# Exodus 33:12-23

Traditionally, theology works by thinking issues through discursively and analytically, and this takes up one way the Bible does theology. But the Bible often does theology by telling a story, and that is happening in Exodus 32—34. The present passage in particular offers a narrative discussion of the question, What do we mean by saying that God is *with* us? How can *God* be *with* us? How much of God is with us? In what way is God with us? How do we experience God being with us? What difference does it make? Telling a story means that different ways of handling the question can be explored without the author having to decide that one of the approaches is *the* right one. The various angles in the story can contribute to the way its hearers think through the issue and live with it. For like most of life’s important questions, this one does not exactly have *an* answer. We do not so much answer such questions as walk round them and live with them. So the sermon might seek to help the congregation to think about the various meanings we attach to the idea of God being with us, and to test and expand these by scripture.

When Christians think about how God can be *with* us, we often see the problem as lying in God’s *moral* holiness and our sinfulness. Exodus knows that we are sinful but it also knows that God is inherently gracious and merciful (v. 19) and does not have a problem forgiving people. Exodus is more preoccupied by another angle on the question, which does not concern Christians so much, and may therefore be the angle we need to learn from. It is that God is *metaphysically* holy, whereas we are earthly. In the Old Testament, “God is holy” means God is other than us, transcendent, belonging to the realm of heaven, uncreated, awesomely powerful and majestic. God’s presence is like a monarch’s presence. It reduces you to silence. You are a being of a quite different status and significance. “Our God”, like the God of Sinai, “is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12)—not only in relation to sin but just in being awesomely transcendent. We and God are such different beings that we can hardly imagine being in the same room with God, or on the same mountain (Exod 19).

So asked who will accompany Moses in leading the people, Yahweh’s answers, “my *presence* will go with you, and I will give you rest”. The word for “presence”, *panim*, literally means “face”. A person’s face tells us that the person is with us. It shines out with their love and concern. We know they are “with” us from their face. We know they care from their face. When someone *looks* with favor, and their face thus shines on us, this naturally issues in generous acts towards us (cf. the priestly blessing in Numbers 6:22-27). So having Yahweh’s face with the people will guarantee that they experience God’s blessing and provision and reach their destination (v. 14). At the same time, speaking of Yahweh’s “face” being with them avoids implying that the whole of Yahweh is with them. Speaking of the presence of God’s face is like speaking of the presence of God’s hand or arm or breath or name. It implies a real presence of God, but not a presence of the whole of God that we would be unable to cope with.

When Moses then asks to be allowed to see God’s *glory*, the story is taking another run at the question of how we can understand God’s presence. A person’s glory or splendor is the outward manifestation of their intrinsic importance. When sitting at home watching television, a monarch is still sovereign of the realm, but he or she looks less impressive than when robed in regalia and sitting in the state carriage, processing before the people. God’s glory is the outward manifestation of God’s intrinsic holiness, the holiness that distinguishes God from human beings. So Moses says, “I want to see you as you really are, in all your splendor”. It would be a silly request (but perhaps we are not to treat this piece of narrative theology as part of some actual conversation that an actual Moses once initiated). Moses would fry. God therefore offers some alternatives.

First, “I will make all my *goodness* pass before you”. “Goodness” sounds more abstract than the Hebrew word *tob*. “All my good” would be as fair a translation, which fits with the fact that here we are being given another run at the issue that arose in vv. 12-17. The “good” Yahweh intends to give the Israelites is the fulfillment of the purposes that have been announced to them. They will be taken to their Promised Land. That promise’s fulfillment is an aspect of Yahweh’s splendor that Moses will be able to cope with. The people will know God is with them because they will experience God giving them good things.

Second, Yahweh undertakes to proclaim before Moses that *name* “Yahweh”. In traditional societies, names often express something about a person’s character or destiny, or the vision or hopes their parents hold for them. The name “Yahweh” itself spoke of God’s character, of who God would be for Israel. It was not just a label, but a revelation.

Old Testament names can be a puzzle—they may not intrinsically have the meaning the Old Testament associates with them. Instead, it is the shape of the name that suggests something. Moses’ name does not refer to being drawn out of water, but it looks a bit like a verb meaning that, so it can be given a link with that (Exod 2:10). Similarly, Yahweh’s name is reminiscent of the verb *hayah*, “to be” or “to happen”. The short version of the name is Yah (cf. “hallelu-yah”). Perhaps “Yahweh” is a lengthened form of some such shorter name, as happened when “Abram” became “Abraham”. Thus the name “Yahweh” does not exactly mean “the one who is/will be there”, “the one who is/will be with you”, but it looks rather like a form of the verb that would mean that. That is therefore the message or the promise that God invites Israel to receive from this name (see Exod 3). The name means that God will be with you, or (to put it another way) that you will experience God as one who is always insisting on being gracious and merciful (v. 19).

It is in this sense that the name reveals the person and that having the name means you have the person. We might compare the preciousness of the name “Jesus”. It is therefore entirely appropriate that this narrative discussion of what God’s presence means should include a reminder of the name Yahweh. The name mediated the presence of the person, because through saying the name people were saying who the person was. Further, in this particular case the actual name spoke of presence. It is therefore sad that translations deprive us of the name that God graciously revealed and replace it by the patriarchal expression “the LORD”.

So in response to the request about seeing God’s splendor, God first promises that Israel will see God’s goodness and then that they will know God’s name. Then we are amazed to hear God adding, “But you cannot see my *face*” (v. 20). Translations obscure the contrast with v. 15 because there they rendered the same word “presence”. And in a sense that is right, because evidently the word has some different sense here. Or perhaps the implication of the double usage is that you can *know* God’s face is with you but not *see* God’s face. We might recall Jesus’ exhortation to Mary not to hold onto him, and recall the way in which he disappears as soon as he is recognized (Luke 24:31; John 20:17). And we might recall the frequency with which hymns and songs ask to “see” God, but mean this metaphorically. Israel’s leaders did see God (Exod 24:9-11). Here, seeing God would kill you. Both declarations make important statements about the reality and the limitation of the sense in which we know God’s presence.

The story has one other run at the question, one that has often amused people. We cannot see God’s face, because it will shine out with that splendor that Moses has asked to see. But we can see God’s *back* (vv. 21-23). We cannot see God coming, but we can see God going. Again we are reminded of resurrection stories. Jesus leaves the tomb while the disciples are not looking, and goes off ahead of them to Galilee (Mark 16:7). They had better run if they want to catch him up. We do not see God, but sometimes we see God’s back disappearing round the corner and realize that God has just acted.

# Exodus 34:29-35

We are at the close of a tumultuous stage in the story of Israel’s time at Sinai—indeed, of its relationship with Yahweh. It is a pregnant moment when Moses comes down the mountain with his two stones. They are the “covenant stones” or “testimony stones”. They give testimony to the basis on which the covenant relationship between Israel and Yahweh will work in the future. That basis is the Ten Words from chapter 20. These detail for Israel the basic requirements and promises built into that relationship.

Coming down with these stones might itself be enough to make someone’s face shine with enthusiasm and joy. Another natural cause of that shining would be the simple fact of having been with God for six weeks. To be in the presence of someone who loves us puts a shine on our faces. Being welcomed into the presence of someone very important can have a similar effect. Both have been true of Moses.

But there is something else going on. “Shine” (*qaran*) is an unusual word. It is a “denominative” verb, a verb formed from a noun—the opposite to the usual rule in Hebrew, where nouns are formed from verbs. In a case such as this, we work out the meaning of the verb from the noun rather than vice versa.

This noun (*qeren*) is a much more common word meaning “horn”. It refers to

* the literal horn growing on an animal
* such a horn used as a flask or a musical instrument
* something that a horn symbolizes, such as strength and impressiveness
* something horn-shaped (given a little imagination!) such as a tusk, or a hill, or the projections at the corner of an altar, or the rays of the sun.

In the only other occurrence of the verb in Psalm 69:31, it means “to display horns”, and in connection with Exodus 34 medieval artists and sculptors portrayed Moses as having literal horn-like projections in his forehead. But the Greek translation of Exodus assumed that here it meant “to shine”, and this seems more likely. This involves inferring that the verb took its meaning from the last of the noun’s metaphorical usages. The same inference underlies 2 Corinthians 3.

The other passage where “horns” refers to the rays of the sun is the vision in Habakkuk 3. That vision pictures Yahweh coming to act decisively in world history to rescue Israel and its king and to defeat its oppressors. Near the beginning of the picture (Hab 3:4) is a description of Yahweh:

*The brightness was like the sun;*

*rays came forth from his hand,*

*where his power lay hidden.*

Now it is quite common to describe God as shining like the sun, and it seems that this distinctive statement in Exodus 34 links with that. The implication is that as Yahweh shines like the sun, Moses has “caught” some of that brightness. Rays shine forth from his face that reflect Yahweh’s glory.

Naturally enough, Moses is unaware of this, and naturally enough, it has a startling affect on the people. The passage turns out to continue the narrative discussion of what it means to be in the presence of God, which was a dominant theme in passages such as Exodus 33:12-33 (see the comment). There Moses was told he could not see God’s glory, because that would mean death, yet we had already read about Moses and other people seeing God’s face and surviving. These are not so much contradictions as testimonies to the ambiguous nature of the presence of God. Here it is implied that Moses has indeed seen God’s glory, and has come home reflecting it. That makes him in turn a danger to the people, who have already expressed the desire that he should go into that dangerous presence on their behalf and then speak on God’s behalf to them, rather than that God should speak directly to them (cf. Exod 20:18-21).

It is thus tempting for the people of God not to want to get too near to God. When God acts, it is a scary matter. We long to have an experience of God’s awesome presence, but we are also fearful of it. One of the gospel aspects of this story is that God deals graciously with such mixed feelings on our part. God does not co-operate with our desire that we should not have to come too near to God’s glory. But God makes allowances for us in the way that glory appears. As 2 Corinthians 4 goes on to note after this passage has been taken up in 2 Corinthians 3, we see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, where it is easier to handle (cf also John 1:14).

It might also be tempting for leaders to collude with that reluctance to get too near to God and to enjoy the prestige of being the person who embodies the scary presence of God. Moses’ response is rather the one that Paul and Barnabas will one day make when they have an analogous experience (Acts 14:8-18). His response is to call the people close, because it is important that they hear what has transpired in his meetings with Yahweh. This is so precisely because those meetings took place for their sake and not just for his. In due course, indeed, God’s glory will come to dwell in the shrine that the Israelites will shortly make (40:29-35). God’s glory will dwell in their very midst and will signify when they are to be on the move and when they are to settle down. They will be guaranteed God’s presence, but they will also be protected from it, because it is located in this shrine, and none of them will actually enter it—not even Moses himself.

So Moses shares God’s word with them. As usual, one underlying assumption of the story is that discovering God’s expectations of them is a privilege and a joy. To know God’s commands is no more a burden than is the case when we discover the desires of someone whom we love or admire or respect. It will be a joy to us to seek to fulfill those desires (perhaps!). Christians often think of the Jewish people as burdened by the commands God has given them, but that is not the impression the Old Testament gives. Nor is it the feeling that Jewish people themselves usually have—any more than Christians feel it a burden that Jesus gave us the Sermon on the Mount.

The rays that emanated from Moses’ face were a sign that he had been in God’s presence and had received those commands from God. Moses thus spoke with the people with his face unveiled, so that they could see the sign. After he had finished telling them God’s words, he put a veil on his face, apparently so that they were not put off from relating to him in everyday life. The next time he went to talk with God, he uncovered his face again, because he did not need to have it covered before God, and once more he would stay unveiled while passing on God’s words to the people. That routine obtained as long as the people were at Sinai. We assume that it is a “veil” that he put over his face, though the Hebrew word (*masweh*) is another unusual one: it comes only here in the Old Testament.

Exodus gives no hint of the idea that Moses wore the veil so that people would not see the glory of his face fading (2 Cor 3). Paul is perhaps taking up the way the story was interpreted in New Testament times, and simply working with that interpretation. In Exodus itself the point of the story is to convey something of the wonder of the fact that God has given Israel a supernatural revelation. It means it is possible for people to know clearly what God expects of them, and to do it.

Paul draws our attention to the fact that seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ makes us all bearers of the glory. We are all people who continually shine out with God in the church and in the world, as Moses did. Exodus itself points to a converse fact, that from time to time individuals are the bearers of God’s glory to a special degree. They shine out in remarkable ways. A congregation may have someone like that within it. We do well to pay attention to people who seem to have climbed the mountain and come down redolent of God, and even to be open to the possibility of people finding that in us. We might need especially to pay attention to such people when we have previously dismissed them (see 32:1, the first verse of the complex of chapters that 34:29-35 closes off).