:12-23

33:12 Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said 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.'

33:13 Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people."

33:14 He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

33:15 And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here.

33:16 For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

33:17 The LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."

33:18 Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray."

33:19 And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

33:20 But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."

33:21 And the LORD continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock;

33:22 and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by;

33:23 then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

Excerpt from “I Wasn’t One of the Six Million”, by Yehuda Amichai.

I wasn't one of the six million who died in the Shoah,

I wasn't even among the survivors.

And I wasn't one of the six hundred thousand who went out of Egypt.

I came to the Promised Land by sea.

No, I was not in that number,

though I still have the fire and the smoke within me,

pillars of fire and pillars of smoke that guide me by night and by day.

I still have inside me the mad search for emergency exits,

for soft places,

for the nakedness of the land,

for the escape into weakness and hope,

I still have within me the lust to search for living water

with quiet talk to the rock

or with frenzied blows.

Afterwards, silence:

no questions, no answers.

Jewish history and world history grind me between them like two grindstones,
sometimes to a powder.
And the solar year and the lunar year get ahead of each other
or fall behind,
leaping, they set my life in perpetual motion.
Sometimes I fall into the gap between them to hide,
or to sink all the way down.

Sermon October 22
“The Moral Arc of the Universe”

Last night I was at the Freedom Fund Dinner for the Windham County NAACP.
It was a beautiful night. Among the clergy seated
together was the local Rabbi, Amita. We had been worried about how much to
mention the ongoing war in Palestine and Israel and I had been worried for her.
But she came.

It was a very healing uplifting night with many, many African Americans there
together along with allies from the NAACP community. Samirah Evans and her
trio of musicians sang various songs and interludes, we ate a meal together,
and lifted up our spirits and our leaders.

Again and again people used the imagery of ancestors,
ancestors celebrating their dreams come true in the lives of people.
ancestors having worked and prayed for God to lift his children up.
We were celebrating Steffen Gillom who was given the lifetime achievement
award. In his acceptance speech he talked about his grandmother having
“come from the mud”—her parents sharecroppers and yet rose from poverty
and her grandson has done remarkable things.

In a speech in 1965 Martin Luther King, Jr talks about another elder in the
church. He began by talking about the march in Selma (which had just ended)
where “more than eight thousand of us started on a mighty walk from Selma,
Alabama. We have walked through desolate valleys and across the trying hills.
We have walked on meandering highways and rested our bodies on rocky
byways. Some of our faces are burned from the outpourings of the sweltering
sun. Some have literally slept in the mud. We have been drenched by the rains.

And then he continues:

“...as I stand before you and think back over that great march, I can say, as
Sister Pollard said—a seventy-year-old Negro woman who lived in this
community during the bus boycott—and one day, she was asked while walking
if she didn’t want to ride. And when she answered, "No," the person said, "Well,
aren’t you tired?" And with her ungrammatical profundity, she said, "My feet

is tired, but my soul is rested." And in a real sense this afternoon, we can say that our feet are tired, but our souls are rested."

That was my feeling last night. I call it "good tired".

As you gave out the flowers this morning I couldn't help imagine all the work which has been done in this church for the past 60 years. It is remarkable how many of you are still here. Countless pastors have come and gone and yet the building is more beautiful than ever, filled with warmth, healing and worship of all kinds. A church in El Salvador thrives and people of all ages literally "see" because of your membership.

I think of the hymn "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God¹"
"patient and brave and true..who toiled and fought and lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew..
They lived not only in ages past;
there are hundreds of thousands still.
The world is bright with the joyous saints
who love to do Jesus' will.
You can meet them in school, on the street, in the store,
in church, by the sea, in the house next door;
they are saints of God, whether rich or poor,
and I mean to be one too."

The reading by Yehuda Amichai that Judy read is an excerpt from a longer poem in which the poet mentions the same long ancestry of pilgrims and saints...

*I wasn't one of the six hundred thousand who went out of Egypt...
Though I still have the fire and the smoke within me,
pillars of fire and pillars of smoke that guide me by night and by day.
I still have within me the lust to search for living water
with quiet talk to the rock*

Today's scripture helps us look inside that journey even deeper and into what it means to travel the long journey of life on earth with faith...

Exodus 33 finds Moses in another argument. Moses urges God to be "with" his people and God fears if he comes close he will destroy them. I had never really understood until this week that he was as much God's hesitancy to come near to us as it was Moses yearning to see God that was at play here.

Through Exodus we see this evolving relationship.

¹ <https://www.hymnsite.com/lyrics/umh712.sht>

God begins by revealing a name that points to the past: “I am the God of your ancestors” (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob — 3:6, 15). Next is a name that points to the present and the future: “I Am Who I Am” ... And then ...

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2). You are my people, says, the LORD, and I am “your God” who freed you from oppression.

Getting closer

In Exodus 29 God asks for priests and specific rituals so that he can say “I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt *in order that* I might live among them” (Exodus 29:46).

It will not be until Jesus comes to us that God truly takes human form and lives with and among us but today’s scripture is a significant step.

The whole point of God delivering Israel was to make it possible that God would be close and near, living “with us” in the midst of God’s beloved people. That’s why the book of Exodus spends so much time on the instructions (Exodus 25-31) and the building (Exodus 35-40) of the Tabernacle or tent sanctuary. The tabernacle is intended to be God’s home and dwelling place in the midst of God’s holy people².

God’s yearning to be “with” Israel and in their midst is the reason why the people’s rebellion in worshipping the golden calf in Exodus 32 is such a devastating event. Israel’s worship of the golden calf violated the first and important commandment about worshipping God alone and not worshipping idols (Exodus 20:3-5). (so) God agrees to go to Canaan but not “in the midst of” them, not “with” them, not “among” them. Maybe in front of, alongside, behind...but “not with us” (Hebrew *?immanu*).

(But) Moses remains unsatisfied³. Moses insists to God that you must “go **with us**” (*?immanu* — Exodus 33:16). Amazingly, God finally agrees! “I will do the very thing that you have asked” (Exodus 33:17). Great! But how can a holy God live and travel “with us”

Moses and God have a uniquely intimate relationship (Exodus 33:11). On that basis, Moses has been able to nudge God step-by-step to reveal enough of God’s deep character to find a way forward that allows the holy, glorious, powerful, and good God to live “with us” (Immanuel) without destroying us, sinners though we may be.

Again this week it is Moses who is urging God to draw near to the people rather than the other way around.

² Taken and adapted from <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-29/commentary-on-exodus-3312-23-4>

That is the key to Exodus. It was the key to the March for Civil Rights. And it is the key to the Israel Palestine Conflict. God with us, God among us...we looking for God. God travelling with us

Returning to Martin Luther King jr:

I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because "truth crushed to earth will rise again."

"...Behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.
How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."⁴

On Thursday I attended a vigil at St Michael's at which Rev Mary Lindquist read the following excerpt from something three other priests had put together:

In the days since the rockets were first fired I have had conversations with people who are horrified and terrified, but with the frustration as well of not knowing how to act in a positive way, how to help, how to make a difference. Pray. Because prayer changes things.

Whether or not you believe that your prayers might make a difference on the violence in the Middle East, it is a certainty that they will make a difference in you. When, by your prayers, you lift up and hold before God all of these suffering people - those you love as your very own, and those you name enemy or adversary - you will surely find a conversion of heart and find within yourself courage, faith and strength to face and meet these most terrible of days with the possibility of love. And hope. Hope to trust that God is not finished with this world, and is not inactive even in the midst of war and horrible suffering⁵.

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⁴ [https://speakola.com/ideas/martin-luther-king-jr-how-long-not-long-1965#:~:text=Luther King Jr.,- 'The arc of the moral universe is long, but,Long, Not Long\) - 1965&text=Speech delivered on the steps,Selma to the State capital..](https://speakola.com/ideas/martin-luther-king-jr-how-long-not-long-1965#:~:text=Luther King Jr.,- 'The arc of the moral universe is long, but,Long, Not Long) - 1965&text=Speech delivered on the steps,Selma to the State capital..)

⁵ <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/On-the-Violence-in-Israel-and-Gaza.html?soid=1102067254998&aid=q6wYnodRo2Y>

⁶ <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/On-the-Violence-in-Israel-and-Gaza.html?soid=1102067254998&aid=q6wYnodRo2Y>

Prayer is what Moses was doing..talking with God, drawing God near, urging God to work in and among us...that we might see God's light at work among us....We are part of this great journey and we must pray...

Let us pray...

Draw near to us Dear God,

Be WITH us in our pain and suffering

In our prayers and heartache

That you may also be with us in our joys and celebrations

In miracles and moments of revelation

We need you and you need us

If this world is to unfold in love and glory

We are here. Be with us.

Now and forever. Amen.