

*What Belongs to God*  
Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
October 19, 2014  
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Texts: Exodus 33.12-33;  
Psalm 99;  
1 Thessalonians 1.1-10;  
Matthew 22.15-22

I had the delight this week of talking with several of you about the texts we read together last week. There are certain days when we sit in worship and know that the preacher was preaching just to us, that the texts were chosen because of what we needed to hear from God's word, and the music was arranged to speak directly to our hearts and minds that day. In the course of those conversations I was struck by how deeply human the stories of our scriptures truly are. We often speak in terms of the divine inspiration behind them and the way they reveal the nature of God to us as well we should, that is what they are designed to do. But these stories also reveal who we are as human beings seeking to follow God in the world.

So while we may not be drawn to collect the gold among us to forge a golden calf as we read together last week, we do know what it is to live with profound uncertainty and to long for some tangible, visible sign of God that can serve as a touchstone for us when fear has put a stranglehold on our faith. We explored together our calling as storytellers: how looking back we can see the pivotal moments where our choices or reactions become a crossroads where the opportunity to chart a new course is opened up before us. We saw God at one of those crossroads in the story of the golden calf. On the verge of destroying the people for their idolatry, God hears Moses out and remarkably the passage ends saying "the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring upon the people."<sup>1</sup> We heard in that story an invitation to turn away from the false security of idols in order to entrust ourselves to a life with a God who is alive and invested in us and with us. Because life is change it is good news

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 32.14, NRSV.

to hear that the God whom we serve is open, adaptable, and responsive to the changing circumstances of life.

At the same time I'm not at all surprised that the story takes the turn it does today. The discovery that God is not static or cast in stone IS liberating. But there still is this gnawing question: given how unpredictable and uncertain this life can be how do we know what to do when we find ourselves at a crossroads? Moses wants some assurance that they will not be left to their own devices as they journey forward. Even after the promise made in verse 14 when God says "My presence will go with you and I will give you rest," Moses still wants more. "Show me your glory", he says. We've looked at this text together before and I remember sharing with you the insight a Jewish Rabbi shared with me in a clergy group some years ago. Sshe made a very similar observation to the one I shared last week when I said that life seems so inevitable while we are living it - that we can often only see the pivotal moments in retrospect. That's what the Rabbi said about this text as well: when it comes to seeing God's glory we often only see that glory in retrospect. It's as we look back that we can trace the presence and goodness of God at work in us and around us. That's how she made meaning from this rather strange story.

The last time I preached on this text I offered some perspective for why that might be - why we often cannot see God's glory at work in us as it is happening but only afterward can we turn and look back and see the subtle presence of God guiding us. I wondered with you in that sermon six years ago if part of the rationale for this is the preservation of our freedom. When God's presence with us comes from the shadows and edges of life, we have the freedom to choose whether we will turn toward that presence and follow its leading or whether we will turn from it and go our own way. The preservation of our freedom ensures that our life with God is based in love. Without freedom there is no love. With this freedom there is the possibility of love and fidelity and there is the possibility of betrayal. Some days that line is obvious and other days we can wrestle until the daybreak and not be sure.

Jesus was confronted in the gospel today by some of the religious leaders who were seeking to play upon the inevitability of those lines. Here is the line in question: the Herodians were likely supporters of the local Roman

official Herod Antipas, sympathizers if you will to the Roman occupation. The Pharisees were especially observant Jews and highly influential among God's people. These two groups coming together should alert us to some ulterior motives! The question that they posed to Jesus is "is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" If Jesus says yes he is in danger of being viewed by the oppressed Jewish residents of Palestine as a sympathizer to Rome. If he says no he is in danger of being viewed by the Romans as fostering insurrection. There it is - that line between fidelity and betrayal. They pose the question as if it easy to discern. You make this choice and God goes with you, you make this choice and you go alone. Jesus refuses to place the line where they are placing it.

When he asks for a coin that is used for the tax and questions whose image is upon it he is making a brilliant move. He avoids the political trap they placed for him. By affirming that they should give to the Emperor the things that belong to the Emperor he avoids the charge of insurrection. But when he goes further to say that they should give to God what is God's he is challenging the reach and rightness of the government's claim and therefore avoids the charge of sympathizer as well.

I've always loved the brilliance of this move but realized this week after some reading on this text that Jesus is doing more than simply stepping out of their political trap. When Jesus asks for a coin and whose image is upon it he is making clear that the tax rightfully belongs to the Emperor but he is at the same time limiting the extent of the claim the Emperor can make. He can put his image on a coin and expect a tax in return but the sphere of his sovereignty does not go beyond the wealth he wields and the power that comes from that wealth great as that power may seem. In fact his interest does not go beyond that wealth or that power either.

The image of God is written on the hearts of every human being<sup>2</sup>. The sphere of God's sovereignty goes far beyond the realm of the Roman Empire or any other empire we might seek to build or bow down before. And by sovereignty I mean something far more than power, I am speaking of God's interest, of God's love for us, of God's investment in us and how we do our life together. God's image is upon on us - on each and every

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<sup>2</sup> Richard E. Spaulding, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 190.

one of us. That means that God goes with us into every sphere of life – every realm – every place we go. On the one hand that gives to us great assurance; the kind that Moses was seeking. On the other hand, it means that we have all kinds of choices to make as we consider what belongs to God.

And while I did not find a simple or definitive answer to the question we all find ourselves asking from time to time: how do we know what to do when we find ourselves at a crossroads when we have not yet caught a glimpse of God’s glory going by? I did find a clear direction to go in our searching: keep looking for ways to uncover God’s image. Keep looking for God’s image as we do our work, as we build our governments, as we relate to our neighbors and in our families.

The piece I read this week concluded with these words regarding the image of God: “the image (of God) can sometimes be difficult to recognize. When we look at each other, or in the mirror, we tend to see the inscriptions that our business with the world has left on us: you are what you look like, what you have, what you wear, what you do, the company you keep. Nevertheless, underneath all those inscriptions is a much deeper mark: the kiss of light in your eyes, the watery sign of a cross made once upon a time on the forehead... All those faces are a part of your face, when you begin to see the image that God sees, the image engraved in the palm of the hand of the God who, in Jesus, stands behind us with full faith and credit.”<sup>3</sup>

I know we will all find ourselves from time to time longing as Moses did for certainty, clarity, and a vision of God’s goodness and glory. And when we do, I hope that Jesus’ words come back to mind: give to God what belongs to God. In those words we are reminded of the relative power any other claim has upon us. Nothing anyone can demand from us compares to the image of God that is within us and in all those who are around us. Uncover God’s image and you will be well on your way to catching a glimpse of God’s glory. And even when we fail...the promise is that God keeps calling us back and never lets us go.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard E. Spaulding, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 192.