

October 18, 2026 — Sermon

Scripture Reading: Exodus 33:12–23

Gospel Reading: Matthew 22:15–22

“At Second Glance”

My wife is from Gangwon Province, a region of South Korea that reminds me a little of Wisconsin. It is known for its mountains, farms, and especially its potatoes and corn. There is even a joke that people there pay for things with potatoes. Not anymore, of course. But you can ask my wife whether she paid with potatoes when she was a child. Her hometown is Gangneung, a beautiful city on Korea's east coast. There is a lake right beside the sea, with mountains nearby. You can enjoy quite a lot in one place.

Over the centuries, poets, scholars, and painters visited this area. They enjoyed the scenery, shared food and drinks, and expressed what they experienced through poetry and painting. At Gyeongpodae, a pavilion overlooking the lake, people used to say that you could see five moons. Can you guess where? One in the sky. One in the lake. One in the sea. One in the cup. And one in the eyes of the person you love.

Now, a physicist might say, “There is only one moon. The other four are reflections.” Who is right—the poet or the scientist? Both are right. The scientist explains the moon and its reflections. The poet discovers love and beauty in the same scene. A precise explanation does not capture every meaning an experience can hold. Sometimes we need to look again.

In today's reading from Exodus, Moses is worried about the journey ahead. The people have made a golden calf, and Moses must continue leading them after this terrible rupture in their relationship with God. He carries the responsibility of leadership, but he cannot carry it alone. He says to God, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here.” Then he asks, “Show me your glory.” We can understand that longing. When the road ahead is uncertain, we want reassurance. “God, show me that you are here.” “Show me that we are going in the right direction.” “Give me something I can hold on to.”

God responds to Moses, but Moses does not receive a complete view of God. God promises to make divine goodness pass before him and to proclaim the divine name. God places him in a cleft of the rock and protects him as the glory passes. Moses will see God's back, but not God's face. At first, we may notice what Moses is

not allowed to see. But look again. Notice what God gives him: a place to stand, a shelter, a protecting hand, and the promise of presence. Moses cannot see God fully, yet he is held in God's care.

That distinction matters in our lives, too. There are times when we become tired and discouraged. We struggle to move forward, and we wonder where God has gone. There is a familiar story about someone looking back over the footprints of a lifetime. For much of the journey, there are two sets of footprints: their own and God's. But during the most difficult times, there is only one. So the person asks, "God, why did you leave me when I needed you most?" And God answers, "Those were the times when I carried you."

That story does not explain every experience of suffering. Some questions remain painful and unanswered. But it invites us to look again. Perhaps what first appeared to be abandonment also held moments of care we could not recognize at the time. Someone listened. Someone brought a meal. Someone stayed when we had nothing left to say. We did not understand everything that was happening. Yet we were being helped through it.

Faith does not begin only after we have fully understood God. Faith grows as we live in relationship with the God we cannot fully understand. That relationship asks something of us. It asks us to remain open to what we have not yet seen. We may have to admit, "My first understanding was incomplete. There is more here than I realized." That takes courage. Our familiar answers can make us feel secure. We may become uncomfortable when God unsettles them. But if God is greater than our understanding, we should expect to keep learning. And we should be careful about assuming that the choices we have imagined are the only choices God can offer.

In Matthew's Gospel, the Pharisees make plans to trap Jesus in his words. They send their disciples, together with the Herodians, to ask him: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" It sounds like a question with only two answers. Yes or no. Pay or refuse. Either answer could put Jesus in danger. If he says yes, he risks appearing to support the Roman power that rules over his people. If he says no, he risks being accused of rebellion against Rome. They have prepared the question so that there seems to be no way through.

We know something about situations like that. Are you with us or against us? Do you belong here or there? Are you a success or a failure? The question is asked, and suddenly we are expected to live inside the categories someone else has chosen. Jesus asks to see the coin used for the tax. "Whose image is this, and whose title?" "The emperor's," they answer. Then Jesus says, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

By distinguishing what belongs to Caesar from what belongs to God, Jesus declares that Caesar is not God. At first glance, everything seems to happen under Caesar's rule. His power shapes everyday life. It can feel as though there is no other choice but to accept the system and live by its demands. We know that pressure, too. Sometimes the world's expectations feel so powerful that we can hardly imagine another way to live. But Jesus invites his listeners to look again. Caesar's authority is real, but it is not ultimate. There is more to life than the emperor can claim. There are things that belong to God.

Jesus escapes the trap while opening their eyes to a deeper question. They came asking what they should give Caesar. Now they must consider what they owe God. Matthew tells us that when they heard his answer, they were amazed, and they left him and went away. We are not told what they thought as they left. But perhaps Jesus' answer can turn us around as well. When we glimpse that deeper dimension of life, our desire to corner someone else can begin to lose its hold. We have questions of our own to face.

What have I allowed to rule my life? What have I given the power to claim my loyalty? And what would it mean for me to give to God what belongs to God? These questions turn our attention toward our own lives. We may still disagree with someone. We may still need to take a stand. But we can do so without trying to corner or humiliate them. We can pause and ask: Am I listening, or am I only waiting to prove my point? Am I seeking what is faithful, or simply defending what is familiar? Jesus' answer leaves us with more to consider than we expected.

Back at Gyeongpodae, there is still one moon. But its light reaches the lake, the sea, the cup, and the eyes of someone we love. A second glance does not change the moon. It changes what we notice. Perhaps the same is true of our lives. What we first understood as abandonment may hold traces of care. What seemed like the only possible choice may open into a different response. And a question we meant for someone else may become a question we need to face ourselves.

May God give us the patience to look again, the humility to keep learning, and the courage to respond faithfully. Amen.

Let us pray. Gracious God, you have been faithful and good to us. Sometimes we grow discouraged and disappointed when we cannot see your presence. Yet we trust that you have been with us, caring for us along the way. Give us the courage to look again and the wisdom to discover what we have overlooked. Help us move forward in faith and grow in our understanding of you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.