

# Story and Meditation: Faces

October 18, 2020

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 33:12-23

Matthew 22:15-22

by *Eric Anderson*

One of the teens had been spending a lot of time on Twitter, and in particular, had been attentively following the posts of Unvirtuous Abbey. Therefore, he knew what the face of God looks like.

The other teen, his sister, had been spending more time on the Internet exploring the wonders of European Renaissance painting. Therefore, she knew what the face of God looks like.

To the Twitter follower, accustomed to a series of photos of birds photographed in the wild captioned with something like, "The Holy Spirit on her way," the face of God looked like a sharp beak, intense eyes, and brightly colored feathers, with an expression that promised fierce devotion.

To the Renaissance follower, intrigued by the lightness and richness of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, the face of God looked like a man's, lined with experience and focused in power, giving life at the tip of an extended finger.

"A bird," cried the brother. "A man!" cried the sister. "With broad wings!" cried the brother. "With a long beard," cried the sister.

The younger sister, the smallest of the three, considered just crying at all the noise and outrage.

Instead, she courageously popped up between their angry faces and jutting jaws and said, "I know what God looks like." Then she strolled away down the hall.

Briefly confused by this statement and her abrupt departure, brother and sister followed, though they were both taking breaths to shout, "You do not!"

Before that thought could reach their lips, however, little sister had reached her destination. "God looks like this," she said, and gestured to an alcove in the wall. Older brother and sister pushed her out of the way to look.

They were staring into the mirror they'd forgotten was there.

"That's what God looks like," said little sister.

Big sister looked at big brother's reflection, then at her own. "That's what God can look like," she started, and big brother finished the sentence with her, "if we act like God."

Little sister pushed in between them and they looked, all three, at one another in the mirror. "Yes," she laughed. "That's just what God looks like."

Today's texts are all about faces. Moses wanted to see the face of God. Jesus demanded the see the face of the Emperor Tiberius – well, the version on a coin. Moses remembered the faces of the people of Israel and he was trying to get God to reaffirm the covenant with them after they had broken it so completely with the golden calf. Jesus was reading the hostility and hypocrisy in the faces of those challenging him. Moses knew God could see his face. Jesus replied to a question addressed to his face.

Lots and lots of faces.

One of the stresses of our time is the separation we suffer from one another's faces. As I've said more than once, it turns out that I'm really bad at recognizing people when they put on a mask. With practice, I'm getting somewhat better, but it means that when I'm out and about (a somewhat rare thing), I may believe I'm among strangers when several may well be deeply valued friends.

Masks also conceal the small expressions with which people communicate more than words can bear. We have all been learning, I'm sure, to make sure we smile with our eyes, since our lips can't be seen. One of my frustrations with telephone conversations over the years has been that lack of visual expression. Now I get to have that experience in person. It's disorienting.

Video conferencing is an improvement, but it's strangely flat. My brain, and I suspect many brains, don't handle an image on a screen in the same way that they handle seeing someone close up and in person.

So here we are. That may sound like I'm an opponent of mask wearing, but I'm not. You may notice that I'm wearing one now both as a sound practice and as a good example. I'm just acknowledging what we all know: with all the other deprivations of this time, one of the things we miss is faces.

Faces help us understand one another.

Kathryn M. Schifferdecker writes at Working Preacher:

"That God chooses to abide with human beings is an astonishing thing indeed. That God chooses to be in relationship with human beings means that God makes himself vulnerable to the pain that ensues when that relationship is betrayed. But it also means that authentic communication is made possible, communication 'face to face,' and Moses is the model for us of that sort of authentic divine-human communication.

“That is, Moses models prayer for us, prayer that is not afraid to hold God to God's promises, prayer that is not afraid to appeal to God's love for God's people, even over and against God's holiness. Moses, through this audacious prayer, succeeds in securing God's promise that God will indeed abide with the Israelites throughout their long wilderness wandering.

“Moses, in other words, wins the argument.

“But that's not the end of the conversation. There is this other matter about seeing God's glory. The fact that Moses' request is not granted reminds Moses, and us, that God is still God. For all his chutzpah, even Moses cannot presume too much. Even Moses cannot know or comprehend God completely.”

Moses' question, which he hoped to be completely affirmed with the sight of God's face, was, “Will you be loyal to this people even though they have not been loyal to you?” God's answer was, “Yes. Further, I will be so loyal to them and to you that I will not expose you to harm, even though you have asked me to do it.”

In truth, we don't understand one another completely either, even when we can see one another's faces. Human beings have different experiences and backgrounds, know different things, and think in different ways. I can look at your face and guess what you're thinking. I am far more likely to look at your face and guess completely wrong.

Faces may communicate, but they cannot and do not communicate fully, no matter how poor your poker face may be, even if it was as poor as that of this group of Pharisees and Herodians whom Jesus read like a book.

By asking about the imperial tax, these would-be trappers sought to put Jesus between the rock of Imperial wrath – the Roman fortress was literally just yards away – and the hard place of Jewish discontent with Roman rule. Jesus answered their question in a way that simply leaves more work for us. What belongs to Caesar? What belongs to God? And as Lance Pape writes at Working Preacher, “...one absolute commitment subsumes and relativizes all other commitments. Whatever we render unto Caesar, or to the retirement fund, or to the offering basket at church, we can never afford to forget this: we belong entirely to God. We may divide our budget, but we must never divide our allegiance. The coin of our realm bears the image of dead presidents, but each of us bears another. Our Emperor said: ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.’”

We do not live in two realms, but in one. We live in God's creation, on God's earth, as God's people. David Lose writes, “We were made in the image and likeness of God, and because we bear God's likeness we are to act like God. Not mind you, like gods, those who lord their authority over others for self-gain, but rather like God – the One who creates and sustains and nurtures and redeems and saves...no matter what the cost. We are called, that is, to serve as God's agents, God's partners, and God's co-workers, exercising dominion over creation not as

an act of power but rather as an act of stewardship and extending to all the abundant life God wishes for all.”

Or in other words, “That’s what God can look like if we act like God.”

Debie Thomas writes at *The Christian Century*, “When I look to Jesus to think about how to practice my faith in the political realm, I see no path to glory that sidesteps humility, surrender, and sacrificial love. I see no permission to secure my prosperity at the expense of another’s suffering, no evidence that truth telling is optional. I see no kingdom that favors the contemptuous over the brokenhearted and no church that thrives for long when it aligns itself with power.”

As we face the political tests of this election, remember that acting like God may mean keeping people safe from God’s anger, as Moses did, and even from God’s glory, as God did for Moses. Remember that acting like God may mean telling the truth about hypocrisy and malice, as Jesus did, while telling the truth about God’s sovereignty and grace. In our system, voting is an obligation of citizenship, rendering to Caesar what is Caesar’s. It is also an obligation of participation in God’s realm, rendering to God what is God’s.

Remember that acting like God is to see God in all these faces: in your own face, in your siblings’ faces, in your parents’ faces, in your children’s faces, in the faces of friends and strangers and opponents, in the faces of the deprived and the foreigners and the refugees, in the faces of differing shapes and hues and lines and patterns, in the faces of birds and Renaissance paintings, in the faces of delicate flower petals and deeply ridged tree bark, in the green of leaves and the sable of stone.

As Meister Eckhart wrote seven centuries ago, “Apprehend God in all things, for God is in all things. Every single creature is full of God and a book about God. Every creature is a word of God. If I spent enough time with the tiniest creature—even a caterpillar—I would never have to prepare a sermon. So full of God is every creature.”

Or in other words, “That’s what God can look like if we act like God.”

Amen.

The story is based on a “Young Church” practice that comes from D. Mark Davis:  
<https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/10/the-structure-of-entrapment.html>

Unvirtuous Abbey tweets at <https://twitter.com/UnvirtuousAbbey>