

A number of years ago, a 7 year old boy was suffering from a very rare and aggressive brain cancer. He was restricted to his hospital bed in Rhode Island, but wanted desperately to sing his favorite song, "Walk This Way," with rock star Steven Tyler. Sounds like something for the Make a Wish foundation right? No problem!

Through a Skype video call, 7-year-old Cole Grace and Aerosmith frontman Steven Tyler were able to connect with each other for a one-hour conversation. They also shared a special performance of "Walk This Way," and Tyler even gave a shout-out to Grace from his seat as a judge when he was on *American Idol*. Said Grace after the video meeting, "It felt pretty awesome."

It's nice to know that at times, Modern technology can help us make some truly amazing connections, across continents and even around the globe. In the world of business for example: virtual meetings have become increasingly popular, especially these past two years during Covid, because they save time and money while offering flexibility in location and timing. But a blogger named Steve Manicor of *bigIDEASblog* questions whether web conferences and virtual meetings can replace the value of face-to-face contact.

In one of his online articles Manicor cites a *Forbes* study involving more than 750 businesses. The study revealed that face-to-face, in-person meetings go deeper than webinars and virtual events. In fact, 80 percent of the executives questioned in the survey said they prefer face-to-face contact to virtual meetings. They believe that in-person meetings are superior for achieving almost every business objective including: persuasion, engagement, inspiration, decision-making, etc..

Just imagine what our first lesson this morning would have been like if God and Moses had just Skyped each other? Most likely we can imagine that at some

point Moses would have insisted on a personal meeting. But, our text for today, however, tells us that Moses was on Mount Sinai with the Lord for 40 days and 40 nights. It was a high-level and very intense meeting, with no pastries or Starbucks; Exodus tells us that Moses neither ate bread nor drank water. He wrote the words of God' covenant the ten commandments on two tablets -- stone tablets, not on an iPad or a Samsung Galaxy tab.

Then Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets in his hands. He could have simply placed the commandments in front of the people and walked away, saying something sarcastic like, "Here you go, people. Read 'em and weep." But instead, he called to the people and spoke to them-- another face to face experience! Then he returned to speak to God, and then he spoke to the people again. Moses knew the value of face-to-face meetings, and used them for persuasion, leadership, engagement, and inspiration.

Ok, so what is the message of this passage for those of us living in a world with Skype, FaceTime, Zoom, and other virtual meetings? Perhaps it is a good reminder for us that it is time to go face to face in the church and in the world. And although we can't do a face-to-face thing with Moses today, sadly he probably isn't gonna show up like he did during the Transfiguration in our Gospel today. But in Exodus, Moses does send us a text message -- no, not a message on a smartphone, but a message we can refer to as a biblical text! And we're going to have to be content with that, because what he says to us is vital to our faith! Moses texts us, informs us, of the value and the importance of having some face-to-face time with God.

So, what does Moses say: First, he texts us the words: **Take the time to build a relationship with God.** Notice that Moses does not try to arrange a virtual meeting with God, one that gives him flexibility in location and timing, one that's convenient. Of course, we might respond sarcastically, "Well, of course he

couldn't. That was 4,000 years ago or something! The latest thing they had in technology back then was a camel."

Actually, Moses could've just asked God to call it in. "Hey, God, let's do the meeting and vision thing perhaps in a dream this time. Hiking to the top of Mount Sinai is no picnic, not with the knees I got. Send me a vision -- okay, and I'll get back to you."

Moses does not do that! Instead, he hobbles right up the mountain to a precise location where he could get close to God. There, he spends 40 days and 40 nights, listening to God and taking down every word that the Lord said. Notice that Moses takes the time he needs to build a relationship with God.

Today, we might do this through daily prayer, through weekly Bible study, through making a commitment to regular worship. During the season of Lent we may do this through certain spiritual disciplines like fasting or giving up something we enjoy for 40 days. All of these practices put us in personal contact with God and keep us open to the presence, the power, and the possibility of God in our lives.

Marina Abramovic is a Serbian performance artist who staged a three-month exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City a few years ago. All day, every day, she sat at a table in the museum's atrium, in what she described as a "square of light." Members of the audience were invited to join her, one at a time, at the opposite end of the table. There was no talking, no touching, and no overt communication of any kind.

Her goal was "to achieve a luminous state of being and then transmit it." She literally wanted to sit there and give off light. While she did not achieve the shining face of Moses, she made a compassionate and loving connection with many people who sat across from her in silence, and some were even moved to tears. Which begs the question, as we think about today's lesson, what kind of

relationship might we have with God, if we simply took the time to sit with him, silently, in deep prayer and meditation?

The second text message Moses sends is: **Expect your relationship with God to change you.** Look at what happens when Moses spends time with God: Exodus says that "the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God." Theologian Walter Brueggemann observes that "after this meeting, Moses is no ordinary person, for he has entered deeply into God's own life."

After Moses saw the fire of God's glory, he had to put on a veil because his face had become radiant. After the shepherds of Bethlehem saw the glory of the Lord, they had to search for Mary, Joseph and Jesus, and then tell others about the Messiah. After the disciples saw the glory of Jesus in the Transfiguration, they had a new appreciation for his connection to God. After the first Christians saw the glory of God in Jesus, "the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth," they went out into the world to spread the good news of his grace, truth and love -- even at the cost of their own lives. When we see the glory of God face to face, we are going to be changed.

Transformation happens when we enter deeply into God's own life. We become more compassionate, loving, forgiving and truthful. Our actions serve others instead of ourselves, and our decisions are driven more by what is right, than by what is profitable. At work, at home, at school and in our communities, the people around us begin to see evidence that we are trying to follow the guidance of Jesus, and to live in the light of his glory. As the classic question goes: If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

A third text message from the mountain is this: **Reach out to everyone, even those who annoy you.** One of the attractions of virtual meetings is that we can keep our distance from people who bug us. But Moses insists on face-to-face meetings, even with the rebellious and stiff-necked people of Israel.

This is a lot harder than it looks. Naturally, we are going to want to get close to the people we love -- parents prefer to see their children face to face instead of through Zoom or FaceTime. At the same time, most of us are glad to keep our distance from people we dislike or disrespect, and we actually prefer virtual meetings with them. But Moses gets close to all the people of Israel, again and again. After all, it was the right thing to do. How much better would our life in America be if people of different political persuasions actually sat down at a table together and had respectful conversations. How much healthier would our society be if conservatives and liberals decreased their Internet battles and increased their face-to-face meetings with a willingness to actually listen to each other.

Finally, Moses sends the text message: **Keep moving, both up and down the mountain.** What he means by this is that we shouldn't talk only to God, nor should we converse only with humans. In other words, we need to learn to maintain a balance; and Moses would probably suggest that we need to find a balance between worship and work, between prayer and participation in the life of our community of faith. If we focus only on God, we'll miss out on His important mission of serving a world in need. If we focus only on people, we'll miss out on the glory of God that brings inspiration and hope into the middle of human life.

Today Moses calls us to a life of balance, one that makes use of technologies such as Facetime or Zoom, but one that also preserves the value of face-to-face contact. He challenges us to take time to build relationships with God and with each other, and to expect to be changed by these relationships. The prophet pushes us to reach out to everyone, and not hide behind technology when the encounters are difficult. And he reminds us to keep moving up and down the mountain that runs from the human to the divine. So go ahead and Skype when necessary. But don't forget to also listen to both Moses and Business executives, who clearly make a case for face to face contact. Amen.