

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, October 19, 2008
Rev. John Tapscott

"THE ROCK"

Exodus 33:21-23

Very few Biblical characters had such a close relationship with God as Moses had. God called him, spoke to him in various ways, and empowered him to lead the people out of Egypt. Moses could be hot-tempered and passionate, and even tongue-tied, but none of that disqualified Moses from leading the Hebrew people from slavery into the wilderness and then towards the Promised Land. Leadership is never easy, and Moses felt the burden of leadership very keenly. In fact, considering the size of his task and what he accomplished, Moses is ranked as one of the greatest leaders in all human history. One of the keys to Moses' leadership was this relationship he had with God. Moses listened to God and obeyed him. Moses also spoke to God and not always quietly. Sometimes Moses pleaded with the Lord God, argued with him, questioned him.

In our reading today from Exodus 33, Moses was having one of these personal conversations with God. Now at the time, God was less than pleased with the people. Not long before, they had built a golden calf and worshipped it as the god that had brought them up out of Egypt. Moses was afraid that God might destroy the people in the wilderness and begged him not to. Well, God didn't do that, but now God was thinking, "They're a stiff-necked and rebellious people and so I'll just leave them on their own." But Moses said to the Lord in effect, "Look, you've said to me, Lead this people, but I don't know who you're going to send with me. And if you don't go, we can't go, either. You have to be with us, Lord, or this journey through the wilderness to the Promised land will end in disaster. Unless you're with us, we'll never make it. I have found favour with you. So at least for my sake, please go with us. Remember that we are your people. Do not forsake us."

There was a famous 18th century preacher in Scotland by the name of Robert Bruce. No one in his generation preached the gospel so powerfully. Many souls were converted under his preaching. One day the secret of his ministry was discovered. He was asked to preach at a certain church, and arrived early, but when the time came to begin the service, he was nowhere to be found. So someone went searching for him. And from behind a closed door, Robert Bruce was heard speaking to someone with great seriousness. "I will not go, I cannot go, unless you go with me." And when he finally emerged to preach it was

reported that he was "supernaturally assisted."

Robert Bruce's request to God was an echo of what Moses said to God. "We will not go, we cannot go up to the Promised Land, unless you go with us." And so God said, "Alright Moses, I will do what you ask, because you have found favour in my sight. My presence will go with you and I will give you rest."

Moses made one more daring request. "Show me your glory, I pray. Show me yourself." God said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the Name 'The Lord.'" I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy." The Lord continued, "But Moses, you cannot see my face, for no one shall see my face and live." And He said, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on a rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by: then I will take away my hand, and you will see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

Look again at verse 21, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock..." This is what I want us to focus on today - the rock.

For many people, most people, there are turbulent times, days of dramatic ups and down, shifts in accepted values, days of uncertainty in our world, in our country, perhaps in our personal lives. It sometimes feels as if the very ground is falling away beneath our feet. Now we Christians of course, are to be people of action, people in motion. But we also need a rock to stand on, a firm place to set our feet. For we can't go forward and act with confidence unless we are well grounded, unless we have a rock on which we build our lives and our hopes. And we also need a refuge, a shelter in this stormy and changing world, a place where we go for healing and refuge. And the Lord says to us in these days, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on a rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock." God has given us the rock we need. God has given us a rock on which we can stand and a rock in which we can find refuge.

First, God has given us a rock on which we can stand.

God said to Moses, "I will make all my goodness pass before you,see, there is a place by me where you shall stand on a rock..." The rock on which we stand is the goodness of God.

One Christian writer has a passage in which he envisions us all walking outside some October evening and seeing emblazoned across the evening sky

in neon lights , the words, "I EXIST." Wouldn't that be great? Then all who have doubted God's existence would see how wrong they were. But for most people God's existence is not the real issue. The wonder of nature, the glory of the skies, the human creature so wonderfully made, the fine balances required to keep this whole universe humming along, even our own intuition, all speak to us of the Existence of the Creator God.

The bigger question is, Who is this God? What is the character of God? That's what Moses was asking of God - "Show me your glory." We want to see God's face, to see God as he really is. Does God have a kind face or a scowling face, a caring face, or an indifferent face? Does God empathize with us, does he feel our pain and share our joy? What is God like? "Show us your glory, O God." And God says, "I will make all my goodness pass before you..."

Here is what God has revealed about himself. God is good. He is pure goodness. Now God in his pure goodness cannot and does not overlook sin and its consequences; that's why there had to be a Cross. But that Cross allows God to be gracious and merciful to all who seek Him in repentance and faith. God's plans for us and for creation are good. Paul tells us that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. That doesn't mean everything that happens is good; it is clearly not, some things are caused by our own foolishness, our turning away from God; the very groaning and of creation is rooted in human sin and rebellion. But none of this changes God's goodness. No matter what bad things happen around us or to us, God is good. We know that in all that happens, even when what happens is bad in itself, God is working to bring good from it. "I will make all my goodness pass before you." God is only good in his character, his thoughts, his actions. Even when God disciplines us, corrects us and says "No" to us, it comes from of God's goodness. This is the rock on which we stand - the goodness of God.

God's character is good, so good, in fact, that we, who are such a mixture of goodness and sin, of light and darkness cannot stand in the presence of God. God said to Moses, "You cannot see my face, for no one shall see my face and live." The glory of God's goodness would have overwhelmed Moses, for he too was a sinful man. So God put Moses in the cleft of the rock and covered him with his hand when he passed by. Moses only saw God's back.

But we see even more of God than Moses saw. For once in history God came our way and passed by so that we could see his face and not die. God came in the Word made flesh and showed us all his goodness. To see the face of Jesus is to see the face of God. The Name "Lord" which God proclaimed to Moses and which encompasses all of God's goodness is applied to Jesus. There

is nothing in God which is not like Jesus his Son. In Jesus' face we see tenderness, we see righteous anger at sin and injustice; we see, graciousness, mercy, love. The tears of grief on Jesus' face as he stood at Lazarus' tomb, his delight in the presence of children, all this is the face of God. "Whoever has seen me," said Jesus, "has seen the Father." The agonized face of One who died on the Cross is the face of God, a God who willingly suffers separation within himself to pay for our sins, a God who plumbed the depth of human sin and suffering to reconcile the world to himself and open the way for all to come into an eternal relationship with God. The Cross and Resurrection of Christ mean that God's good purposes for his people, for his church, for his creation will not fail. God's goodness will finally embrace and shine through the whole creation and all who believe. God is good and all that he has done, all that he is doing among us now, and all that he will yet do is for good. The Lord said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you... See there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock..." The rock on which we stand is the goodness of God. That is the truth about God we proclaim to the world. It is the basis for all of our acts of mercy and kindness in the world. God is good.

God has not only given us a rock to stand on; he has given us a rock in which we can find refuge and safety. "While my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by..."

I know that we are all sick and tired of politics from both south and north of the border. But let me just share one image with you from a photo which appeared in the newspaper. Following the Vice-Presidential debate between Joe Biden and Sarah Palin their family members came on stage to speak and interact with one another. One photo showed Palin and Biden speaking face-to-face and between them stood Palin's six-year-old daughter. Both Palin and Biden had a tender and protecting hand on the little girl's shoulder, and she looked very safe and secure in that space, that cleft between them.

So God has provided a place of security and refuge for us. God has carved out a cleft in the rock and that space is none other than Christ himself. "Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee." In Christ, God draws near to us and we draw near to God and we are not overwhelmed by God's glory. We can run to Christ with all our sins and wounds and sorrows, knowing that we will not be rejected. When we come to that cleft in the Rock, we come to a place where both the Father and the Son put a strong protecting hand on us and the Holy Spirit surrounds us with the everlasting love of God. God has given us a cleft in the rock where we find refuge and security and true freedom, and that cleft in the rock is Christ himself. That's why we go to him and put all of our trust in Him. In Christ we find shelter from the storm, peace in the midst

of the world's anxiety, security in the midst of turmoil. In Christ we find grace and mercy. In Him there is empowerment and hope and healing. He is our forgiveness, our strength, our hope and promise of eternity. He is our life. In Christ, God puts us in the cleft of the rock, a place where nothing in life or in death or in all creation shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. "Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee."