

October 16, 2011

SCRIPTURE: Hebrew Bible: Exodus 33: 12-23
Epistle: I Thessalonians 1: 1-10
Gospel: Matthew 22: 15-22

MEDITATION: In the Cleft of the Rock

There is something wonderful in the images in the scripture this morning. In the Exodus passage we have Moses, in deep conversation with God, one on one, God to Moses and Moses to God. They are like two friends mulling over a problem and trying to decide together what must be done about a rather serious situation. Have you ever had such a conversation with a friend? Or better yet have you ever had such a conversation with God? When something has happened in your life, and you can't seem to find your way and there seems to be no help for you anywhere, have you turned to God to find a path that will be acceptable to both of you? I bet you have had such times and such conversations, even if you are not fully aware that it is God who is in this dilemma with you.

In the verses just before those we have read this morning, there is a rather startling situation developing. God is rather fed up with these people. He even goes so far as to tell Moses that these Israelites are a "stiff necked" folk, who had tried the patience of God to such an extent that God seems not to trust God's self to be in their presence. God even goes so far as to tell Moses to take the people onward to the land of milk and honey BUT God will not go with them for fear that God will loose patience and destroy the people along the way. That is an awesome image. A God so angry with God's own chosen people who are now so "stiff necked" that God can not bare to be in their presence.

That sounds more like a human dilemma rather than one that God would admit to. I am willing to bet there have been times in your life that you have become so frustrated with others that you walked away. You ended conversation and proclaimed a loud, "That's it – I'm out of here" Think for a moment about such a time and your reaction. Recall what that felt like. Recall the outcome of such an action. Was it positive or was it negative? In my life experience, I will have to admit that this has happened once or twice. OK maybe more then once or twice and mostly when I look back it is not a very positive view that I see. I recall a time in my first ministry when the abusive actions of a few, caused a great deal of pain and anguish for many, and my reaction was one of anger and walking away. It was only with distance and time, that I could see that there might have been a better way to deal with that rather than shutting down conversation. With time I was able to see that I had to take some action, not to punish or berate, but rather to be an agent of change, that anything really positive was able to come out of that difficult situation.

This is what I see in the images presented in the scripture this morning. Moses was pleading with God, not to abandon him or the people, but to remember that these "stiff-necked" people were indeed God's people and they needed God to be with them or

Moses would be unable to lead them and certainly would not be able to be confident in the outcome of this long and arduous journey. And miracle of miracles God changed God's mind. That is what can happen when we are in a deeply personal conversation with God. We know that we are changed when we are in conversation with God BUT can God change as well when in conversation with us? This is a hotly debated theological question. The Bible teaches us that people pray to God, often with the hope of moving God, changing God, getting God to act in their behalf. And there are places in scripture where it says that God 'repents' that is, God changes. God, having thought first to do one thing, after being addressed in prayer, changes and does another thing, out of love. Then why should it not be the same for us. God can be persuaded of our repentance and God can come back into the conversation and into the journey with us.

That's an amazing image in the scripture that offers us that comfort. . And it doesn't end there. God goes on in this conversation with Moses to explain how God will place Moses in a cleft of a rock, and protect Moses with God's own hand as God passes by. Can we get a clearer image of how God wants to be in relationship with us? We too can be placed in that cleft and be protected. What can hurt or harm us when we are in a relationship that offers us that? I know you are thinking of times when you didn't think that God protected you. We all feel that at times in our human journey. But think a little deeper – did God give you strength to endure the unendurable. Did God later show you that what seemed a catastrophe was indeed a blessing? Or at the least a partial blessing? We say these words to each other often in Christian community – There is nothing that can keep us separated from God's love. We just need to believe it at our very core, and sometimes we need to help each other believe it. That the value of the conversation that we have with each other and with God.

Jesus was of course the primary example for us. Certainly Jesus did not live an easy human life. Jesus, like us, knew heartbreak and betrayal and intrigue and deceit but he never lost sight of the fact that God was with him. God held him in that cleft many times and when it was impossible to offer protection, God offered strength, wisdom, love, presence and the ability to endure the impossible. We must always remember that, and we must strive to hold that promise for ourselves as well. In the gospel today Jesus was in a difficult place. The last weeks and days of his earthly life, being attacked on all sides by those who were afraid of his power and his love. God did not leave him. And God will not leave us. We are safe. The hand of God holds us securely in the cleft of a rock, secure for now and for forever. That's an amazing image! AMEN