

Theme – Assumptions & Misunderstandings - (Ex 34: 29-35 & Luke 9:28-36)

In the church of San Pietro in Rome, you will find the tomb of Pope Julius II. Not being a man of simplicity nor humility, this pope commissioned the artist Michelangelo to sculpt an extravagant tomb for him where he would be placed after he died; that way he would forever be remembered in the annals of history. There are two ironies that came about from this project. One, most people have heard of Michelangelo and have no idea who Pope Julius II is. And, two, on the tomb itself, the main character is not Pope Julius, rather it is the statue of Moses who is the central figure.

You may have even seen this unique statue of Moses. It stands out, because it depicts Moses with two small horns *sticking out* of his head. In the Christian faith when we see horns on someone's head we usually associate it with the devil, so why would Michelangelo put horns on Moses' head?

The reason Moses is depicted in this manner, is actually based on the scripture reading that was shared today from the book of Exodus. When we read that Moses' face shines after seeing God, that word "shine" comes from the Hebrew word *qeren* (kah•ran) which means either "to shine or send out rays" or "to display or grow horns." So, when Saint Jerome was translating the Bible from Hebrew to Latin and he came across this word, guess which translation he chose?

From about 410 (A.D), when the Vulgate (the Latin Bible) was completed, all the way to and throughout the Renaissance, which was around the 16th century; people understood this particular passage to mean “having horns”, instead of “shining.” Think about it; That’s over 1,000 years of folks interpreting this scripture incorrectly! And it’s literally, why if you ever get a chance to visit the tomb of Pope Julius II in Rome, you’ll see a horned statue of Moses.

It is easy to laugh at the historical inaccuracies of the past, and to see how simple misunderstandings can turn into assumed truths. Yet, even in today’s world we live with hundreds, perhaps thousands of things that we assume to be correct.

Many of us are taught that when you greet somebody, whether it’s a stranger, a date, and definitely at a job interview, make sure you maintain eye contact. It’s a sign of being confident and sure of yourself.

However:

- In China, if you make prolonged eye contact someone may think you are angry.
- In Saudi Arabia, eye contact with the opposite gender is considered rude.
- In Kenya, eye contact is fine in the city; however, it is unnecessary in the rural areas, and discouraged when speaking to elders.
- You don’t even have to go to another country. Taking a subway ride in New York City will give any out-of-towner a quick lesson on when, and when not to, maintain eye contact with others.

Whether it's the mistranslation of scripture that influences awkward art in Rome, or cultural differences, such as eye contact, that can create awkward encounters; we should beware of assuming that our way is the correct way. Or even worse, assuming our way is God's way.

In the Gospel reading we read that the disciples, Peter, John, and James witness the 'Glory of God' shine on Jesus, who is visited by Moses and Elijah. They tell Jesus what his destiny will be in Jerusalem; and Peter comes up with this grand idea:

"You know Jesus we need to go ahead and stay up here. I can set up some shelters, You can sleep over here, Moses over there, Elijah over there."

For Peter it didn't get much better than that mountaintop experience. He would have been perfectly content to stay up there. After all he was in the 'Glory of God.' He assumed that everybody would want to stay up there.

We can be like Peter at times. We have experiences in life that we want to encapsulate and never depart from. We make assumptions about reality and what it should be. Assumptions about what truth is. And assumptions of who God is and where God should be found.

Yet, what Peter didn't realize is, God's will was not to stay on the Mount of Transfiguration; rather it was to go to the hill of Golgotha; where there was no glory of God, rather there were only crosses and the stench of death awaiting.

So, while Moses and Elijah are sharing with Jesus plans of a crucifixion, Peter has plans of a stationary celebration; one which is exclusive to only a few people, where sacrifices and hardships of life are minimized.

The past two years of living through a pandemic, remind us that life cannot always be spent on the mountaintop, there are dips and valleys. Each day the sun dispels the darkness of dawn, only to surrender to the darkness of night later in the evening.

Another thing the past couple of years has shown us, is how divided we are as a country. People equate God with either being on the side of Liberals or Conservatives.

In 2020, when Donald Trump contracted Covid during his presidency, many Christians (at least the Liberal and Progressive ones) believed that God had finally heard their prayers. The President who refused to wear masks, refused to social distance, and who spread misinformation, had finally reaped what he sowed and fell victim to his own rhetoric, testing positive for Covid-19.

The world watched on to see how bad things would get for President Trump. Some were even hoping for the worst. This could finally be a message to all those doubters and nay-sayers about Covid-19. Could you imagine how many people would have worn masks and got vaccinated if the president died?

However, Donald Trump didn't die. According to his administration he wasn't even that sick. And now, it was the Conservative Christians who believed that God heard their prayers. Well, whose side was God on?

Why do we assume that we understand God? We're but one person on a planet of 7.7 billion people; one planet in a universe composed of over 100 billion galaxies. Yet, we act as if our doctrine or dogma is the ultimate truth. As if our religion is as ancient as the stars themselves. As if our theory of evolution is the final say about creation, rather than simply being the latest understanding, based on the limitations of technology and finite knowledge.

There is a reason why when Moses encounters God, people were afraid to approach him afterwards. There is a reason why, when we read in the book of Luke, after the glory of God comes in a cloud that Peter and the disciples fell silent. No more chatter about setting up tents for Moses or Elijah. No more bright ideas. Rather it is the recognition they have encountered something or someone, much larger than you, or I, or the disciples can even conceive of.

We must be mindful of the assumptions we make about God.

Story about misunderstanding - a young boy who prayed for a bike day after day after day. He finally realizes that God doesn't work that way; so he stole the bike then prayed for forgiveness.

The theologian Paul Tillich says, “The courage to be, is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.”

To put it another way, there is a “God beyond God.” Put another way, “when pointing to moon, don’t confuse your finger for the moon.”

Or if you prefer less theology and philosophy and more Bible, Saint Paul says, “No eye has seen, and no ears has heard, and no mind has imagined the things which God has prepared for those who love him.”

One of the theological reasons Judaism and Islam has issues with Christianity, is because they take the otherness of God very seriously. Muslims won’t even draw an image of God, because God is so inconceivable that even creating an image of God is idolatry. For Jews, the idea of God being one-in-three contradicts their belief of monotheism. As for us Christians, we believe that God is so beyond us, that we actually need God to help us get to God, and that’s where Jesus comes in.

Whatever our beliefs, we have to get back to a point in our society where we can engage in healthy dialogue and debate, without cancelling one another out because of disagreements. A place where our neighbor is not our enemy.

Where are we as a nation if we lack empathy and understanding towards one another? Where are we as the church if we do not help to bring about some sort of balance to this division? That balance comes from a place of humility recognizing, “I’m not God, and I don’t have everything figured out.”

Now that Covid numbers are down how do we move forward as a people? As Russia continues its invasion of the Ukraine, how far will things escalate? And where is God in the midst of pandemic and war? If we are honest, we don't really know. And that's where faith comes in.

One of the reasons Peter denied Christ is because he made assumptions about God. Peter says, "Let's stay on the mountaintop." "Let's take down the Roman Empire." "Let's avoid the cross." And what did Jesus say to him? "Get behind me Satan, you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of man."

Let us be like Mary Magdalene. Although she is silenced throughout the canonical Bible. Her silence speaks loudly, because when it was time for Jesus to go the cross; and all the disciples fled, because of fear, and the assumptions they made about power and glory that was not meant to be. Mary stayed with Jesus and his Mother Mary, all the way to the cross. And if we can maintain our faith through the cross, then by the grace of God, like Mary, we will also see empty tomb.