

# God's Backside

Exodus 33:12-23

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

There is a legend told about a German painter from long ago. In the fifteenth century in a tiny village near Nuremberg, lived a family with eighteen children. In order to provide food and necessities, the father worked for long hours everyday in his trade as a goldsmith, and then took on other odd jobs he could find to support the family. Despite the desperate challenges they faced, and the hopelessness of their situation, two of the children had a dream.

Albrecht Durer and his brother Albert wanted to pursue their interest and talent for art, but they knew that their father could not afford to send them to school in Nuremberg, to study at the Academy. After considering the impossibility of the situation, the two boys hatched a plan. They decided to toss a coin. The loser would go to work in the nearby mines and with his earnings would support the other brother while he attended the Academy. When the brother who won the toss completed his studies, he would support the other brother at the Academy, either with sales of his artwork or, if necessary, also by laboring in the mines.

One Sunday morning after church, they tossed a coin. Albrecht Durer won the toss and went off to the Academy. Albert went into the mines and financed his brother at school. Albrecht became an instant sensation. His etchings, woodcuts and oil paintings were better than even his professors, and by the time he graduated, he was beginning to earn substantial fees for his commissioned works. Albrecht returned to his village and the family held a dinner to celebrate his triumphant homecoming. Toward the end of the evening, after much food and music, Albrecht rose from the head of the table to drink a toast to his brother Albert and the years of sacrifice that had enabled him to fulfill his ambition. And then he said, "Now Albert, blessed brother of mine, now it is your turn. Now you can go to Nuremberg to pursue your dream, and I will take care of you."

Albert, after a long pause and with tears in his eyes rose to his feet and said, "No brother, it is too late for me. I cannot go to Nuremberg. Look what the years in the mines have done to my hands. The bones in my fingers have been smashed and I have arthritis. It is difficult even to hold this glass for the toast. I can no longer use a brush or a pen for making delicate lines on parchment or canvas. No, brother, for me it is too late."

500 years later, Albrecht Durer's masterful portraits, sketches, paintings, charcoals, copper engravings and etchings hang in great museums the world over, but the most well known is a drawing he did for a commissioned altarpiece for a Dominican Church in Frankfurt. The story is that Albrecht Durer painstakingly drew his brother's hands with palms together and fingers stretched skyward. He called them simply "Hands," but the painting is known better as "The Praying Hands." Perhaps you have seen the painting or a copy of it, first completed in 1508. It is a tribute to the sacrifices made by a brother that allowed a remarkable artist to make a significant contribution to the art world.

It reminds us that no one ever makes it alone! Each one of us owes a debt to others who have sacrificed so we could pursue our ambitions, our talents. Next time you have the opportunity, why don't you thank those who have helped you to make it.

Those who have gone before us here at this church have given us all of this so we can teach our children and help them dream big about their own lives. No one makes it alone. Together here at church we make sacrifices for one another and receive from one another and through our many ministries we help others for whom life has grown hopeless and without opportunity, or even adequate food, clean water, education, and medical attention. Help support this great vision with your estimates of giving during our stewardship drive this fall.

Above me in the Transfiguration Window, we see Moses depicted in art, along with Jesus and Elijah. The life of Moses had many seasons as told in the historical narrative of the first five books of the Bible, sometimes referred to as the "Books

of Moses.” These past several weeks we have read of his adventures in the wilderness and today we read of his friendship with God.

Moses first resisted the call of God to lead. He had no confidence in his ability to speak, no desire to take up the challenge of his time in history. He merely wanted to be left alone to focus on making his own life comfortable and fulfilling. The young Moses, both Jewish and Egyptian, resisted God's interference in his life. But now we see a seasoned Moses. One who had learned to walk with God, who became friends with God, who contends with God, who is engaged in life, bold in demeanor, strong in character. Moses becomes self-assured and self-assertive before God. It is a picture of a human being fully alive, a description of a faithful life that God enjoys as much as anything. It is a portrait of what happens to us when we walk faithfully with God through the years.

Moses conversed with God in prayer, contended with God, expressed hopes, dreams, frustrations, desires, fears, petitions, and, in short, every emotion he had, he was able to express with God. Do you know the Lord that way? When you fold your hands in prayer, can you pray with that kind of abandon? Moses knew frustration, disappointment, disenchantment. He knew the exhilaration of great achievement but also the disappointment of failure. Through it all, he became a man after God's own heart – fully alive, self-assured, taking risks, contending with life, creating possibilities for others.

God invites us into friendship that is characterized by the language of intimacy. Moses is like the prodigal son who returns to the father to serve him out of love rather than obligation. For others in the biblical story, closeness with God was a momentary experience that changed them forever. For Moses, it was a regular experience, a habitual experience that shaped him into a courageous leader. God befriends Moses and in Christ wants to befriend you in the same manner. The friendship of God leads ultimately to the incarnation of Jesus and the cross of Christ, the sacrifice that makes our deepest dreams come true. No one ever makes it alone. No one need ever be alone again. The Almighty God offers us

friendship and a glimpse of his glory is enough to change you forever. Have you taken the Lord up on that offer? You can pour out your heart to him, as Moses did.

I don't know what challenges you are facing today. I don't know whether you are on your way to a "promised-land" of one kind or another, or whether you are frightened by life and all that is going wrong in the world around you. You may be fearful about the future or anxious about today. You may feel inadequate in some way to deal with the life you have been given. But I know this – if you seek for the Lord with all your heart, you will find the God who is seeking you. And it will make a difference in your life. All you need is a glimpse of the Lord's backside and you will be changed. You will become stronger in character, more self-assured, more assertive, as did the biblical characters. It happened to Moses, and to Sarah, Ruth, and Esther, it happened to Peter, James and John, and to Martha and Mary, Lazarus and Paul. And it can happen for you.

Look around you. In all of these stained glass windows you will see at least one that includes a representation of Moses. Stained glass windows can be beautiful, but not because they're perfect. The magnificence of this art comes because they are made of tiny shards of glass broken into a million little jagged pieces that are carefully and painstakingly reassembled to reveal a beauty that we could never imagine if they were scattered at our feet. When your dreams are broken, it may just be because God is preparing to assemble the broken shards into something more spectacular than you imagined. It happened to Moses and it can happen to each of us, if like him, we are willing to dream differently about the future with the Lord our God.

This week through our estimates of giving, we each have the opportunity to make a small sacrifice to help others make it, out of gratitude for God's kindness to us. Tell God every detail of your needs in earnest and thankful prayer, and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds as they rest in Christ Jesus. <sup>1</sup> Amen

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1      Philippians 4:6-7

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