

## With God our future is secure

Exodus 33.12-23

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengtholt

What will the future be like? Are we not all apprehensive of the near future? How badly will Corona bite us? How will the economy be? How to move forward, personally, and as a church.

So much of what will happen in the coming weeks is unclear. And that does not feel good at all.

Moses was also apprehensive of the future, and he had the responsibility of the people of Israel like a rope around his neck. Of course he was worried. "Show me your ways," he asked from God. 'Please. Help me understand what is going on!'

In the story we read today, we join Moses at the beginning of his ministry. He is struggling with doubts and with his calling, and what the future would hold. So he was looking for help from God. He knocked on the right door, as we should.

Moses wanted a confirmation of God's presence and blessings - and he wanted to know what God was going to do. Where does my road lead to?

Just as we love to feel and know that God is with us, today and tomorrow. What will the future hold!



### 1. Desire for God's presence

Moses asks of God that he may know Him, and that God will assure him that He will go with Moses and the people of Israel on their future journey through the desert. 'God, give me a glimpse of the future.'

God had already shown himself as very present with Israel. Moses had seen God's miracles in how the people left Egypt, how they went through the Red Sea.

Moses had met with God in the burning bush and on the mountain when he received the Ten Commandments in an amazing sound-and-light show.

Even at daybreak, in the morning when Moses asked God to assure His presence with him and with Israel, he had been able to pick up the miracle bread, the manna, from the desert.



Did Moses doubt God's blessings and his presence and his future help?

I do not think so. I think this prayer of Moses signifies that Moses was not satisfied, even after so many glorious experiences of life with God in the desert, and even after seeing God's caring love each day. As we see God's care for us.

Moses wanted to experience God's care in a deeper way; he wanted to know Him more, he wanted to experience the presence of God - again, and more intensely.

Because he wanted to understand what the future would hold. 'Show me your ways'.

A true believer in God can never be satisfied. After being a Christian for 25 years, you cannot say: 'now I have reached the goal'.

You can never say: 'Now I know God well enough. Now I trust Him as perfectly well as I could.'

In his letter to the Philippians, St Paul wrote about his desire "...that I may know [God] Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on." (Philippians 3.12)

Paul wrote this letter after he had preached and taught and prayed to God through Jesus Christ for 30 years or so. And still he wanted to know God more.

Knowing God and knowing Him more, that has always been the desire of those who believe. We can never be satisfied with where we are now.

Throughout history many men and women have withdrawn into a life of solitude in order to know God better.

St Anthony, one of the most famous hermits in Egypt, stayed alone in a cave to know God better.

The climb up the 1.158 wooden steps to the cave entrance is hot and steep and took me about half an hour. Long ago, in my better days.

I remember arriving at the cave, and I admired the amazing views over the hills and valley below. And it was totally silent. Unbelievable. Just the wind.

St Anthony stayed there for 50 years, because of his desire for God. I confess, I did not last 15 minutes and went down again, all 1.158 steps.

Moses cared for his people; he did not withdraw for years for privately experiencing God. He asked God to assure him that He would truly bless the people. The community. And he wanted to lead that community into the future.

But to do so, he asked God for a very personal experience. We as a church seek God together, but as believers, we also go our way, we go back home. And we seek God personally.

As a Christian, you cannot do without with meeting God in church, but you also need to be with Jesus Christ in the stillness of your heart, at home. Always desiring to know God better.

## 2. Promise of God's presence but 'My face shall not be seen'

And God promises Moses exactly what he asked for: "And the LORD said to Moses, 'This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.'"

Moses wants to know God, but God says: "I know you."

Being known by God, that should ultimately satisfy us when we are worried about the future. When we pray that we want to know God and his ways, of course we do not mean that we want to have a list of his characteristics.

And that He knows us does not just mean that he is aware of our existence. That he knows your name as if He read the telephone book.

Goodness I am old. Telephone book. Do you remember those? Here in The Netherlands we needed them urgently for our St Nicolas feasts, to cut a hole in it for hiding a present inside the big fat telephone book...

God knows your name in a different way, not from the phone book.

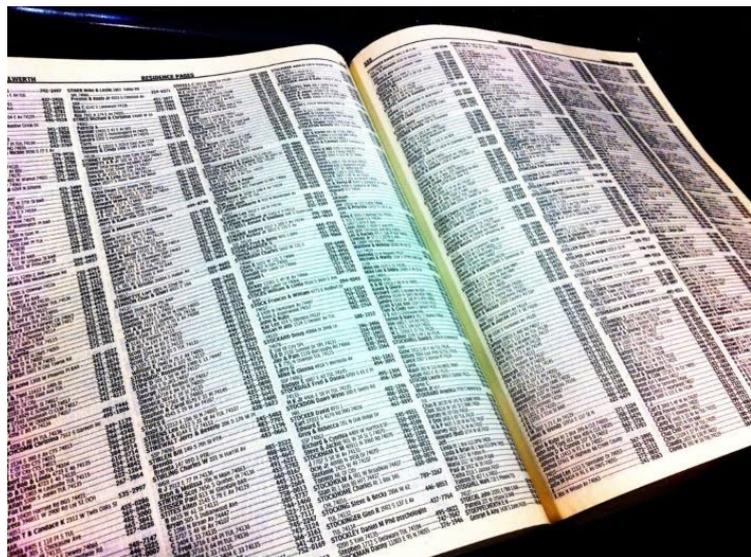
In Genesis 4.1, we read that Adam knew Eve, his wife. The result of this knowing was that a baby was born.

Knowing, in the bible often indicates participation in the life of the person you know. If God says that He knows you, it means He is personally present in your life.

God knows you. He is there, with you. To our question, 'God what does the future hold,' He answers: 'Worry not. I know you. You will never be out of my sight, not now, not in the future. I will take care of you.'

And Moses, encouraged by this awesome thought, by this reality, goes one step further. Never satisfied in his desire to know God better.

He said, "Please show me your glory." More of you, Lord.



Basil the Great, a phenomenal theologian and seeker of God in the fourth century in Cappadocia, wrote in a book about Moses:

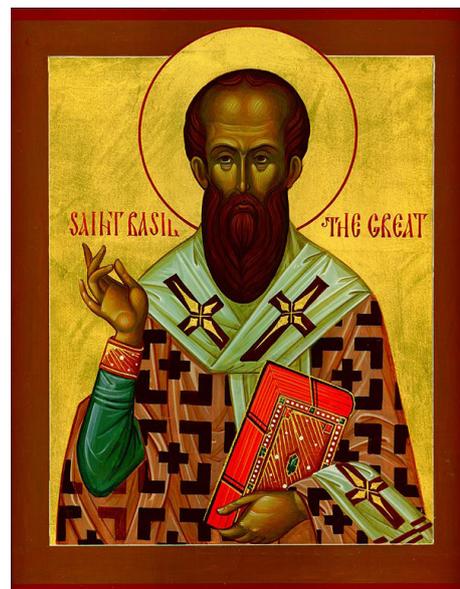
The great Moses at no time stopped in his ascent, nor did he set a limit for himself in his upward course. Once having set foot on the ladder [...] he continually climbed to the step above and never ceased to rise higher, because he always found a step higher than the one he had attained.

What an example for us. To never be satisfied in knowing God.

That is true faith; our non-relenting desire to know God more, even when we know that complete knowledge is not attainable.

Because Moses was asking God for the impossible. He wanted to see God's glory, which seems to mean, he wanted to see Him face to face. And that is impossible.

God said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' [...] But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."



### 3. Moses sees the back of God

So God replied, 'you cannot see My face, but I will do this':

Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the 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 shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.

If we truly desire to know God, and if we want to be assured of a safe future, we need a solid foundation. A rock to stand on. In our present days where the ground seems to be shaking, nothing seems clear and stable, we need such a rock to stand on.

Call it our Archimedean point of religion. We need a reliable starting point. How can we ever know God? The subject is too large.

St John writes in his first letter that in the future, "We shall see [God] as he is." (1 John 3.2) How can this be? Does this not contradict what God said to Moses, that we cannot see God and live?

John says we will see Him "when He appears". He speaks specifically about the return of Jesus Christ. Through Him we will see God as He is.

When the disciple Philip asked Jesus, "show us the Father," Jesus replied: "Philip, I have been with you all this time, and still you do not know Me? Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father?'"

This is the grace of God. St Paul writes about God to Timothy: He “dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.”

He is unapproachable; He is eternally invisible. But in Jesus Christ He comes to us.

In Jesus Christ we meet with God. If we stand on that rock, on Jesus Christ, we meet with God and we have the stability we need to face the future.

Moses cannot see God. When Moses stands on that rock, God tells him that he cannot see God’s face, but only his back.

Basil the Great, I quoted him before and let me paraphrase him now, he calls the idea that God has a literal face and a literal back “absurd.” He says, ‘of course we do not look at this literally. God does not have a body, He is not limited.’

So what does it mean, according to Basil, that Moses - and we - can only see the ‘back of God’? We have to look at its spiritual meaning, according to Basil. He says: God shows his back to Moses means that Moses has to follow.

## **Conclusion**

Moses needs guidance into the future; he wants to know what the future will be like. Well, you do not look at the face of your guide but at his back. You follow.

Moses asked God to know Him better, to be assured about a good future, he wanted to see God’s glory, his face, and God says: follow me. To follow God wherever he might lead is true knowledge of God.

Moses had seen God in the burning bush, and he has been on the mountain where he received the law - and where he was in God’s presence.

This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. There is no limit in our ascent to God. Moses goes higher and higher in his knowledge of God.

And what is the ultimate self-revelation of God? Where do we really meet with God? If we follow Him. If we obey. If we follow Jesus Christ.

Following Jesus Christ is the ultimate meeting with the presence of God.

Following means, being with Him and learning from Him and doing what He says. If we fear the future, if we are insecure, follow Jesus Christ. Where the shepherd leads you, there will always be green grass.

There is no shortcut to knowing God. Jesus is the way. And there is no better assurance of being safe in the future, than by following Jesus Christ.

**+ Amen.**