

Wm. Blake Spencer
22:15-22

The Face of God

Exodus 33:12-23/Matthew

We're in one of those seasons of life when questions are asked and the answers given are scrutinized with tedious detail. One carefully spoken *question and answer* can make or break the day.

We're in the season when national political candidates endlessly parade across the television screen offering "*sound bite*" answers... hoping all the while we might remember their face.....and if we remember their face we might know their story.

And some of the time we do....for better and worse they become known, and part of our daily banter. Their bumper sticker statements and their smiling faces imprinted on yard signs and commercials are a constant attempt to make the candidate known.

These are jumpy, complicated days.....

One day a candidate spouts out an answer with candid brashness, the next day they explain what they did not say in the words they did say. And all the while reporters, commentators and comedians hash and rehash their answers telling us what they really meant to say hoping to persuade our vote, one way or another.

Each question tossed a candidates way....comes with it the potential for a defining moment. The polls and pundits, the media and those of us watching, all wait to hear the candidate's response. And often our opinions and reactions hinge on the words they speak.

What is your answer! Can you tell us what you think?

Give us your answer.

And Jesus spoke. Not as a politician, though the people gathered..... eagerly await his answer.....this whole scene hinges on his answer. So, Jesus spoke to the crowd answering the question posed by a particular religious sect of Pharisees. Ahhhhh.....the Pharisees. We hear that word and the hair on the back of our necks stand on end.....because we associate these religious leaders as the antagonists to Jesus.....the hard hearted, bull headed power brokers of their day.

And this is so....at least in part.

Over in the 13th chapter in Luke's gospel we witness another kind of Pharisee.....for they were not all on the same page....some did not recognize Jesus as a threat and even were friendly enough to warn him of Herod's desire to entrap him.

But today, these friendly Pharisees are mute.... and speaking for all to hear are *those Pharisees* who had formed a sect within the religious leadership known as Herodians, named for their intention to cooperate with Herod.....Herod An-tipas, who was given charge of Galilee .

These are the Pharisees who chose the path of least resistance when it came to religious and political matters. In order to maintain their status, they collaborated with Herod and other appointed officials of the Roman government and in the process became the "pro" voice for the laws and methods of tax collection.

It seems taxation has never been an easy topic; not then, not now. In that day it was one of the hottest of hot button issues.....so hot, notions of revolution were rampant.....so hot....one word from the right or wrong person and the pressure cooker would blow.

And there Jesus stood.....the crowd waiting for his response.

A little background: The Roman Empire had invaded Israel, dividing the country into sectors and set up puppet governments with power of taxation. Without enforceable standards most citizens were taxed at the whim of the leader....

in turn allowing tax collectors to keep a portion of what they collected for themselves.....which meant the rich of that day were gaining their wealth off the backs of their neighbors, and sometimes their own families.

Some devout Jews said, No! Absolutely Not! We will not pay taxes and encouraged others to not cooperate with the Roman government. Other devout Jews, the Herodian's, sided with the Roman government, hoping to not make waves, and most assuredly benefiting from their cooperation.....

these are the ones standing before Jesus with their pointed questions....hoping to trap him into saying something that would give them cause to alert the governing officials with the hope that Jesus would be dealt with once and for all.

Jesus had become a nuisance to the Herodian Pharisees. His teachings and stories of healings and the crowds he attracted were a visible threat to their leadership. These are the Pharisees we know....these are the ones who make the hair on the back of our neck stand up.

Their question: "So, tell us Jesus is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

Remember..... the answer Jesus offers has powerful implications.....one way or another this scene could turn ugly. Jesus is not naïve, or unaware of the consequences of his words. So in typical fashion he asks a question in return.

Do you have a coin with you?

Well, of course the Pharisees had a coin....they most likely received a number of extra coins for their willingness to cooperate with the government. So a coin is offered up.....and Jesus looks at it and asks yet another question: Whose head do you see? Whose face appears on this coin?

Their faces....the Pharisees in particular.... tell the story without uttering a word. Jesus has already answered their question with his question. The answer is in the face imprinted on the coin. The face of the Emperor passed from hand to hand, pocket to pocket.

The royal face telling the story of power....constantly reminding all Roman citizens who was in charge and who was to be known. The royal face... stamped on coins....visible to the poorest and to the richest. The royal face demanding allegiance and adherence.

Jesus makes clear....the coin belongs to the Emperor....his face is on it.so give to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor.

But the next words make clear: The Emperor's face is not imprinted upon all of life.....thus the Emperor does not own all that God has created. So what belongs to God....is to be offered back to God.

Give to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor. Give to the Government what belongs to the Government.

But we are given a bigger story. Coins and political power, calculated questions and sound byte answers, taxes and laws and debt.....worries and angst....sorrows, and fear, and speculation....

Give these things to the one who owns them for we have inherited another story.....

We have inherited another story.....the story Moses revealed as he stood before the very presence of God. Moses had been burdened with the woes of God's people. Every step forward in the wilderness came with what seemed three steps backwards.

Moses in the middle.... ran back and forth between the people and God....he listened and reported, sometimes he wrangled with God to change God's mood and mind.....He's the stereotypical "go-between" guy.....and in the scene presented in today's Old Testament passage....Moses he has come to a defining moment and asks God a question.

"I hear you God. I do. But I've come to a moment in this journey when I need to see what I believe. I need to see you. Show me your presence....which really means....show me your face so I know who I belong too....so I know you are with me and these people I lead."

Often the face tells the whole story. Let me see your face and I will know what's true....because our eyes and expressions can tell long stories.....can reveal the depths of our thinking and feeling...if we are so in tuned.

So Moses is asking quite a question.....one mighty request!

Let me see your face God...

Let me see your face....then I will know the depths of your thinking and feeling....

Let me see your face and then I will know for a fact to whom I belong.

Let me see your face, so I know what your promise is real.

And to this question posed by Moses, God responds....

Oh child.....you could never handle such a thing? My thoughts, my feelings, my presence, my face....are far more than you can humanly fathom.....and to see all these things at once is just not a possibility.

But....I love you so deeply..... I want you to know who I am and that what I say and what I promise and what I live.... is true.

And then the most amazing scene unfolds. God directs Moses to stand in a crevice in the middle of large rocks and says watch.....look.....see.

And protecting Moses....God's hand shelters his eyes for a moment as God passes in front of Moses.....and having passed him....God's hand lifts and Moses gets a glimpse of God's back.

God's back.....this is our bigger story. We stand behind God and we follow, we listen, we love as God shows us the way.....as God leads us into the bigger story.

(Pause)

And Jesus speaks this bigger story for the Pharisees and the crowds to hear.

Give what belongs to the government. Give what belongs to others.

And then look up.

For God has been revealed.....and God is showing us the way to life. Give what belongs to them.....then lift up your hearts and your faces and give to God your trust and your love.