

Follow the Leader

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Exodus 33: 12-23

1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10

Matthew 22: 15-22

Psalm 99

Summary: God not only goes with us; God goes before us. Following the leader, we become like Him and others see the Lord by His grace in us.

Twenty-eight years ago, on Valentine's Day, 1992, my husband and I celebrated our Holy Union. It was a magical night in many ways, but the moment I am recalling for the purpose of making an introduction for my sermon was my wedding dance. He and I began a conga line which wove in and out and around all the tables and chairs, eventually including everyone attending the affair.

A conga line is the musical version of the childhood game that inspired my sermon title, "Follow the leader." The point of the game is to challenge the dancers but not to lose any. Everyone dances together no matter how we weave, and we all get to the end of the song with the line intact.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we encounter Moses looking ahead to leading a long line of contentious people through unfamiliar spaces to the Promised Land. This is no easy dance and Moses does not really feel up to being the leader of the line. He turns to God, praying that the Almighty Lord who called them out of Egypt will go ahead of the people gathered in His Name. If God will lead, He will show His glory through all who follow, distinguishing them from all other nations.

God agrees and Moses then wants to confirm the divine promise by asking to see God's glory. God allows this and passes by a certain rock which He has cleft for his prophet, covering Moses with His hand till He is in a position where Moses can glimpse Him but only see His back.

This inspired the hymn, *Rock of Ages*, as it foreshadows what God will do for us with Jesus. If you see someone's back, that person is the leader and you are following. God does more than simply go with us as we wander through the maze of life; God takes the lead. The leadership of God distinguishes the people of God from anyone else, healing and changing them as they begin to keep company with Him.

I see that process of healing and change in Psalm 99. There is an intriguing verse which says God was a forgiving God to Moses, Aaron, and Samuel and yet an avenger of their evil deeds. I suspect generations wondered how God could do both things!

Understanding this confusion, Paul points to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was called, "the Comforter," but that word really originates from "come *fortus*:" come strength. This is far more than settling upset or unsteady dancers. This is power which enables God's people to not only follow but to imitate their leader.

This fits perfectly into Jesus' parable involving the image on the coins used for the poll tax.

Jesus points out Caesar's image and remarks that these coins are the things of Caesar. Temple coins, which are given to God, bear another image altogether, a holy one. If others are to distinguish a difference in the people of God, it will be because they bear God's image. So, if we are to render unto God the things that are God's, it will be ourselves that we give.

God avenges our evil deeds by giving them to Jesus. Forsaken by God for our sake, Jesus yet prays, "Father, forgive them." God answers that prayer and is, thus, both a forgiving God and an avenger of sin at the same time! So, as we follow our leader, Jesus' image, God's image, becomes clearer in us and others may come to see God by His grace in us. Let us follow the leader and render our lives and characters unto God. This is the only hope of the world. Amen