

The Exodus story is full of twists and turns. And Moses is the pivot point for every change of direction. As one of the principal characters in this extended drama, Moses gets all the good scenes - from confrontations with Pharaoh, to his ascent of the Holy mountain - Moses is THE MAN. He receives the law, then confronts the people who have broken the law in fear and frustration. The tablets - smashed. The golden calf - destroyed. The people who 'lost faith' - put to the sword. There are parts of Exodus that are not at all pleasant, and in today's reading, Moses' frustration with it all is showing. After the trauma of the 'Golden Calf' incident, Moses seems to have been taking regular meetings with the Almighty - a tent serves as their Holy place.

The people have tested God's patience - but it's Moses nerves that are frayed - and Moses wants to know what's next.

"See, you have said to me 'Bring up this people', but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said I know you by name and you have also found favour in my sight.' Now; if I HAVE found favour in your sight, show me your ways..."

Moses' frustration is out in the open. He has described the people as 'stiff-necked' (and God has agreed!) Moses has ordered the slaughter of the worst offenders in the wake of his tablet-smashing tantrum. Moses is a wreck, and asks God straight out for a sign.

Now. Let's remember that Exodus is practically THE BOOK OF SIGNS FROM GOD. Burning bushes, plagues by the number, seas parted, water from solid rock - bread from heaven. For the man of God to declare (at this point in the journey) that he still has doubts, is remarkable. But here we have it; Moses says he needs more; Moses begging for assurance; Moses saying to God "oh, so I'm your guy and these are your people? Prove it!"

Not what you'd expect from someone who is called (the) friend of God.

While Moses is the featured character in this Exodus extravaganza, he is not the star. God gets top billing, make no mistake. Moses is just the guy that is the lightning rod for divine activity. So when he asks - begs - for clear guidance, God's response is worth noting.

Sure, God is recorded as affirming promises and setting Moses mind at ease - and we expect nothing less than that. God even takes Moses tantrum in stride - for a tantrum is what it is; in frustration Moses has lashed out (and God and God's people) and done what every person of faith does when things are going badly...he rages at God - looking for assurance - expressing doubts - demanding signs. We get an object lesson here from the friend of God.

You see, we are free to make demands of God - I mean, if Moses (of all people) had doubts and begged reassurance then surely we are entitled to the occasional late night bargaining session.

But the real lesson that Exodus seems to offer is that our insistence will be answered only (and always) on God's terms.

Reading Exodus from a Christian perspective is challenging, because there is the temptation to say "that was then and now we have Jesus..." But God is not changed. An all powerful - all knowing - creative redeemer is not to be experienced 'head-on'. Not even Moses gets the full treatment.

"I will place you in a cleft in the rock...I will cover you with my hand (as I pass by)...then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back."

This is an ancient version of an argument offered by every parent since the invention of free will: You can't always get what you want.

We are at a point of not wanting to hear that. What we want doesn't seem unreasonable at all - our prayers for peace, for justice, for an end to the uncertainty that this pandemic has unleashed; surely these are simple matters for God? And unlike Moses, we have Jesus as our ally; the Spirit as our advocate; we are not in this argument with God alone...

But even so, the solutions we long for are not unfolding fast enough. Who among us hasn't bargained with God this year - this month - this week? "Are we not your people? Can't we experience your glory? Give us something!"

And like Moses on the mountain, we can't always get what we want.

But if you if you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need. (The gospel according to Mick Jagger...)

Turns out the Stones were right. Moses got just enough - a glimpse of God and the promise affirmed. For the glory of God in its entirety is overwhelming - too much to take in. But in the presence of our uncertainty and fear - in the midst of chaos and doubt - even a glimpse of glory can change our outlook; even a reminder of the promise of peace can settle our nerves; even the IDEA of God can be enough to strengthen our resolve.

And we have more than that. We have Jesus as our ally and the spirit as our advocate - we have scripture and Sacrament and tradition and memory - we have this familiar community of faith and we have the global Christian movement - all of which represents just a tiny piece of the overwhelming presence of God in Creation. And that is enough