

**Sermon: "Where God Just Was"**

**Text: Exodus 33:12-23**

**Sunday, March 25, 2007, - First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO**

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One of the worst experiences of my high school English courses was the 1882 short story *The Lady, or the Tiger* by Frank Stockton. *The Lady, or the Tiger?* is a fantasy story that resembles a fairy tale. However, it is considered more whimsical and open-ended than most fairy tales. It involves a jealous princess, a vindictive king, and an ardent suitor—long the staple elements of fairy tales. In discussing romantic relationships, passion, self-interest, and reason, Stockton puts the princess at the center of a terrible conflict: whether she will send her lover to his death or let him live and marry another woman. Her decision is left unresolved at the story's conclusion where we are left with the final image of the young suitor opening one of two doors and the princess is the only person in the entire world who knows whether a lady or a tiger is waiting behind the door he chooses. The story's power and popularity was gained by its abrupt ending, which leaves the reader to ponder the princess's decision, and her lover's fate.

I am still tortured today by that ending. I swear that somewhere on this planet is a known ending. At sometime, Stockton must have declared the real ending and the literary world is playing a horribly cruel game with people like me who are tormented by the question, "The lady, or the tiger"? There are some days where I can't believe I'm going to die and not know the answer to that question. When I stand before God, I pray the first words I hear are "Well done, my good and faithful servant." And perhaps because God is a merciful God, the second thing I will hear will be either "lady" or "tiger" along with a knowing wink.

Obviously, I missed the point of Stockton's story. It is quite clear that I got hung up on a mute point. But you see, I like to know. To have a clear answer. To experience conclusions to my questions. Some people find joy in the unknown and the ambiguity, the mystery of life. I am not one of those individuals.

This is why I relate so well to Moses in this passage. The guy wants some answers. He could use a little comfort in our text. Moses had confronted the Egyptian Pharaoh and won the Israelites' release. He had held his arms over the Red Sea to part them so the refugees could pass safely through, and had guided and cajoled them through the wilderness and their justifiable apprehension that eventually questioned whether they had done the right thing in leaving the relative security of Egypt. He had organized, counseled, marshaled and mothered; he had

interceded and reassured. And no sooner had he gone up the holy mountain to spend some quality time with God, the people gathered up all their jewelry, melted it down and cast it into a golden calf which they then proceeded to worship.

As soon as Moses got that whole mess straightened out, and lest they all have heck to pay for their serious breach of faithfulness, Moses headed back up the mountain to see what he might be able to salvage of their relationship with the one they should have been worshipping.

Suffice it to say, Moses was tired, mad, nervous and afraid. And protective of his little flock, despite their errant ways. So Moses, calling assertively into the vapors from whence he has heard the voice of God, asks for a little comfort. “Where the heck are we going, and who, might I ask, is going with us? You tell me to go, and you claim to know my name; you say you think I’m swell, but I’m feeling all alone out here. If you are still backing this little road trip, clue me in. What’s going through your mind?”

To which God ambiguously responds, “I’m with you – ahead of you and behind – and I will give you rest.”

“Umm,” Moses presses, “is that ‘you’ as in ‘me’ or ‘you’ as in ‘y’all? If you aren’t behind the whole of us, don’t keep dragging us further into nowhere. I need to know that your arms are around us and your heart is with us. I need some reassurance – and some confidence. How about this: let me see your glory. Let me see your face – your very self.”

In reply, God assures Moses that neither he, Moses, nor the people of Israel will be abandoned. God will be with them – all of them. “But you can’t see my glory. I’ll show you my goodness, but you can’t see my face. The fact is, you couldn’t take it. No one can see the face of God and live. What you will see, Moses, is my back.”

Ancient rabbis said that in the original Hebrew language, the word “back” should be understood as an euphemism for “where I just was”. So God says “the best you can do . . . the most you are capable of, is seeing where I just was.”

The longing for something tangible, for something visible is a quest of humankind. Israel was no different than us. There is an old preacher story – that may even be true – about a fearful child in need of a hug who responds to his mother’s reminder that “God is always with you,” by confessing that he would prefer something with “skin on it”.

Woody Allen, in *Love and Death*, says “If God would only speak to me – just once. If He would only cough. If I could just see a miracle. If I could see a burning bush or the seas part. Or my Uncle Sasha pick up the check.”

We can understand these feelings. An unambiguous sign from God would surely be appreciated and would provide, we might think, just the solid foundation on which to build a spiritual life. But what faith would that require? What faith would there be in a world where the Creator intruded so powerfully that we would have no choice but to believe? What freedom would we have if we were coerced into faith? Uncertainty is a necessity of faith.

In his book, *The Trivialization of God*, author Donald McCullough tells about a moment he experienced while in Scotland several years ago that taught him about true faith. A few days after his arrival, he attended a concert at Usher Hall and at the end of the performance, he walked out into a very rainy night. Not to worry, he thought. I’ll be back at my room before I’m completely soaked. So with confidence bolstered by complete ignorance, he raced off through dark streets. The rain fell with increasing conviction, everything became unfamiliar, and fear formed in his stomach and gnawed at his courage. Eventually, as W.C. Fields put it, he had to take the bull by the tail and face the situation: He was outrageously lost. He needed help, but even muggers and stray cats had quit the night. He wandered aimlessly.

A man appeared. What reason had set him in such inhospitable circumstances? A spat with his wife? Or to find Don? Do angels speak with a Scottish accent? Whoever he was, Don needed him.

Don asked the man, “Sir, can you tell me the way to Pollack Residence Hall?”

“Aye. (Imagine my best Scottish accent here.) You need to go three blocks down this street, and then left on Clerk, go for two blocks, and then turn right . . .” The man stopped when he saw the confusion in Don’s eyes. “Ahh . . . He said, “I’ll show ya. Follow me.”

Don says that in the moments that followed he had perhaps the purest form of faith he had ever experienced: he entrusted himself totally to this man’s guidance. He dedicated not a fleeting second of thought to his watery appearance, his fearful panting, his confused speech – or his trust in

this stranger. At the time, his faith was completely unremarkable; his attention was devoted exclusively to his savior, to what he saying and where he was going.

Let's take a moment to compare this to some of our trips with God. Sometimes we just downright refuse to go – arguing that we know a better way or demanding that God tells us upfront where God is taking us. More often than not, we go along with God but we pester and nag. We're walking on his heels, tapping his arm, and peppering Him with questions like a five-year-old. "Where are we going, God?" "When will we be there, God?" "Weren't we suppose to take that exit, God?" "Are you sure this is the right way, God?" "Are we there yet, God?" Sometimes it seems like a very long trip for us, but I imagine it can seem even longer to God.

Why can't we fully know God, God's very self, as Moses requested? It seems like a fair request from a sincere heart. "God, I need some reassurance. Show me your face."

The fullness of the Lord's presence, what Moses in his fear and uncertainty thinks will help, is in and of itself too much for human comprehension. As one writer says, "such presence would be coercive, faith would be turned into sight and humankind could not but believe." The uncertainty, the mystery associated with God leaves room for faith and trust.

There are things that I know now that I asked to know when I was younger. However, if I had known then what I know now, it would have been more than I could have handled. It would have tainted the journey I've taken thus far.

Like it or not, sometimes we really don't know what's best for us. But God does. So God, in His infinite wisdom and as a Parent who knows best, assures us of what we need to know and protects us from what we can't know.

And what remains is for us to have faith. For us to blindly trust God as Don McCullough blindly trusted his Scottish angel.

But God has mercy on us and in his compassion,

Where can you look in your life journey and see where God just was?

What is important in the end, is not our ability to ‘see’ or know God, but to recognize that we are indeed already known by God who travels with us.

“How shall we begin to know who You are if we do not begin ourselves to be something of what You are?” asks Thomas Merton. “We receive enlightenment only in proportion as we give ourselves more and more completely to God by humble submission and love. We do not first see, then act: we act, then see . . . And that is why the man who waits to see clearly, before he will believe, never starts on the journey.”

If we join Woody Allen in waiting for God to speak in the extraordinary, we will likely miss the Word that has already been clearly addressed to us. When God speaks, as Elijah discovered, it’s not usually in the wind or earthquake or fire, but in the realm of silence. The Word does not blast away all doubt with unambiguous clarity and thus bully us into belief; instead it takes the way of humility into this world, gently inviting us into a relationship of growing faith – a faith never without doubt as it moves steadily, if not always smoothly, toward deeper trust.

Sometimes in the middle of life, we will not always see what God is doing. But months or even years later, we may come to understand the quiet and hidden things God has been doing in our lives. We will see where God just was.

### **Benediction**

*Send us now into the world in peace,  
and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you;  
with gladness and singleness of heart;  
through Christ our Lord.*

*Amen*