

God Friended Me

Text: Exodus 33: 12-23; Revelation 1:7-8

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There's a new show on CBS this season called *God Friended Me*. Perhaps you have seen it. It's a humorous and uplifting series, a sweet blend of comedy and drama that presents and explores questions of faith, existence and science.

Its premise is formed around an unlikely character named Miles, a skeptical atheist, who one afternoon gets a friend request from God. Of course in the world of social media friend requests are one way that people connect and build of relationships.

And so if you can imagine God asks Miles to be friends. (I know it's a stretch but stay with me!) Miles quickly finds his life turned upside down. Unwittingly he becomes an agent of change in the lives and destinies of others around him in varied need of help.

Depending on the episode, it can come across as light and sentimental, but it also has moments that are poignant and theologically intriguing. And it's the theologically intriguing part that I want us to pause around these moments today.

After all people have hungered across time for closer connection with God. Human-merely-being, it's written into who we are. Michelangelo got it just right in his Sistine Chapel portrayal the Divine hand and a human hand each reaching for the other.

Our passage from Exodus today is a case in point. Moses wanted a God-friended moment of the supreme sort. As the story tells, he wanted "to see God face to face, and to speak to God as one speaks to a friend."

He didn't exactly get what he asked for or expected. After all, requesting an eye-to-eye audience with the Author of Life is a pretty audacious thing to expect, even for a powerhouse like Moses.

Nevertheless, he persisted. A sequence of conversation transpired between them in which God finally said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you but you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live."

"Here's what I will do. I will shield you with my hand. When my glory passes by I will place you in the cleft of the rock to protect you; then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back; but my face you shall not see."

It's a vivid teaching moment in which God makes known to Moses and all of rest of the human family that seeing the Holy One face-straight is not possible. We can, however, recognize God's presence in the effects of where God has been and what God has done. **Two weeks ago, God showed up right here in our town in real time.** It was not face-to-face, nor was it

photographical. Nonetheless, it was palpable as a thousand plus people experienced the edges, the backside if you will, of God's holy presence.

It was in time and out of time at once; astonishing and ineffable and I hope in these few words I can begin to describe it – though ineffable means “cannot be put into words.” Still, I want to try and to bear my own witness.

We had gathered on the steps of Congregation Beth Israel, summoned in shock and disbelief by the murder of eleven people. We had come in the shadow of abject hatred looking for some glimmer of light.

We were a diverse and anguished spread of neighbors, friends and complete strangers. Jews. Muslim. Christian. We were mostly adult but not entirely. In today's lexicon there is a new term emerging: othering. And we were. Other. And other. And other.

Stories rose up. We learned that one of the eleven killed at Tree of Life Synagogue was 97 years old and had survived the Holocaust. The irony was screaming. She had come to this land fleeing anti-Semitism, and it was on this land that such hatred took her.

Words were spoken. “How Long, Lord, how long?” Rabbi Pinkus read the names. Eleven candles were lit by a rainbow of interfaith clergy and religious leaders. You could have heard the dropping of a pin. And there was not a dry eye.

Within and around and beneath and above each step of this, the presence of God could not be mistaken – or at least not in my view. We did not see the face of God. But God showed up in our suffering anger, our reaching for light, and hope, and a better way.

And then this melted everyone. Arms and shoulders linked. Hurting souls of different faiths and colors and languages joined into one body of God's own. Tearful tender eyes met searching fearful eyes.

A common prayer was read by all of us. And then we sang in Hebrew. Not all of us knew the melody or the words but we all found our way, together, carried by the harmony and solidarity of community: Shalom. Shalom. Shalom.

I bear this as trustworthy and true. God friended us right there, odd as it sounds. We were still plenty broken but we were stronger, too. The challenges yet before us did not vanish but they were accompanied my something deeper and more.

“So, Moses, you want to see me, talk to me, contest with me face to face,” our scripture tells. “This cannot be. But I will let my glory pass through. I will hide your eyes to protect you. I will shield you in the cleft of the rock.”

“Then I will move my hand from your eyes. And you shall see my back. You shall see where I have passed through. You shall see what I have done. You shall see the effects of my presence. But you shall not see me face to face.”

I take solace in this transcendent story today. Just as much, I find such promise in the truth that, now and then, here and there, God does friend us. Not just for Miles playing a role on TV, but each and all of us. And for that, I am so deeply thankful.

And I take strength and encouragement from these words at the other end of the bible from our story of Moses. It arouses my curiosity. "Look, he is coming in the clouds! And every eye will see him. So it is to be."

In these confusing times when strange and troubling contradictions seem to mark our days, may we learn to trust new and fresh in the friendship, love and presence of God, who is and was and is to come. Amen.

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