

Sermon *God Acting in the Past Tense*
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 10.22.23

By a show of hands, how many of you were born and raised on Longboat Key? None? Okay. How many of you were born and raised in Sarasota? None. Bradenton? Also none. How about Sarasota County; Manatee County... Pinellas County? None?? Okay, one of us was born and raised in Polk County. That's it. Interesting; so, we all came here from somewhere else. How many of you came here to vacation with your parents when you were kids? Okay, so about a quarter of us came here on vacation in our youth.

On Thursday, last week, I had a meeting in my office with the Rev. Brock Patterson from the Longboat Chapel and Rabbi Stephen Sniderman from Temple Beth Israel. We were planning for the upcoming Thanksgiving service and pet blessing service. The Rabbi said that they have one member of their congregation that grew up on Longboat Key. One member. We were all surprised. He then said that the rest of his people came from somewhere else and that he does few funerals because often they will have the service at their family's synagogue at home – wherever that is; but it's not on Longboat. Brock and I shared that it similar with us too. Most, if not all, of our congregations came from somewhere else. And now, after asking you this morning, I can clearly see that we're from somewhere else (and the closest being Polk County). There is a reason I am bringing this up with you but you'll have to wait until the end of the message to find out why.

At the meeting with the religious leaders; after the business of the day was finished; I asked the Rabbi a theological question about Exodus 33. I told him we're on a three-year lectionary cycle. He knows about our lectionary and that his synagogue used to be on a three-year Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) cycle but now they are on a one-year lectionary. Yes, all five books in one year! There are some occasions when they will read four or five chapters. ... in Hebrew, by the way. Brock said that the Chapel is on the Revised Common Lectionary (the same as us) and that he's been preaching about Moses in Exodus for a month now (and he knew the question I was going to ask and was quite interested in hearing the response). I asked the Rabbi this: Why did Moses want to see God face to face? Was it not good enough to have God on the outside of the tent, talking to Him as a friend; why did he want to step outside the tent to see God?

Without taking a moment to think, Stephen blurted out: don't we all want to see God face to face? Isn't that a human thing – to want to see what God looks like, what God's expressions are, what God is doing with his hands when he speaks? He then took a moment and said, "But, you are probably asking what does it mean theologically?" I nodded yes. The Rabbi went on: what we believe it means is that we can only see God after God has acted – not before, not during, but only after. We can only see God's backside; if we're lucky to see God's actions at all. Not even Moses could see what God was going to do; only that God has acted.

Brock and I both shared about how we have experienced that – God acting in the past tense. And all three of us shared stories that went like this: *if we only knew God's presence was with us when such and such was happening, but we didn't*. Apparently seeing God only after God has acted is universal. It's a God thing.

During my research for this message, I came upon how a servant treats, and looks, at his master. Although not staring, or looking at the master in the face, the good servant will watch the body language, and especially the hands, to see what the master wants before the master asks for it. The role of the good servant is to anticipate what the master wants and to provide so that the master does not have to ask or act first. Although we are called to serve our Lord, this is not our relationship with our Master. We cannot see, or anticipate, or act before God acts. God does not want us to see God's hands at work and to anticipate what God is going to do next. We are all blind to it; even Moses. (And really, if anyone on this earth could have ever known and anticipated, it'd be Moses) Even Jesus; he said about the end times that he does not know, the angels do not know, only his Father in Heaven knows the day and the hour of when all those things will come to be. Even Jesus could not anticipate the will of the Father before God acted.

But we want to. We want to see and to know what God is up to before God acts. But, we can't.

I got to know the Bishop of Northern Indiana; in particular to the ministry of healing. He told me a story of a three-week stretch in which he had no time off. It ended with a visitation to a rural church that he knows well. It's is a happy, well managed church and he was looking forward to a nice visit and then to leave during the Coffee Hour, take a 90-minute car ride home, and then take two days off. As he was saying his goodbyes, a couple came up to him and asked for some prayers. He sighed and said, "Okay, what would you like." They said they'd prefer to talk to him in private in the sanctuary. The three of them walked in, they knelt at the altar rail, briefly said what they need healing prayers for, and then bowed their heads. He said he did the quickest, least enthusiastic (or prayerful) prayer he's ever done: *Lord, you know what we want before we ask, please heal this couple. Amen*. He then said goodbye and headed to his car. Later that week, the Rector of that rural parish emailed him with very good news. The couple had received healing, that day (on Sunday) and were very appreciative of his time and his prayer with them. The bishop remarked to me that had he known God was present, right then and there, and that God was going to do what was asked, he would have paid much closer attention and spent much more time praying. But, the lesson for him is that God is going to do and show up and heal when God is ready to. We, as God's servants, need to always expect that God is with us and to pray, in faith, that God will act.

We cannot anticipate God's actions. We cannot see God's hands before they have already done what God intends to do. We can only see God in the past tense. In the rearview mirror. Like Moses, we are lucky to see the backside of God after God has passed by.

What then, as servants of our Lord, are we to do if we cannot anticipate what God needs? Our role here is to rejoice and to give thanks; in all times and in all places; we are to rejoice and give thanks. The Rabbi shared with us that the regional group of Rabbis got together to discuss security and to pray for peace in Israel. They all agreed that the meeting should happen on Longboat Key. The reason why is that they feel safe here. Stephen said that he and his congregation knows the Longboat police face to face. They know them, they know Stephen and the Temple. We can't see God face to face but seeing one another, face to face, is something we can do, should do, and crave to do. He then said something interesting: when the Rabbis got together, they said, *why didn't we rejoice and give thanks three weeks ago at how safe it is to be a Jew in the world*. Stephen remarked that they had been living in a time when it was the safest to live into their faith than it had at any other time in his lifetime; maybe even ever. The Rabbis lamented: why didn't we rejoice and give thanks for being safe.

Are we as Christians rejoicing and giving thanks for how safe it is to be a Christian in this country and around the world? How many woke up this morning and gave thanks for our safety, security and for our religious freedom? Taking a lesson from our Jewish brothers and sisters, we cannot anticipate what is coming; our call, our place is to rejoice and to give thanks.

This afternoon we are going to have a pet blessing event with All Angels and Temple Beth Israel. It makes the most sense to have it on their property and to have parking on our property. I have thought about our own sense of security. The Rabbi has told me that there will be a good show of police and that none of their members are concerned; or, well, more concerned than normal. Being neighbors, we get to live as they live for a moment – wondering if we are safe to be at the Temple, gathered together, and giving thanks for our pets and for all of God's creation. In all the other pet blessing events I have done – both here on Longboat and at the other churches I have served – I have never been concerned about safety or security; well, except for the usual concern I have for trip and fall accidents and dogs nipping at each other. Outside of that, I have never been concerned, except for today. But, this is what it is to love one another and to walk together in faith. Today, I am going to lean into that fear and see what life is like for those who face threats when they gather because of violence against their faith.

Humans cannot anticipate what God is going to do and we can hardly recognize when God is working right within our midst. What we can do, and are called to do, is to rejoice and give thanks at all times and in all places. We are to rejoice when we have seen God's backside – in the sense that we have seen that God has acted – we are to rejoice and to give thanks. That is the call to Moses, to the people of the Jewish faith and to all Christians, our call is to rejoice and to give thanks.

I asked how many of you were born and raised on Longboat or in Sarasota or Bradenton. The answer: none. Yet, we are all here. How many of you woke up and prayed, "Thank you God for bringing me here?" (Many hands go up). Good! I am glad to see that. Lord, thank you for bringing me here.

Who could have imagined that God would bring you here? The Rabbi was called here from Maryland. I was called here from San Diego. Who could have imagined it? I didn't even know Longboat Key existed before I received a phone call from someone in this diocese inviting me to take a look. Who could have imagined or anticipated that God called and assembled us all here? Who could have imagined that a year ago God would have brought us David Stasney to lead our music program? Our job is not to anticipate what God is going to do but rather to give thanks that God has acted. I don't know how God did it but God put all of our lives together. God has somehow assembled and knit all of us together. I give thanks that God has.

Are you thankful for the ability to travel safely? Are we giving thanks that we have technology that allows us to stay connected in one another's lives; especially today for our Zoom and YouTube broadcasts. This passage from Exodus reminds me to be thankful. To be thankful that no matter where you are in the country, and the world, we can all stay connected to one another and to carry on the Good News; I give thanks to God for acting in this way and for connecting us together.

Are you trying to get into the mind of God? Are you questioning this morning if God is really with us or not? Or, are you trying to figure out, or anticipate what God is going to do? Moses is telling us that is not our role, or our place, with God. We are to rejoice and give thanks in seeing all that God has done for us. We are to give thanks for how God has brought us all together, in security and safety, to worship God, and to rejoice.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.