

Actions, Not Appearances
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Simon's Rock is the Liberal Arts College where I received my Associates Degree. One of my friends there was named Gareth. We spent a lot of time talking about life and whatever we were studying—sometimes while rambling about in the woods. Some days we would talk psychology or sociology. Other times we might discuss political science or philosophy. Back then, there was precisely one course on the topic of religion at Simon's Rock. It was *The Bible as Literature*. I took it. Guess how I did....C+! Don't worry, I did a lot better in Seminary.

The general lack of religious studies at Simon's Rock didn't keep us from talking about God now and then. Neither Gareth nor I were believers at that time. I actually spent quite a lot of time actively making fun of religious ideas. I sometimes think of my calling to Ministry as both my penance, and undeniable proof that God has a *wicked* sense of humor. But, despite our relative level of unbelief, Gareth and I agreed on one thing: we would both like to meet God face to face. As part of our loopy and rambling conversations, we imagined the exact scenario in which we would like to meet the Almighty. It became a sort of theme for us throughout our friendship.

It went something like this: sometime in the not –too-distant future our shared tendency to ramble on intellectually would acquire a laser fine focus. Bit by bit, we would burn away whole layers of human awareness that had kept people from reaching the loftiest levels of understanding and pure, unbridled experience. We would refine ourselves into Yogi-like beings. No intellectual riddle would be too vast. No matter of experience would be left untasted *or untested* by our increasingly highly evolved selves. ***Then it would happen.*** Suddenly, the very sky itself would roll up like some cheap plastic window shade and *zip* out of the way to reveal the Lord bathed in brilliant glory. The Infinite One would beam down on us, *looking right at us*, smiling broadly. And God would pull up a few lawn chairs, take a seat, and then fix us all some cool drinks. Then, the best part: God would say, in a gruff, yet kindly, Wilford Brimley¹ like voice: "I am proud of you boys. You really figured it all out." }{

Now, what scenario do you think Moses was imagining might occur when he asked God to "(s)how me your Glory, I pray?"² In a way, it is an odd question for Moses to ask. After all, Moses has already *seen* God a number of times. Remember when Moses first met God? He was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro. Out on Mount Horeb the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in a bush that was blazing but not consumed. Soon enough, God called to Moses out of that same bush and their relationship began in earnest.³

Moses also saw God throughout the whole of the Exodus journey—before and after today's story. Elsewhere in Exodus it reads that "The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night... so that they might travel by day

¹ Quaker Oats © advertisement television actor.

² Exodus 22:18

³ Adapted from Exodus 3:1-6.

and by night”..and was *never* out of sight of the people.⁴ So, having seen God in a few different scenarios already, why does Moses feel he needs to see God now? What’s different?

In his initial encounters with God, Moses was intimidated by his Holy companion, and “hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.”⁵ But, *now* Moses ups the ante. Burning Bush? Seen it. Fiery pillar or smoking pillar? Been there, done that. Now, Moses wants to meet God face to face. He wants to see God’s glory full on.

This is a risky request. God tells Moses “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.”⁶ God eventually agrees to pass in front of Moses, but in order to do so safely, God hides Moses in the nook of a rock. When God passes Moses, only the Holy backside is on display. This is not exactly what Moses asked for. There are no cold drinks and lawn chairs in *this* scenario, and no face to face encounter.

It strikes me that the request of Moses to see God directly was not only risky, but also off target. Not unlike the ramblings of teenage boys. While God indeed appears to the Israelites in a variety of forms, it is always clear that God is not actually any of those things. The Burning Bush and the pillars are places that God chooses to appear, but none are actually the true form of God. They are symbols of God rather than some sort of photographic evidence.

I believe that God is making a statement about appearances in these manifestations. Maybe somehow we should not feel we *need* to see God. Perhaps *seeing* God is not as important as something else. After all, consider how badly things went when the Israelites made a Golden Calf so that they could have a god they could see. God was not pleased. They broke the second commandment⁷ against making an image of God. Can you imagine how important *not* being seen is to God if that Commandment ranks as second? It’s also true that not making images of God created a way of being uniquely Jewish. In the world at that time, Pagans made statues, mosaics and paintings of their gods with wild abandon. Not doing so set the Jews apart from their neighbors.

Just as significantly, it also redirects attention from God’s appearance to God’s actions. After God passes by Moses while he is safely tucked into the nook of the mountain, God *says* something. God says God’s name. Not just “the Lord,” as it is written in our English versions of the Bible, but the real deal—Yod Hey Vav Hey, the four letter name usually rendered as “Yahweh” or “Jehovah” when Christians try to pronounce it. By the way, traditionally Jews would *never* say it out loud, because the very pronunciation was understood to contain God’s true essence. This understanding is implied by what happens next, when God *defines* God’s name. This also defines the very way that God will relate to Moses and the Israelites, and even us Christians today.

⁴ Exodus 13:21-22.

⁵ Exodus 3:6.

⁶ Exodus 33:20.

⁷ Exodus 20:4.

The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”⁸ }

That relationship of steadfast love and faithfulness far outlasting memories of wrongdoing *that is who* God is, and *how* God is. It is relationships which favor love and forgiveness above all else that show us what God looks like. It is systems of mercy and grace that reveal God. Those are the way of God, those are the shape of God, and those are the fullness of God’s glory revealed to the world. The face of God is mercy and steadfast love outlasting all else. It is no mistake that this same message is also at the root of the Christian understanding of the Resurrection. Love and relationship triumph over death and evil. That’s God for you.

And it is in that moment of self description by God that God’s glory is revealed to Moses. And Moses got it, too. Because it was not until that moment that Moses “quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped.”⁹ Worship in the Bible always indicates an intimate awareness of God’s full presence.

It wasn’t God’s appearance that made Moses know God’s glory. It was God’s actions. This is supported by Psalm 96, part of which we used as or call to worship. It read in part “Declare his *glory* among the nations, his marvelous *works* among all the peoples.”¹⁰ God’s glory and God’s works are one and the same. God is a verb. God is the essence of right relationships—a creative, outward, doing. Action. Not an empty idol, that looks beautiful but does not, and could never relate to us.

And that’s good news for us, because it means that we are called to *act*. As creatures made in God’s image, it is part and parcel of our nature to participate in God’s glory through our own actions. We, too, are called to be merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We, too, are called to let love and relationship have the last word in our lives. And we are called to share that glory with everyone we meet. When we encounter someone who is suffering, we are called to remind them that God is with them by being with them and relieving what we can of their suffering. That shines God’s glory into the darkness of the world. When we are witness to acts of discrimination against people because of their color, or gender, or

⁸ Exodus 34:6-7

⁹ Exodus 34:8

¹⁰ Psalm 96:3.

sexuality, or their religious views, we are called to speak out against those hateful views and to shine God's glory into the darkness of the world. And when we are witness to, or involved in acts of love and caring and support, don't you know that we shine God's glory into the world.

We don't need a special one on one, face to face encounter with God on a mountaintop to know God's glory. We don't need lawn chairs and cold drinks. We don't need a state of the art light show from the Almighty. God's glory lives in us, too, and we let it shine when we, too, are merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

With God's help, may we all shine God's glory into the darkness of this troubled world.

Amen.

Psalm 96

1O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.

2Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.

3Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.

4For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods.

5For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.

6Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

Exodus 33:12-23, 34:6-8

12Moses 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.’ 13Now 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.”

14He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” 15And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. 16For 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.” 17The 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.” 18Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” 19And 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.

20But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” 21And the Lord continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; 22and 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; 23then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

5The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, “The Lord.” 6The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation. 8And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped.