

“Be for Real”

Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22; I Thessalonians 1:1-10

Exodus 33:12-23

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.”

¹⁴The LORD said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

¹⁵And Moses said to the LORD, “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 the LORD 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,” the LORD 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.”

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. ¹⁶So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

I Thessalonians 1-10

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace to you and peace.

²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.

⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit,⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

The Sermon

Leonard Cohen was a number of things, some paradoxical: a highbrow poet and a popular recording artist; a studiously faithful Jew and an ordained Buddhist monk; a singer with no range and almost no tonal quality, and yet his music is often mesmerizing.

In his poetry and his recordings, like Rumi, you can't always tell whether he's praying fervently to God or whispering in the ear of a love interest, and the best ones tend to be the ones where it seems like Cohen himself isn't sure, either.

In 1991, the 57-year-old Leonard Cohen, whose voice by this time alternated between a low rumble and something barely more than a whisper, recorded an obscure jazz number written in 1975 by a composer named Freddie Knight. It goes:

*Are you back in my life to stay?
Or is it just for today
That you're gonna need me?
If it's a thrill you're looking for
I'm flexible.*

*Just be for real
Be for real
I don't want to be hurt by love again.*

*So you see I'm not naive.
I just would like to believe
What you tell me.
So don't give me the world today
And tomorrow take it away.
Don't do that to me.*

*Just be for real
Be for real
I don't want to be hurt by love again.ⁱ*

When someone has been burned before, they understand what's at stake.

Nowhere in the whole Moses/Exodus narrative is the relationship between God and Moses more intimately portrayed than in the reading we heard this morning.

The two of them are not just exchanging information. What's going on between them is part dance, part duel; they seem to be circling around the smoldering campfire of trust and reassurance.

Moses keeps reacting to the promise of God's word not by acknowledging what God has just told him, but by alternately demanding and begging for an assurance that God is going to be for real.

Don't just tell me you know me by name.

Don't just tell me I've found favor in your sight.

If I'm going to give my life to you, if I'm going to give to you everything that I have and everything I am, if I'm going to follow wherever you lead regardless of whether it makes any human sense at all, if I'm going to lead others to follow you, even into the wilderness,

I need to know: are you going to be for real?

If I have really found favor in your sight, *show me your way*, so that I may *know you* and find favor in your sight. Consider too—this nation is *your* people.

God says, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

And Moses says, "If your presence *won't* go, don't carry us up from here."

And God says, "I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."

And Moses says, "*Show* me your glory, I pray."

What happens next can be read a couple of different ways. It may be that God is responding to Moses's prayer to be shown God's glory, and God tells him how that's going to happen.

But given the emotional magnitude of this conversation, it sounds like Moses may be getting a bit presumptuous—a bit too comfortable with the sense that he can make demands of God, as if it were OK not to listen or hear or trust when God makes a promise;

as if God were supposed to look sheepishly at the floor while being subjected to an accusatory interrogation by an anxious questioner.

Having already been given assurances and reassurances by God, Moses still says, “Show me your glory, I pray.”

And, finally, the LORD says:

“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.

“But you cannot see my face;
for *no* human can see God and live.”

“There’s a place by me where you will stand on the rock, Moses;
and 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.”

Three years ago when this reading turned up in the lectionary, immediately after the service, a number of this congregation’s great and learned Biblical scholars, individually and collectively, approached me to be sure that I recognized a detail of which I had not made mention during the sermon.

It’s there in the Hebrew in this next verse, where the LORD says to Moses:

“I’ll cover you with my hand until I have passed by;
then I will take away my hand,
and you shall see my back;
but my face shall not be seen.”

That’s very tastefully presented, but in the Hebrew...er...it’s not exactly God’s *back* that God’s going to let Moses see.

I wonder if the idea might have been that God was saying, “You know, you ‘Covenant People’ have been showing me *yours* for an awfully long time...”

“So Moses, if you or any other mortal thinks it’s their place to insist on seeing God’s glory, let me tell you what I’m gonna show you...”

It's up to God to determine whether Moses had stepped over a line of too much doubt, not enough faith, not enough trust in God's word, too-casual badgering of the Almighty Creator and Lord of the Universe.

Moses was the one human being who had been granted the closest access to the person of God that any human being had ever been given. The way Moses might have said it was that he was the one human being who had been *cursed with the burden* of such access.

And in Moses's defense, I think it must be said that the reward for his faithfulness, in having been burdened with the task of leading the People of God through forty years of wilderness to an uncertain Promised Land,

was to spend forty years on the receiving end of the doubts and the complaints and the anger of an uprooted people living in what must have felt like a permanent in-between time in which there was only hunger and misery and dissatisfaction and questioning and doubting—including self-questioning and self-doubting—all aimed at this one man, Moses, who hadn't even wanted to accept the call in the first place.

Sometimes, following God's call meant a lot of long, lonely nights.

And sometimes it was probably too much.

So if God was going to keep calling Moses to keep following God into wilderness and to keep calling others to do the same, I can understand his prayer to God:

Are you going to be for real?

After Jesus had entered Jerusalem for the last time, according to Matthew, the Pharisees (patriotic Jews in Roman-occupied Jerusalem), along with some Herodians (supporters of the status quo under Roman authority), went to lay a trap for Jesus.ⁱⁱ

“What do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

That was a clever set-up. Say yes, and it will be like he's spitting in the face of all the Jews in Jerusalem who chafe under Roman occupation; say no, and he will have handed the government a strong legal case for sedition, with catastrophic consequences for himself.ⁱⁱⁱ

According to their calculus, it was a checkmate: whichever answer he gave was going to be wrong, so no matter which answer he gives, they win, and he loses. Status quo 1, God's radical love 0.

It was a question that had everything to do with strategy, not much to do with truth, and nothing at all to do with faith.

But whenever Jesus speaks, the priorities are reversed.

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's,” he said, “and give to God the things that belong to God.”

Which might be said in a different way: Whether we are involved in the daily doings of this limited, legal, human and bureaucratic construct of the world, or presenting ourselves before the most holy and awesome God of creation—

at all times, in whatever we do and say, in our relating with others or ourselves or our God, be for real.

Paul clearly regarded the church at Thessalonica as a Church that knew how to be for real.

Paul was a Christian who had been a zealous Jew, whose living faith in Jesus was shaped by his tradition; and he was writing (in the earliest of all the writings of the New Testament) to a congregation with no Jewish people in it, located in a culturally Greek city.^{iv}

He and they had come to Christianity from very different places and backgrounds.

But, he told them, it was obvious to him and to anybody who witnessed the way they carried out their ministries: based on their work of faith, and their labor of love, and their steadfastness of hope in Jesus Christ, everybody could tell:

That Thessalonian church was for real.

We're asking people in high places to be for real.

We're asking whether the people who have the biggest megaphones and use them most loudly are for real.

Girls and women interacting with boys and men in families, schools, commerce, employment, civic society, the public square, and the halls and boardrooms and bedrooms of power—how long, O Lord, do they have to wonder if the males they interact with are for real?

Peter Marshall, chaplain of the U.S. Senate and prominent Presbyterian preacher in the late 1940's, composed a prayer that said, in part:

“I do need you, Lord. I need you now. I know that I can do without many of the things that once I thought were necessities, but without you I cannot live, and dare not die.

“I needed you when sorrow came, when shadows were thrown across the threshold of my life, and you did not fail me then. I needed you when sickness laid a clammy hand upon my family, and I cried to you, and you did hear. I needed you when perplexity brought me to a parting of the ways, and I knew not how to turn. You did not fail me then, but indicated the better way. And though the sun is shining around me today, I know that I need you even in the sunshine, and I'll still need you tomorrow.

“I ask of you no easy way, but just your grace, which is sufficient for every need...”^v

It is certainly within bounds for believers and questioners alike to say to God:

If I'm going to give my life to you;
 if I'm going to give to you everything that I have and everything I am;
 if I'm going to follow wherever you lead, regardless of whether it makes any human sense at all;
 if I'm going to lead others to follow you, even into the wilderness,
 I need you to be for real.

It is entirely justified to ask that much of God.

We just need to remember that God is going to be asking us for the same thing.

*So you see I'm not naive.
 I just would like to believe
 What you tell me.*

*So don't give me the world today
And tomorrow take it away.
Don't do that to me.
Just be for real
Be for real
I don't want to be hurt by love again.^{vi}*

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Montreat, NC
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ⁱ Frederick Knight, "Be for Real." © 1975 Irving Music, Inc. (BMI) and Two-Knight Music, Inc. (BMI)

ⁱⁱ Albright, W.F. and C.S. Mann, *Matthew Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 272-73

ⁱⁱⁱ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 253

^{iv} Summarized nicely in Edgar M. Krentz, "The First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians," HarperCollins Study Bible, 2218-19

^v Adapted, with modernized language, from "I Do Need Thee" in *The Prayers of Peter Marshall* (McGraw Hill, 1954)

^{vi} Knight, "Be for Real"