

When we discovered that Heather was pregnant with Danny, we decided to do something that is becoming increasingly rare among parents – we decided to keep ourselves from knowing the gender of the baby until he was born.

The main reason for this was because I wanted to be the one to tell Heather that our baby was a boy or a girl. I wanted to be the one that would hand her the baby and say, “It’s a boy!” I didn’t want her OB announcing the news after examining a fuzzy image from a sonogram; I wanted to be the one to make the exciting declaration.

But another reason we decided this is because we found the mystery and uncertainty to be exciting. “Delivery Day” was like a birthday celebration or a holiday, and we found ourselves wondering, dreaming, creating different scenarios in our heads. Would she have her mommy’s eyes, or would he have daddy’s hairline? Or vice versa?

The uncertainty was fun! It became a kind of blank canvas where we could paint our dreams.

Now there were plenty of people who were a bit miffed by our decision. And so they’d ask questions like: You mean to tell me your not going to find out?! What color are you going to paint the nursery? (green & yellow) What kinds of clothes should we buy for the baby shower? (green and yellow) What color should the baby blankets and towels be? (green and yellow)

Many people couldn’t understand why we wouldn’t want to know the gender of the baby. Don’t you want to know? Don’t you want to prepare yourselves? Don’t you want to be ready? Why wouldn’t you want to plan ahead?

As our technology has become more advanced, we are able to have access to more information. This enlightens us and allows us to know much more than our parent’s generation or the generation before that.

But this knowledge has a flip side: you see, we may know more, but we also know more about what we don’t know. And the more we know about what we don’t know, the more fearful and anxious we feel. The human mind doesn’t like not knowing. It doesn’t like uncertainty or mystery.

No one knew this better than Moses.

The Israelites have just endured one of the darkest chapters in their short history. The Israelites had given up on their leader, Moses, and had lost faith in their God, so they made an idol, a golden calf, that looked like the gods of their neighbors. They put their trust in something made with human hands and they did awful, wicked things as they worshipped the golden calf idol.

So, when Moses and God learn of the Israelites disobedient behavior, they respond with a furious rage and this sparks a kind of civil war where 3,000 people are killed and massive plague follows.

When the dust settles and God’s anger subsides, God sends the Israelites on to The Promised Land but God tells them that God will not be going with them, calling them a “stiff-necked people.”

The people mourn and remove their jewelry to highlight how sorry they are, and God agrees to consider a different decision.

After some time, Moses, who the text says, spoke to God “face to face as one speaks to a friend,” approaches the tent of meeting, now shrouded in a holy cloud, and presses God for some clarity.

“If you are not going with us,” Moses wonders, “Then tell me who will. God, if you know me by name, and if you approve of me, then ‘show me your ways, so that I may know you and receive your favor.’”

Show me your ways. Help me understand you. Help me prepare for the places you want me to go to. Show me the ultrasound to reveal your will, let

me hear the test results. Advise me, assure me, and guarantee me. Tell me what is going to happen next. Show me!

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

But this assurance doesn't seem to comfort Moses much, because he presses God further.

“Now, if you decide to not go with us, then don't send us,” Moses says, “I mean, if you're not going with us, then how will people know that you are on our side and how will people know who is behind the parting of the sea, or the pillar of fire, the pillar of clouds or our military achievements? How will we maintain our distinct identity without you?”

God relents once again and says, “I will do what you have asked for, Moses,” God says, “I will do it because I know you and because I like you.”

You'd think that would be clear enough. I mean, Moses has received about as much clarity as he could ever want.

Moses is almost behaving like a lawyer, asking God to sign legal document after legal document, seeking crystal-clear assurance that God will do what God says God will do.

“Okay, so you want us to go to The Promised Land?” Moses asks, “Then show me your ways.”

In other explain to me why you are doing what you are doing. Let me take a peek at the blueprint you have for my life or the road map you have laid out for my journey.

You say that you agree to the terms I have presented you? Then show me your glory.

Show me your glory. Show me your glory.

In The Bible, when they talk about the core, the identity, the very essence of God, they refer to it as God's glory.

It's like that time when George W. Bush said that he looked into Russian President, Vladimir Putin's eyes, and said that “he was able to get a sense of his

soul.” What George W. Bush was saying was there was a deep understanding between himself and Putin. By getting a “sense of his soul,” he felt as if he was able to connect and trust Putin.

When Moses asks to see God's glory, it's because he desires to connect with God in a similar manner; to understand God and relate to God.

But God's glory wasn't like the soul of a world leader. When people witnessed the glory of God they responded with fear and trembling. God's glory was bright, powerful, brilliant and terrifying. People were blinded by the glory of God, they kept their distance from the glory of God. It was unstrained, undiluted power. You couldn't handle his glory, it was too powerful, it was too consuming; and Moses knew this.

But Moses didn't care.

Moses wants to be sure this next step is the right one and he's willing to risk his very life to have complete certainty that this is the right decision. Moses is telling God to show him everything so that he can be sure, absolutely 100% sure that what he is being told is the God-honest truth.

Brennan Manning tells the story of, noted ethicist, John Kavanaugh's interaction with Mother Teresa when he went to serve with her for three months as she ministered to those dying of illness and malnutrition on the streets of Calcutta.

Kavanaugh went, as many people do, to determine his own life course and discover how he could spend the rest of his life.

When he met Mother Teresa, he asked her to pray for him. “What do you want me to pray for?” she replied. He then uttered the request he had carried thousands of miles: “Clarity. Pray that I have clarity.”

“No,” Mother Teresa answered, “I will not do that.” When he asked her why, she said, “Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of.” When Kavanaugh said that she always seemed to have clarity, the very kind of clarity he was looking for, Mother Teresa laughed and said: “I have never

had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God.”

When we go to God and ask for clarity we reveal our lack of faith, our lack of trust in God’s power, and our inability to embrace mystery. Moses’ question to see the glory of God may seem bold and fearless, but in actuality it reveals Moses’ fear of the unknown and his distrust in the character of God.

God could have given Moses what he wanted; but granting him that request would not have been an act of love.

My brother and his wife have a Beagle named, Boba, and if you know anything about Beagles you know they are quite energetic and they have voracious appetites.

My brother says they can literally eat themselves to death. We have seen him grab entire potroasts off of countertops and turn in into ribbons of fat and gristle.

Boba wants to eat, no limits, no boundaries whatsoever.

Now, let’s say Boba could talk and he requested that my brother let him eat everything in their refrigerator. Would a good, loving owner oblige such a request? No, in fact we would charge my brother with abuse and neglect for letting that poor, dumb beagle eat until his stomach exploded.

The same can be said of people and their ability to experience the fullness of God’s glory: we can’t handle it! If we were to take in all that God is and all of God’s glory we might not explode like a dog stomach, but we couldn’t possibly endure it.

So, because we can’t understand all that is God and because God’s glory in all its fullness is overpowering and consuming, some things are withheld and the result is mystery, uncertainty – not knowing everything there is to know about life and about God.

So, in the passage we just read, God gently rejects Moses’ request. But God agrees to do something else.

God takes Moses and puts him in the fold of a mountain to protect him like a mother bear would care for her cub. And then God covers Moses with God’s hand and then God - passes in front of Moses.

And then God takes away his hand, and reveals... his back.

God’s back.

I find that so interesting. God would not and could not show God’s face, back.

Why would God show God’s back?

Perhaps it’s because God wanted to be vulnerable without being fully transparent or exposed.

Steve Jobs, the iconic founder of Apple passed away a couple weeks ago. Jobs was notoriously private, but he was quite transparent with his biographer, Walter Isaacson, who interviewed him more than 50 times. During his final interview, Isaacson asked Jobs why he had opened up so much for this book when he was so unusually private. “I wanted my kids to know me,” he said. “I wasn’t always there for them, and I wanted them to know why and to understand what I did.”

I guess I thought it was a little sad to hear that his kids had to know him through a book, but it was something. It was one way that Steve was connecting with his kids.

Similarly, God couldn’t connect as fully with Moses either, but God could connect in some way. God could at least be a bit revealing.

But there’s another reason I think God showed Moses his back.

When you want someone to pay attention to you, what do you want to see? Their face.

When you want to know someone is truly sincere and honest what do you want to see? Their face.

When we want to have a meaningful meeting, we have “face-to-face” meetings. When we want to be bold or brave with someone, we turn to face them.

But if we let someone see our back, it seems to me that we are indicating inattentiveness, like we're ignoring the other or rejecting someone.

If we show our back we are indicating shame, or that we have something we want to hide. It's hard to understand us when we can't see their face.

This is the reason texting, e-mail, instant messaging, and facebook postings are so inadequate when it comes to communication. People can't see our face, which is nearly as important as our words.

You all know this. This is why when you send an e-mail you include "emoticons" those little smiley faces or frowns that you put at the end of a sentence. You understand that your words by themselves are inadequate for communicating or for establishing relationships. The face is that important!

But while a face is important for communication and relationship building, a face has no arms or limbs, nothing to carry us with....

Moses wants assurance and clarity. Moses does not want mystery as he plows ahead to The Promised Land. "So, God, look at me. Show me your face if you really mean it." And God says, all you need to see is my back, because that's what will be carrying you all the way.

Look at my back. My back is strong. My back is able. My back is steadfast. My back is ready to carry you through what you will face.

Brothers and sisters, the way ahead is mysterious and uncertain. I wish I could tell you what to do and I wish God gave crystal clear answers when we are confused or discombobulated.

I wish God would just show up, right here and tell you what you should do next.

I wish God was right here and could stand inches from our noses so that we could clearly hear God's words and see the expressions on God's holy face to know exactly what God meant. Geesh! I wish God had holy emoticons for crying out loud!

But this passage tells us that we don't need that face – we only need God's back to carry us through the mystery.

Donald Miller wrote in his whimsical memoir "Blue Like Jazz," about what his journey with God was like:

"Years ago He was a swinging speck in the distance; now He is close enough I can hear His singing. Soon I will see the lines on His face."

We will indeed see "the lines on God's face;" but not in this life. That will come when we stand before the judgment throne. For now as we face the uncertainty of life, we trust in God's back – that merciful, gracious, good back.

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS
For Sunday, October 16, 2011's Sermon
Foundational Scripture: Exodus 33:12-23

Featured Scripture Reflection: ²¹There is a rock not far from me. Stand beside it, ²²and before I pass by in all of my shining glory, I will put you in a large crack in the rock. I will cover your eyes with my hand until I have passed by. ²³Then I will take my hand away, and you will see my back. You will not see my face. – **Exodus 33:21-23** <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=185532349>

Opening Icebreaker: If you could ask God three questions, what would they be?

Scripture Questions

What is the scripture saying?

- Read **Exodus 33:1-11**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=185532381> What stands out to you about this story? What questions does it raise? What does this passage tell us about God? What do you like about this story? What do you dislike about this story?
- Read **Genesis 33:12-23**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=185532405> What words or phrases stand out to you when you read this passage? What does this passage tell us about Moses?
- Read **1 Corinthians 13:11-13**. <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=185532428> Think about what you've just read. How does it compliment what was read in the previous passages?

How is God speaking through Scripture?

- What is the "Good News" in these passages of Scripture?
- After discussing and pondering these passages, how do these passages affect me?
- How are these passages troubling or confusing?

God's word

- What is God's invitation to you?

A prayer

God, we confess that we are uncomfortable with mystery and not knowing the future. Help us to trust you and to be find peace in not seeing the complete picture.