

Two stories of Adonai's presence

Our theme for today is Praying, as one of the 7 marks of the church, as defined by Shane Claiborne, a leading post-evangelical, friend of Anabaptists. The other 6 are: worship, sacraments, evangelism, mutual care, fellowship, and apostolic teaching. We will devote all Sunday themes to these marks until we get to Advent. Worship and sacraments will be combined to fit them all in.

For today, to today's theme of prayer, we are adding waiting. Prayer and waiting. And now a story.

Before and immediately after my neck fusion surgery in September, I was told that I would need to wear the neck brace, affectionately known as Alfred, until Dec. 1. Three months seemed like an eternity at that time, but I was committed to doing anything I could to help the healing process, so I braced myself for the long haul. After just 4 weeks, I was told that I only had to wear it two more weeks because everything looked really good in my Xray, and I had been following doctor's orders.

The day arrived for the neck brace to finally come off. While I was curious and excited to return to freedom of movement and being able to drive again, I was surprised that I was kind of nervous and afraid to take it off. I had become used to it. I trusted it to protect me from something bad happening. I wasn't 100% sure it would be OK to let it go 6 weeks earlier than they told me at the beginning. Did this nurse practitioner really know what she was talking about? I wanted assurance.

As you see, I am not wearing it anymore, but I did at night for 1.5 nights beyond the 6 weeks. Halfway through the 2nd night, I found it unbelievably uncomfortable. It just no longer felt right and I was restless with it poking me so I took it off. It no longer felt comfortable because I was getting used to my new normal, and going back just didn't feel right anymore.

Our Scripture gives us a picture of one of the most prominent leaders of the Jewish people in the Bible. This was at a time when he felt vulnerable because change was coming. They had left Egypt, the land of provision for Joseph's family, which became the land of their slavery. And now I'm making a conscious decision to say the word Adonai rather than God or

Yahweh, at the urging of the Professor Lisa Wolfe, Professor of Hebrew Bible at Oklahoma City University, whose commentary on this passage I read. It is a way of showing respect and solidarity with Jewish people of faith, who use Adonai out of reverence for the Creator. I'm not going to comment on the name of Adonai being revealed to Moses in this passage per se, but using Adonai is my way of acknowledging that part of the story. Please do not misread my use of Adonai to be somehow pro-Israel at this difficult time. It is simply showing due reverence to the name.

As they escaped out of Egypt and commenced the journey toward the promised land, Adonai had showed up in marvelous ways to lead them and protect them.

But then, they wandered around without clear direction for 40 years. All they had was a promise that they were someday going to a land flowing with milk and honey. But the journey did not go as they originally thought it would. To sum up those years, they shared in moments of the "thrill of victory and the agony of defeat," to quote ABC's Wide World of Sports in years past.

Prior to this story, Moses had been away a long time, on the mountain talking with Adonai and was given the 10 commandments a second time. But what does he find when he comes down? A golden calf! The people have lost hope that Moses would return and he was their direct connection to Adonai, and everyone knows you need one god or another and apparently a god embodied in a golden calf would also do, since it appeared Adonai and Moses had abandoned them.

Moses is very angry, as is Adonai. But Moses finds compassion in his heart and appeals to Adonai's compassion and they come to an agreement not to destroy the people but to work with them where they are. Moses pitches the tent of meeting outside the camp, and this is where he went to talk with Adonai, like a friend talks to a friend, face to face.

In our Scripture for today, Moses is meeting with Adonai in the tent of meeting—which was a real thing, but for us serves as a metaphor for a space where you talk to God. Isn't that essentially what prayer is? A conversation where you plead, you request, you give thanks, you sit still in silence and reverence and listen for God's voice. Here, Moses is pleading

with Adonai to receive some kind of deeper assurance of Adonai's presence as they begin to break up camp and move to the land promised to their forebears.

What stands out to me is that Moses confesses, "I know you have said I have found favor in your sight but show me whom you will send with me. And Adonai's answer was—I know you by name. By his next response, it sounds like Moses is saying that this isn't the answer to his prayer that he wanted. Adonai knowing his name isn't revealing who will go with him, which is what Moses asked for. Can you relate to not getting the answer you wanted sometimes in your prayers?

Moses continues giving Adonai reasons to answer his prayer for assurance—these are your people!

Moses' prayer continues to evolve. Now he says, "show me your ways so that I may know you." Moses recognizes that Adonai knows him and now he wants to know Adonai. And this is the guy who has been conversing in a very intimate way with Adonai for many, many years. And still so uncertain. So human. So like us.

In the tension between his certainty and uncertainty, it seems he is asking for a new level of intimacy and assurance that he needs to match this daunting new task.

So Adonai gives him an answer and promises that his very presence will go with them. Not a proxy this time.

And Adonai makes another promise—I will give you rest. I'll return to this shortly.

And yet, Moses carries on as if Adonai said nothing, because he says, but if your presence will NOT go with us, then we don't want to go from here and how will I KNOW your presence is with us?

When someone is in crisis and deep uncertainty, they are often unable to hear what the other is saying. As we read this story, we can feel Moses' fear, and his anguish and we can get glimpses of his heart—he really does want to know Adonai and be assured that Adonai will not abandon him as he steps out in faith. Can't we all identify with that?

Back to Adonai giving rest. What does that mean? Is it a mere nap in the middle of the stress? It's much more than that. Dr. Wolfe says that "the Lord's presence will ensure the people freedom from warfare and suffering." That kind of rest. It is also interesting to note that the same word for presence here is translated as "face" in verses 20 & 23. The face/the presence that will accompany the people on their journey is the same one that he cannot be allowed to see just a few verses later.

What to make of this???

In one passage just 9 verses earlier, we have Adonai conversing with Moses face to face, like friends do and in the very next passage we have a story where Adonai says, "no one can see my face and live."

How do we handle these seeming contradictions? Two strategies:

One theory says that different religious editors had their hands in the text and shaped different stories to fit their own priorities and theological understandings. Today, we have to accept that Scripture is a product of many times, eras, editors with different agendas and priorities. And we have to accept that and ask ourselves why these contradicting stories are in

there. What can we learn from them? Why did the communities of faith pass these stories on to us over centuries and millennia?

The second strategy is to harmonize the differences. Find a way to make them not contradict each other, but to actually work together. This strategy is based on the principle that there can be no discrepancies or contradictions in God's word because that would be threatening to those who believe the Bible is infallible and inerrant. So, to deal with anything that looks like a contradiction, you have to find some sort of explanation to make it all fit together. So here is the harmonization attempt for these two seeming contradictions about whether you can see Adonai's face and live to tell about it. We all know that Adonai is Spirit, not a body, so either Moses was speaking to the pre-incarnate Son of Adonai (a [Christophany](#)); or the passage is using a figure of speech called [anthropomorphism](#), in which human qualities are applied to Adonai. It helps us mere mortals relate to an entity that is different from us in terms that we can understand.

“Face to face”, in the harmonization strategy, is likely idiomatic, metaphorical to communicate that Adonai and Moses were very familiar with one another, a level of intimacy.

Further, this strategy says that Adonai’s glory and goodness are intangible and beyond human capacity to understand, so again, the scene in today’s Scripture is a way for Adonai to show something of Adonai’s glory and goodness in a way that a human could understand without being totally overcome and undone with the full glory and goodness of Adonai.

So these are two strategies for dealing with the discrepancy in the texts.

What can we learn from these texts as we wait and pray?

One can puzzle over how this all makes sense, and if you’re anything like me, you might go back and forth from one day to the next—wanting a nice harmonized, unified story about whether humans can see the face of Adonai and live or not, and the other day ready to have the two different stories co-exist and not judge which is right/wrong, truthful/not truthful but to accept them as simply different.

If the writers and editors of the text, not to mention the faith communities who have passed these stories down to us, were able to live with this kind of difference, my question is, can we?

Can we live with different stories we're hearing about our life and future as a congregation? Our sense of what Adonai is doing among us? Or do we need one unified story?

Moses and the people were getting ready for a significant transition after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Adonai said it was time to move. Change was inevitable and imminent. I am sure that many people were torn between wanting the safety of the familiar and being curious and eager to discover the new.

We can relate—feeling torn, feeling uncertain, not wanting to lose what we know and what has been good.

What do we need to feel assured of Adonai's presence as we come to this time of inevitable change?

How will Adonai give us rest?

How we will receive Adonai's responses to our requests, even if they aren't exactly what we were asking for?

Can we open ourselves to hear the name of Adonai, and see a glimpse of Adonai's glory and goodness and be reminded of Adonai's sovereign ability to show mercy and compassion to whom he will?

As Dr. Wolfe reminds us, "The Holy One is at once protective and revelatory. NO ancient deity worthy of worship would have been anything other than dangerous, otherwise what good would they be in times of trouble?" Even as we seek Adonai's favor and Adonai's revelation to light our path, we have to accept that Adonai will show us what to do in Adonai's time. Let us continue to wait and pray, to pray and wait.