
Face to Face

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Proper 25 – Year A

*Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses,
whom the Lord knew face to face. –Deuteronomy 34:10*

“Face to Face,” the bible says. The great Hebrew leader, Moses, knew God “face to face.” So declares this intriguing description of the last days of Moses. In his last days, from the top of the mountains, Moses is given a vision. He surveys the grand expanse of territory. It is no matter that he is destined never to set foot, physically, in that territory. His vision was its own substance.

Then, Moses dies. The Book of Deuteronomy presents his obituary, if you will. But, wow, what an obituary! Moses’ eyesight, says the obituary writer, was unimpaired; and his strength was vigorous, even at one-hundred-twenty years old. (I am only half that age, and I seem to be quite impaired already!)

Today, a particular feature of Moses’ vision merits closer attention. The Deuteronomy writer says that, “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:10). “Face to face;” we hear that phrase several times in scripture. When Jacob wrestled an angel in the middle of the night, Jacob named the place “Peniel,” the “face of God,” because he sensed that he had been face to face with God.

Face to face? That phrase presents deep, and complicated, meanings in scripture. Wait a minute, not just in scripture, but in all our human experience! When someone tells me, “I would rather speak with you face to face,” I get it. And when someone angry shouts out, “Why don’t you tell me that to my face!” –well, I get that, too.

What does it mean to be face to face? Consider the first things we face in the morning: we face our loved ones, we face the television screen, we face the smartphone screen, we face the uncleaned house. Then we face the traffic down the street and along the expressway. Yes, we face the traffic, but we always seem careful not to look directly into the other faces of those so strapped and grimaced into their cars.

Occasionally, maybe by the grace of God, maybe a few of us get up in the morning and face the sun, face the open day, face the beautiful world.

Something happens when we speak, face to face, with our co-workers, with our loved ones, with our children, even with our enemies. Our history, and our deeply perceptive brains pick up millions of small signals when we see face to face. Our faces—the lines in our skin, the angle of our jaw, the tone of our eyes—they carry centuries of accumulated meaning. And the sensitive among us can emotionally translate faces almost immediately, can’t we?

So, it is a big deal when our latest technology—our smartphones and our device screens—begin to use a feature called “facial recognition.” Wow, our phones can recognize us now. They can pick us out of a crowd just like our dogs and pets can. Just like our spouses and loved ones can, too. Maybe even just like God can.

However, I don’t think technological wizardry will ever catch up; to know, “face to face,” will always be one of the most

human things we can do. “Face to face” means being able to see through faces and into souls. Face to face might be the most intimate knowledge we can imagine.

So it is that God knew Moses. God knew Moses’ great courage and fortitude. But God knew, too, the weakness and loneliness of Moses—oh, that long loneliness of Moses as he trudged up those mountains in the desert, by himself, wondering what he would face at all. God knew also the anger and the quick temper of Moses. But that intimate knowledge did not keep God from using this human Moses. And it did not keep God from loving Moses.

But, here’s the thing. The relationship between Moses and Yahweh (Moses and God) goes both ways. “Face to face” means a two-way relationship. “Face to face,” two ways, means that Moses knew some things about God, too. Moses knew the overwhelming and awesome features of Yahweh; Moses knew the thunder and the fire. Moses knew the provision and care. Those are all good things.

But, again, “face to face” refers to an intimate knowledge; and sometimes the intimate knowledge is embarrassing. Moses knew the weakness of God, too. Yes, God knew the weakness of Moses; but Moses, in turn, also knew the weakness of God. That is how close they were.

A few Sundays ago, we heard how Moses went up the mountain, and God said “My face you shall not see.” Remember that? We tend to think that God hid his face in order to protect Moses from the overwhelming glory, the crushing power, of God’s face. Maybe so.

But there is another possibility. What if God might have occasionally been embarrassed to show his face? There are days like that. Surely, I have days when I simply don’t want to show my face. If I am made in the image of God, maybe that means God has days like that, too.

On that day, up in the mountains, God could show only his backside to Moses (Exodus 33:23). That, too, is part of an intimate knowledge of the other. For Moses to know the fullness of God, meant that Moses knew the front side of God, but also the back side of God. Moses knew God fully, the front and the back, the strong and the weak, the proud and the embarrassing.

Remember that day when Moses had the undaunted courage to argue with God? That was the day, right after the Hebrew people had thrown their gold into a fire and fashioned new and false idols, that God said to Moses that he, God, would destroy all those people and start all over again. And maybe God should have been unwilling to show his face during those arguments. Maybe God was embarrassed. Moses took him on, face to face. It is Moses, arguing with God, who convinces God not to do that, not to destroy God’s people. Yes, it is Moses who persuades God to change his mind (Exodus 32:14).

That is what it means to know someone face to face. It means being willing to face them. To speak plainly with them. To love them directly. And it means knowing someone front and back. In good times and in tough times. “Face to face” means knowing the other, even when all the other can show us is their backside. “Face to face” means wrestling in the night, like Jacob and the angel.

“Face to face” means engagement, in tender times and in tough times, in smooth times and in rough times. “Face to face” means love. The Lord knew Moses “face to face,” scripture says. They loved each other enough to share not only their strengths together, but also their weaknesses. They shared their pride, and they shared their embarrassment.

We remember Moses today, not simply as a model for how we might relate to God, but as a model for how we might relate to each other. Face to face. Intimately. Courageously. Embarrassingly. Weakly. But, always, face to face. Always, in love.

AMEN.

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