

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*  
*Were you there when the lawyers gamed my Lord?*  
*Were you there when Herodians joined the game?*  
*Were you there when they oiled him up with praise?*  
*Were you there when they let their malice show?*  
*Were you there when they put him to the test?*  
*Were you there when they showed him Empire's face?*  
*Were you there when they heard him spring the trap?*  
*Were you there when they turned away in shame?*  
*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*  
*Oh-oh-oo-oh. Sometimes it causes me*  
*To tremble, tremble, tremble.*  
*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*  
 "Or-not" questions are devil's choices.  
 We've heard them in the halls of Congress.  
 Mr. President, we know that you are sincere  
 and do not regard people with partiality.  
 Tell us, then, what you think?  
 Is it lawful to mandate health insurance? Or not?  
 Sometimes it causes me to tremble.  
 Events in Exodus have been coming to a climax  
 prior to where our OT lesson begins.  
 Moses hadn't seen his people for quite a while –  
 in bible-speak, forty days and forty nights.  
 He had left them while he ascended Mt Sinai  
 to have a little face time with Yahweh.  
 That was an unforgettable send-off:  
 Thunder and lightning resounded over the hills.  
 A trumpet blasted so loud that the camp trembled.  
 Even the mountain had smoked and shaken.  
 When Moses had called, the voice of Yahweh  
 had thundered, **Arise. Meet me on the mountain.**  
 The Lord had spread a divine banquet for Moses.  
 The Ten Commandments were just the appetizer.  
 The forty-day course had included laws concerning  
 worship, ethics, property, violence, and justice.

There had been a vision for a holy Tabernacle  
 fit for God's dwelling-place among the people.  
 God had envisioned every last detail,  
 down to the ritual basin.  
**"Make a bronze basin and a stand for washing.  
 Put it between the tent of meeting and the altar.  
 Put water in it for the priests  
 to wash their hands and feet."**  
 Throughout the feast, Moses had remained humble.  
 But suddenly, the Lord interrupted the theophany  
 with an emergency announcement:  
**"Go down to your people at once!  
 They have cast for themselves an image of a calf  
 and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it.  
 Go, and leave me alone to my wrath."**  
 In haste Moses descended Mount Sinai  
 bearing the two stone tablets  
 inscribed with Ten Commandments  
 from the very hand of God.  
 He heard the sound of a crowd.  
 It was not a war-cry or a funeral dirge.  
 It was a party going on!  
 Moses met the revelers running wild around  
 a golden idol, met them face to face.  
 Like 2-year-olds when you turn your back,  
 Israelites had abandoned God who had saved them.  
 Burning with anger,  
 Moses smashed the Ten Commandments.  
 The next day, Moses chastised the people:  
 "You have committed a terrible sin,  
 but I will go back up to the Lord on the mountain.  
 Perhaps I will be able to obtain forgiveness.  
 Moses trekked up Mount Sinai, ready to bargain.  
 He put a devil's question to God:  
 Will you forgive your peoples' sin, or not?  
 God's response was not what Moses hoped.  
 "I will punish them for their sin," God had warned.

"I still want you to lead people to the Promised Land. But the days of my presence with them are over."

The Israelites were despondent at the news. This is the build-up to our striking OT lesson today about the Tent of Meeting.

The structure itself is probably something like a modern wedding tent, with walls and roof. It is part of a larger, less portable structure known as the Tabernacle, in which resided the Ark of the Covenant.

Moses apparently is in the habit of setting up the Tent of Meeting outside of camp, where people might confide in God Face-to-Face. But the implication in the text is that the only one actually using this confessional is Moses.

The heads of households stand at attention watching as Moses disappears inside the Tent. The now-familiar Pillar of Cloud would appear, indicating the Divine Presence. The people bow.

One of the most striking descriptions of how God and Moses inter-relate is in Numbers 12: **"Hear my words: If there were prophets among you, I the LORD would make myself known to them in visions. I would speak to them in dreams.**

**Not so with my servant Moses.**

**Of all my household, he is the one I trust.**

**With him I speak face to face-- clearly, not in riddles.**

**And he beholds the form of the LORD."**

Well, that might have been true of their relationship before the Golden Calf; it is true no longer.

The prospect of desert wandering without God's reassuring presence no doubt provoked high anxiety in the camp. (Not unlike a church when a pastor retires.)

All this trauma resulted from a one-time infraction of the First Commandment, worshiping a manufactured god.

We might well ask,

What's wrong with an idol, anyway?

We all could use a little hope, a little clarity, a little less anxiety, a little more comfort.

That's what idols provide, Face-to-Face as it were.

Do you see the idols we worship today?

There's the statue of a bull on Wall Street, reminding us that markets do come back.

There are those golden arches, present finally on the Bethany coast, promising newcomers a taste of the familiar.

There's the i-Phone 6, assuring owners of their techno-status.

Let's admit it: we all worship things. Or people.

But true worship is not manufactured.

It is from God. And it is of God.

In the Hebrew encampment the people rise and stand before their tents.

The people bow down in God's presence while Moses communes with God Face-to-Face.

That's still a worship model for the people of God.

We gather for worship to meet God.

Maybe we don't stand in rapt attention

as the pastor enters the sanctuary, despite every pastor's fantasy,

but we do come to this Tent expecting God.

We enter the tent expectantly, and reverently.

We come as a gathered people under this Tent.

In worship we make public offerings to God – of money, of prayer, of music, of preaching.

In a holistic sense, we make offerings of ourselves.

Divine "worth-ship" honors the Creator God, from whom all things come.

Gathered for worship, the people acknowledge their complete and utter dependence on God's provision.

True worship is not escape from reality, but encounter with the transcendent reality.

It is standing in the cleft of the Rock while the glory of God passes over.

Sometimes we only recognize God's presence from the "backside," as it were. After it happens.

That's one difference between the God of Moses and the Caesars of ancient Rome.

Whoever was Caesar at any given time wanted the world to notice him – not only to notice, but to respect and, indeed, worship him.

For that reason, the Caesars had coins minted that bore their likenesses.

A Roman coin was Caesar-in-your-face.

To an occupied people like Jews of Palestine, Roman coins were blasphemous idols.

For a Jew to carry a Roman coin was a painful reminder of God's displeasure at the golden calf.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is confronted by two types of adversaries:

Pharisees, who, as stewards of Jewish law, opposed paying tax to Caesar on religious grounds; and Herodians, who were allies of King Herod, a lackey of the Roman empire.

They, of course, would support paying taxes.

Finding in Jesus a common adversary, the Pharisees and Herodians gang up, trying to paint Jesus into a corner:

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor, or not? If he answers yes, Jesus riles the Pharisees and can kiss their support goodbye.

If he answers no, he riles the Herodians, risking imprisonment for sedition.

Face-to-face with his enemies, it would seem that Jesus can't win, either way.

In his wisdom, Jesus reaches for a deeper, more theological question than taxes.

Who actually bears the Divine Image – a person who holds Caesar's coin? Or a person created in God's image?

The coin will subsidize the civil order of the day. But a person of faith can subsidize God's realm.

Caesar can stamp his face on cold, hard cash. But God already has stamped the Divine Image on every warm, fallible human being.

When a person is baptized in the name of the Triune God, the sign of the cross on the forehead is a mint-mark.

The Divine Image can be difficult to see, often.

When we interact, even Face-to-Face, instead of looking for the Divine Image in another, we pay more attention to material cues – to a person's manner of speaking, to the trappings of the material world they carry, or to their status relative to our own.

These cues become interpersonal idols.

What's wrong with an idol, anyway?

We use verbal cues to create a little less anxiety, a little more comfort.

But Jesus calmly teaches his adversaries, and us,

**"Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's."**

That's the easy part, actually.

Jesus is asking us to give back all the rest – our very lives – to the one whose image we bear.

As the parable we heard a couple weeks ago says, return to God the due harvest of the vineyard; or risk utter alienation from God.

Alienation is what Moses is warned about by God.

In the part of the passage we did not hear today,  
 Moses bargains for God's continued presence:  
 How will the world know that  
 we are your minted coins unless  
 "you go with us, so that we may be distinguished  
 from every people on the face of the earth?"  
 It's no small thing to change the mind of God.  
 But God agrees to continue the Divine Presence.  
 To abide with the people is astonishing enough.  
 God will be involved Face-to-Face  
 in the lived reality of God's Chosen People.  
 But Moses goes for broke, as we read earlier:  
 "Show me your glory, I pray."  
 God's reply to this is something like,  
 "For you, I would, but then I'd have to kill you."  
 The full revelation of God's glory  
 will have to wait for the Incarnation of Christ.  
 With Moses, God relents only enough  
 to allow Moses to see after God passes him by.  
 The text doesn't actually say that's what happens.

## CONCLUSION

Were you there?

*Were you there when God stood you on the rock?*

*Were you there when God put you in the cleft?*

*Were you there when God's glory passed you by?*

*Were you there when you realized God had come?*

*Oh-oh-oo-oh. Sometimes it causes me*

*To tremble, tremble, tremble.*

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

Presbyterian Pastor Martha Greene has written:

"We all go through periods when we feel  
 that the presence of God is withdrawn.

We may try to fill the void

with things we can buy with coin of the realm.

If we face a crisis, we may not always see God.

But years later, we may come to understand

the quiet and hidden things

God has done in our lives."

Seeing God Face-to-Face

remains an unspoken prayer

all through the psalms and the prophets of the OT.

An ancient priestly blessing says it beautifully,

**"May the Lord make his face to shine upon you  
 and be gracious to you.**

**May the Lord turn his countenance toward you  
 and give you peace."**

God grants the very thing Moses asks for:

God's eternal presence,

God's grace and mercy,

accompaniment for the journey,

a pillar of cloud at the entrance of the tent.

God will grant you that very thing, if you ask.

Amen.