

## **“God Is on the Move”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
October 18, 2020 – Proper 24A/20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Exodus 33:12-23

I'd like to tell you a story about a time I went on a blind date: When I was younger, I had a friend named Tom, who wanted me to go on a blind date with his cousin, Matilda. I had never been on a blind date before, so I was a little bit apprehensive about this. I said, “Tom, what do I do if our personalities don't connect, or what if I'm not attracted to her? What do I do?” Tom said, “Well, here's what I do: If I'm on a blind date, I go to the door, and I'm not attracted to the person who opens the door, I just act like I'm having an asthma attack, I go, ‘Ack’ (holding throat)!” I thought that sounded easy enough and that I'd give it a try. Well, the time for the date came, and I went to Matilda's house. She opened the door, and sure enough, she was absolutely beautiful and I was stunned. She took one look at me and went, ‘Ack’ (holding throat)! ...Well, it's not exactly a true story, but it could be.

Have you ever wondered if God acts like that: Sees our ugliness, gags, and then tries to get away from us as quickly as possible? If so, you wouldn't be alone as it's a pretty common view of God in our society. And from our perspective, it's pretty understandable, for there is quite a bit about our world that is downright ugly: God should gag and run away! All you have to do is take a quick look at the day's news to see examples aplenty of the ugliness that exists in the world. And today's ugliness follows thousands of years of other ugly actions by people against one another, God's other creatures, and the planet itself. Indeed, God *should* abandon us or squish us all and start over.

I say this from my perspective as a member of Generation X. I belong to a generation that looks at human suffering and misery, a planet's

brokenness, and horror upon horror, and finds *no* hope for something better. Author Douglas Coupland, a spokesman for those holding this bleak worldview, writes in his book *Life after God*: “And then I felt sad because I realized that once people are broken in certain ways, they can't ever be fixed, and this is something nobody ever tells you when you are young and it never fails to surprise you as you grow older as you see the people in your life break one by one. You wonder when your turn is going to be, or if it's already happened.” For Coupland, we're broken and can never be fixed, but just break and break more and witness the breaking of others and with world itself; there is no hope for something better, only more brokenness. Chris Cornell, the lead vocalist of Gen X band Soundgarden, who died by suicide just a couple of years ago, offered this solution in song: “Black hole sun, won't you come and wash away the rain? Black hole sun, won't you come? Won't you come?” From this perspective, there is no hope for redemption or wholeness; the only hope is for us all to be blotted out of existence.

This bleak worldview, while being common to those of us in Generation X, is hardly unique to people born in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Baby Boomers, Millennials, and Gen Z'ers also struggle to find meaning and hope in a broken world. In fact, the quest to find meaning and hope in the midst of brokenness is a quest of all people going back to the first generations.

We read of this quest of an earlier generation in the last few Sunday's readings from the Book of Exodus. We heard how the children of Israel cried out because of their brokenness, being bound as slaves in Egypt. Although led away from bondage by God, who displayed power far greater than the greatest of human powers, far greater than even nature itself, the people remained bound by their brokenness and lack of hope or trust in God's awesome power, living in faithless fear as

they wandered through the wilderness. In last Sunday's lesson from Exodus, we read of how they rejected their unseen but almighty God, choosing instead to fashion a shiny god for themselves out of the elements of the earth. In their brazen act, they broke their agreement to follow God's instructions for them, specifically breaking the first three of God's commandments in fabricating an idol, claiming it as their god, and misusing God's name by calling it Yahweh. That's three strikes; they should have been out. But for the intercession of Moses, they might have been--blotted out of existence by God, whose anger burned against them for their utter disrespect. But Moses interceded to remind God that the people, broken and faithless as they were, were God's people. And so God, who is ever-merciful, ever-forgiving, and ever-faithful, did not destroy them.

In today's reading from Exodus 33, we find Moses meeting with God again after the idol incident on the desert plain. Moses, whom we are told speaks to God, "face to face (or presence to presence), as one speaks to a friend" (Exodus 33:11), is fearful that God will not remain so friendly with Moses and the children of Israel, a stiff-necked people prone to doing their own thing and disobeying God. And so Moses asks God to reveal God's ways, likely so that Moses could continue to be obedient and enjoy God's favor. Indeed, God promises to remain with Moses, stating, "My presence will go with you." The Hebrew word translated as presence, *panim*, also means face, and so God, who has had many a friendly *panim to panim* chat with Moses, will remain as *panim*, a presence, with him. Wanting even more assurance of God's commitment to remain with him, Moses asks to see God's glory; he requests a vision of God's form, not as he appeared before in a fiery bush or veiled in a cloud, but in God's full, unshrouded glory. Hear again God's response to Moses: "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, Yahweh, and I will

be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But you cannot see my face, my *panim*, for no one shall see me and live” (Exodus 33:19-20). And so God places Moses in a cleft of a rock and then passes by him, shielding Moses’ eyes from seeing God’s face. However, Moses is allowed to see the back of God’s presence. Yes, in this amazing passage, we are told that Moses saw the backside of God, and we could spend much time considering what this looked like, but I’m not going to go there this morning.

But I would like to make note of the symbolic elements involved here. In the rituals of covenant-making in ancient Israel, animals were often cloven and then covenanting parties passed between the halves symbolizing what would happen to either party should they be unfaithful to their sacred agreement. In Exodus 33, Moses is between a cloven rock as God passes by, symbolizing the renewal of the covenant between them. Far from disowning the disobedient Israelites and discarding their leader, God renews God’s covenant to be present with Moses and God’s people, to bless them, and to actively move among them.

This message is one of good news for us today. For in it, we see that even when we are at our worst, God forgives. When we are faithless and wander away from God, God still claims us as beloved children. When we can see nothing other than the gloom and doom of a world that’s broken, God’s good, renewing presence is revealed. Even in these uncertain/unprecedented/difficult times, God continues to pass before us, to move among us, to lead us, to bless us, and to make something wonderful out of the messes around us and within us.

I was struck this week by an article in *The Atlantic* from adolescent psychologist Jean Twenge

(<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/10/how-teens->

[handled-quarantine/616695/](#)). She and a team of colleagues surveyed over 1,500 U.S. teens over the last few months in order to assess their mental well-being in the midst of these difficult pandemic times. They looked at teens' levels of life satisfaction, happiness, depression, and loneliness and then compared these to the levels seen in 2018 from a similar survey. Surprisingly, while their lives have become much more difficult, the percentage of teens who are lonely and depressed has actually gone down. She believes that the reduction in loneliness and depression is the result of teens spending less time gaming, texting, and using social media, and more time videochatting with friends and watching videos online with them. Twenge notes that they were also "sleeping more and spending more time with siblings and parents (including playing family games, going outside more with family, and eating family dinners)." The changes to the lives of American teens because of the pandemic and the resulting reduction in their sense of loneliness and depression is very good news, as Twenge has previously demonstrated in her book *iGen*, this generation of young people faces the highest levels of depression and loneliness out of all age groups in our society. Some good news has come out of the bad news! And how many other ways is God at work amidst the bad news to make something better out of our world? How is God on the move among us?

And so this morning, as we consider the great brokenness in our world and in ourselves, let us not lose hope, for God's glorious, still-speaking, still-working presence indeed remains with us. Just as in the beginning, when the world was but a formless void and darkness covered the abyss and the Wind of God, who was present in these, called beautiful forms to arise and be blessed, the power of the dark abyss we all too often see before us is no match for God's power to create us anew and bless us. And the God who creates and blesses remains with us even if

we should travel through the darkest valley and the most unprecedented of times. May you take comfort in this truth, find strength for your journey, and know the peace of God abiding in you this day and every day. Amen.