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Exod 33:12-23 (The Message)  
Title: The Goodness Right in Front of You

God is telling us this week: "I will make my Goodness pass right in front of you."

It took a while for me to hear. Even though I'd seen God's goodness pass right in front of me last Thursday afternoon, there was a lot of junk between me and God's goodness passing right in front of me this week.

A lot of that junk is right here in this text. For instance, if you've been around Exodus, you might remember that God met Moses face to face, as a friend. Where was that . . . in the verse right before our passage. verse 11.

Yet, by the v. 20, God's declaring that no one can see God's face and live. There's a bunch of brainiacs in this house, but you don't need have a PhD to scratch your head about that one. Maybe stuff like that is why one teenager told me last week that the bible is full of contradictions, so it's not a very credible witness to God.

At this point in Israelites' story, God has gotten good and ticked off at them on account of the golden calf business, and has decided they need to move on to the Promised Land--without God.

Earlier in the chapter, God said, "I will not go with you . . . Now, take off your ornaments." As in: "I'm breaking up with you **and** I want my CD's back." That's the part that really messed with me -- when God basically says, "I quit you."

I asked some kids and youth about this story -- and asked their permission to share with you what they see in the text. These kids, they picked up on the hard parts.

I told them the back story, that the Israelites had misbehaved, and that really drained God's energy, so God said,  
"I know you're in the wilderness, and I've been giving you directions to get to your new home, but guess what? I quit. You guys have disrespected me. Y'all go on by yourselves."

Moses is so scared, because he needs God's help, and he's kinda mad too, because God had told him they were extra special to God, and this wasn't how you treated your favorite. It was like breaking a promise -- bailing on your best friend when he really needs you.

So Moses says to God,  
"You told me to take these people to a new place, and you told me we're your favorites. Well, if I'm so special to you, why aren't you hanging out with me? I want to be with you. What's up with that?"

So God says,

"OK--I'll go with you. You really are special to me."

But Moses isn't so sure of God anymore, and says, "Please I want to see you right now. Right now."

And God says,

"Moses, I'm gonna be nice to whoever I decide to be nice to, but I'll tell you what: I'll come over there, right where you are, but there's one rule: you can't see my face, so stick your head into the crack of that rock as I pass by."

The end.

Their reactions?

"Whoa."

"Scary."

"Is that it? Did Moses get curious and look?"

The youngest kid just looked at me, shocked, and said. "God didn't say that! Weird. Is that really true?"

"If I were God," one middle schooler said, "I'd tell Moses, 'OK, you be really, really good for one day and I'll give you another chance. And if not, I'll leave you out in the desert to die.'"

A first grader said, "If I was Moses, I'd feel sad and very scared because I'm in the middle of nowhere and I wouldn't know where to go and I might get eaten. I would ask God why. Why is he leaving?"

Then paused and said, "Sometimes my best friend Claire goes away from me and I have no one to play with at school."

Another kid said. "I'd be mad if that happened to me. That's not fair, because I didn't really do anything." Well, I'd **think** that," he told me, "I'd say to God, "It wasn't me that did the golden calf. **You** know that -- you're God. So why don't you stay with me, but not with them?"

One of the youth said, "If someone told me, 'I'm going to abandon you,' I'd say, 'I don't want you anyway.'"

Another said, "If I were Moses, I'd say, 'Thank you, Your Lord Highness. But would you please tell me where to find some water?'"

I also asked a grown up about the story, who noticed the "mixed messages," and wondered on it, then out of the blue, she said, "I was in a bible study once and the leader asked us, "Have you ever had an intimate experience with God?"

Nobody had.

They said, "We pray and read our bibles and do all these things, but we haven't had an intimate experience."

Then my friend shared about an encounter with God that happened one Sunday afternoon,  
many years ago.

Her husband had left her,  
and her 16-year-old daughter chose him over her.

She was flipped out, freaked out, wiggled out.  
She said to herself,

"It's Sunday. No one's coming over. I'm not  
showering or dressing. No make up."

She'd been a flight attendant, she likes to be made  
up. She smoked some cigarettes and drank some  
beers, and ended up on the lawn, where a presence  
came up from behind her and wrapped its arms  
around her and said,

"You're not forsaken. It's going to be OK."  
then put its arms under her elbows, lifted her up,  
and helped her inside.  
and later that day, as she napped, she felt that same  
presence again, snuggling her.

That encounter kept her going during one of the  
toughest months of her life, she told me. And she  
remembers it so vividly 20 years later.

And this memory turned my attention away from  
the Moses-God drama and pointed me toward what  
grabs me most about this passage:  
God's goodness passing right in front of me.

That's what I think prayer is -- remembering what  
you already have -- God's goodness passing right in  
front of you. To draw that up. I've touched and  
tasted that reality, too.

The struggle is to live out of that reality.  
Look at Moses. If there's anybody who's  
experienced God, it's Moses.

In burning bushes and  
parting seas and  
mountaintops.

Yet, even Moses is struggling to live out of that  
reality during this scary conversation with God.

A friend at Emory told me about when Desmond  
Tutu was there. It was a huge coup for the  
university, to bring in the Bishop of South Africa  
for a year.

We're a social justice church, he's a hero of our  
faith, for his activism against apartheid.

Well, Emory gave him an office, where he wrote a  
book. He's there writing, month after month, and  
Emory asks and asks him to teach something.  
Anything. He finally agrees. Says he'll teach one  
class at Emory's seminary to seniors who are  
graduating and going to work in the church.

They say, "Yes, Nobel Prize Winner Tutu, whatever  
you want, Nobel Prize Winner Tutu."

So Tutu shows up to class on the first day. He says,  
"Here's what we're going to do this semester. I'm  
going to tell stories of when I experienced and  
encountered and knew God's love. You're going to  
tell stories of when you experienced and

encountered and new God's love. All we're going to do is remember and tell stories of when we knew God's love."

As he goes along, this buzz arises in the class. Tutu says, "What's going on?"

A student says, "Well, you haven't given us a syllabus."

He says, "There is no syllabus."

Students look uncomfortable. Another hand goes up. "How will we be graded?"

Tutu says, "Everybody gets an A. You're going out into the church. All that matters is that you've experienced and encountered and known God's love. That's what'll equip you for your work."

The central experience of the Christian experience is meeting God's love -- that's where the power of God is -- **being rewired, reformed, reshaped by God's love.**

I don't know about

    a God who decides to quit, then  
    changes God's mind

I don't know about not

    being allowed to see God's face,

I don't know a God who says,

    "I'll be nice to who **I** choose to be nice to."

But I do know that when I scan and remember my life, I recall moments in my history when I've encountered the goodness right in front of me.

The kind of presence I felt was sacred.

I remember that goodness when this church called me up a few weeks ago and said, "We want you to minister to our children and youth." At the time, I was worshipping here, and had basically quit ministry. I had nearly finished seminary, where I'd learned the usual things -- bible, Hebrew, Greek, girls -- one girl, in particular -- that blonde soprano who stands by me. [the blushing soprano]. What with the Presbyterians' kerfluffle about such matters, I had decided my prospects weren't so good for working in churches, and churches' prospects aren't so good these days either, so I was moving on.

Then came that very unexpected phone call. And once the deal was done, I recognized it as an encounter:

God coming after me.

God taking me more seriously than I take myself.

God's being more in touch with my deep longings than I am.

God's caring more about my heart than I do.

God's goodness passing right by me.

When I remember one of these little treasures in my life, I know God I've met God,

I've touched something outside myself,  
something bigger than me.

That's where our faith is rooted.  
And the more I pay attention to the God who shows  
up in my experiences, the more I trust God.

Now, ain't no doubt that living out of the goodness  
right in front of you is a struggle, because of all the  
junk right in front of you.

Junk like diving stock markets  
and layoffs,  
and being in the hole again this month  
and your mean, mean teacher  
and the credit crunch  
and your kid who's driving you up the wall  
and Sarah Palin  
and living together like strangers  
and running from thing to thing like a  
madperson  
and not even realizing that you need the  
divine in your everyday life.

We got junk. No doubt.

Could there **be** a better time to remember what we  
already have?  
Let's reset.  
Let's draw that up.  
Let's dwell in the times that God's goodness passed  
right by.