

A sermon preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Danvers, MA

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Exodus 33:12-23

I Have to Hold My Breath

“The check’s in the mail!” “Just trust me!” “Prices have been slashed!” “The money will be there tomorrow!” “It’s a sure thing!” “You can have it your way!”

All these promises, so many promises do we hear. We hear them on TV, on the radio, see them on billboards as we speed by in our cars, and read them in the newspaper. So often in our modern lives we are asked by so many people in so many different ways to take a leap of faith. We are begged to trust people and organizations we don’t even know. And, especially this year with an election, the campaign promises come fast and furious on TV the internet and in those dinner time phone calls from campaign volunteers calling you.

But the thing that is really amazing is that we do...trust! We do go out and buy that new car or TV or thingamagadget to help us do this and that. We do go to polls or mail in our absentee ballot and vote. We express our faith by putting down our hard earned money and entrusting yet one more politician with our vote. When we make purchases and investments of time and money or brand loyalty we are taking a leap of faith. We are entrusting something we have labored and sweated for that it or he or she will do what it or they claim to do for you. It’s a leap of faith.

Poor old Moses. He goes up on the mountain to listen to God and while he’s away the people lose their faith and build a golden calf to be their god and to worship. These stiff-necked and impatient people just couldn’t wait any longer. No more leaps of faith in this god that Moses talked about or in Moses himself.

So Moses has to bargain with God to save his people from some mighty awful smiting and smoting! God ends up putting faith in Moses and spares them. God even changes direction, does what might be against better judgment and trusts Moses. No sooner does Moses get back than God asks Moses to get on the move again. God even promises Moses that they are going to a land of “milk and honey. (Ex. 33:3)” Wow, how many times have we heard that one. Settle here in the land of milk and honey say the real estate developers. It’s okay to build in that 100 year flood plain.

And old Moses has never even seen this voice in the wilderness and now he’s being told to take his followers to some land where milk is cheap and the honey is sweet. Oh, but, there are those nasty Canaanites and Amorites and Hittites and Perizzites and Jebusites that just happen to live in this land of milk and honey. No worries, God says, they will be driven out. (Ex. 33:2) An angel will help God send these bad folks packing.

Now Moses is getting a little fidgety here. Sure, this God has done some pretty swell things like leading his people through the Reed Sea where they escaped from Pharaoh's army, and, oh, there were those stone tablets with the best laws ever known to humankind that God gave, and how about that water that came from the stone and the manna from heaven to quiet the murmuring crowd who was hungry and thirsty? Yes, God has done some pretty great things for this band of wandering sheep. Still, Moses, just once would like to see the face of this amazing spirit whom he had talked with and been given so much. "Show me your glory, I pray" Moses begs. Just show me your face so that I can know you, Moses pleads. This reminds me of the old John Lennon song in which John sings "I really want to know you Lord, I really want to see you Lord." "Seeing is believing" after all is what they say. Sometimes Moses and all of us, I swear, must have been born in Missouri, the "show me" state. "I won't believe it until I see it with my own eyes" we are fond of saying.

But God does not comply with our wishes, or at least with Moses' wishes. God says in reply to our intrepid leader "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live. (Ex. 33:20)" But God does give Moses this, perhaps he kind of meets Moses and us half way. God says "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; 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; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen. (Ex. 33:21-23)" I wonder what God's backside looked like? Have you ever wondered what Moses saw that day up on the mountain? Have you ever wondered what God's backside looks like? The interesting thing is we are never told.

All we know from reading this story in Exodus is that God said that is what would be given Moses—a glance at the backside of God passing by while Moses was hid in the cleft of the rock. But, the story does not ever detail that it indeed happened. We can read a little further on in Exodus but we see nothing which describes what happened or what Moses saw. But, we do read that when Moses came down from the mountain that his face was shining so much he had to put a veil upon his face. Moses was beaming!

Folks, do we really need to see the face of God to believe in God? Do we need miracles? Would it be easier for us to follow God if she or he walked in here this morning, into the sanctuary of Maple Street Church, and said "Come, follow me and I will take you to the land of milk and honey?" Would our faces then shine like Moses' face? Is that what it would take for us to believe that God is indeed taking us to land of milk and honey? What does it take for us to believe in God anyway?

Why do we follow God anyway? What is it that helps us have faith that there is a God? Has God ever parted the sea when your enemy was chasing you? Has God ever given you laws to live by on stone tablets? Have you ever heard the voice of God in a burning bush? Better yet, has your face ever shown brightly because you have experienced God?

Now, maybe God has not ever literally or factually acted this way in your life. But, let me ask you this: have you ever discovered the path out of a tight situation and felt you had been led through? Have you ever looked up at a fiery red sunrise or sunset and felt God's awesome beauty, power and love? Have you ever seen a child's face shine or has

your face ever shined because you have been loved by someone? Have you ever felt sheltered from the storm of your life if only for a moment and felt true peace?

You see, my friends, there are miracles that happen every day. We may not call them miracles but some moments and some people we come in contact with can change our lives or at least change our minds. We need to keep the faith. We need to believe in miracles. We need to believe God can act even in the smallest moments and through the lowliest people.

There is a wonderful song and inspirational lyrics that talks about how we mature in our faith and can come to see the amazing face of God in so many things. This, I believe is what the ancient prophets were trying to teach us. Listen...

**Holy Now*
By Peter Mayer

*When I was a boy, each week
On Sunday, we would go to church
And pay attention to the priest
He would read the holy word
And consecrate the holy bread
And everyone would kneel and bow
Today the only difference is
Everything is holy now*

*Everything, everything
Everything is holy now*

*When I was in Sunday school
We would learn about the time
Moses split the sea in two
Jesus made the water wine
And I remember feeling sad
That miracles don't happen still
But now I can't keep track
'Cause everything's a miracle*

*Everything, Everything
Everything's a miracle*

*Wine... from water is not so small
But an even better magic trick
Is that anything is here at all
So... the challenging thing becomes
Not to look for miracles
But finding where there isn't one*

*When holy water was rare at best
It barely wet my fingertips
now I have to hold my breath
Like I'm swimming in a sea of it
It used to be a world half there
Heaven's second rate hand-me-down
Now I walk it with a reverent air
'Cause everything is holy now*

*Everything, everything
Everything is holy now*

*Read... a questioning child's face
And say it's not a testament
That'd be very hard to say
See.. another new morning come
And say it's not a sacrament
I tell you that it can't... be... done*

*This morning, outside I stood
And saw a little red-winged bird
Shining like a burning bush
Singing like a scripture verse
It made me want to bow my head
I remember when church let out
How things have changed since then
Everything is holy now*

*It used to be a world half-there
Heaven's second rate hand-me-down
But I walk it with a reverent air
'Cause everything is holy now
Everything, everything
Everything is holy now.*

My prayer, for you members of the Maple Street Church, is that you can have this faith and accept that everyone is a child of God and a miracle. If we believe God can work miracles through us, with us, then all the faces of Maple Street Church can shine by loving and serving God by serving our neighbors. Amen.

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