

Exodus 3:1-6
Psalms 139:1-18
Luke 8:42b-48

Hiding Ourselves from God

The Rev. Patrick S. Cheng*
Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, Massachusetts
October 29, 2001

When I was growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area in the early 1970s, I always felt that I was slightly different than my classmates. Maybe it was the fact that I was often the only kid in my class who would have sticky rice balls in my lunch bag instead of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Or maybe it was the fact that I always preferred playing jump rope and hopscotch with the girls than playing kickball and dodgeball with the boys.

But I suspect the queerest thing about me was that, while my classmates were off racing matchbox cars or playing cops and robbers, I was busy making eucharist -- cutting out hosts from Wonder Bread in my mom's kitchen, and turning tap water (and number 40 red food coloring, of course) into wine.

Like many of you (I suspect), I was drawn from an early age towards the mystery of God-with-us. Like Moses in today's first reading, I longed to turn aside and ponder the burning bush that was not consumed. Like the faithful woman in today's Gospel reading, I wanted to reach out and touch the garments of Jesus.

But something happened when I hit adolescence and realized that I not only liked other boys (and I mean really liked other boys), but I was also a person of Asian descent in a predominantly white world. I simply was not what the church said a priest should be like or look like. And so, like Moses, I hid my face, afraid to look at God. Like the faithful woman, I tried to melt into the crowd, fearful of standing face-to-face with the Holy.

I rejected the church as irrelevant hocus pocus. I buried myself in my studies. I became a card-carrying member of Queer Nation. I studied deconstruction and postmodern literary theory in college, and I ended up at Harvard Law School. In short, I hid myself from God.

What is it that makes us hide ourselves from God? My story is not unlike that of many other lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender Asian Americans of faith. So many of

* Copyright (c) 2001 by Patrick S. Cheng. All rights reserved.

us end up hiding ourselves from God because of our doubly marginalized social location at the intersection of queerness and racial difference.

On the one hand, as queer people, we hide because of the church. The ecclesial closet is a deep one, and it creates a frightening culture of silence that prevents us from talking about who we are emotionally, physically and sexually. On the other hand, as Asian Americans, we hide because of our culture. We are often taught by our families from an early age not to "stand out" or to assert ourselves too much as individuals. For many of us, the cultural closet is equally oppressive.

This tendency to hide is further reinforced by our dual experiences of racism within the queer community and homophobia within the Asian American community.

On the one hand, we hide our "Asianness" because of the racism of the queer community. Have you noticed how some of the most "open and affirming" parishes with respect to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are also some of the most Eurocentric and least welcoming of people of color? And why is it that, within the academy, queer theologians write volumes and volumes on "queer" issues like bodies and relationally, but rarely wrestle deeply with the entrenched racism and the fear of dark bodies that pervades white queer culture? We queer Asian Americans end up blending in the crowd, fearful of asserting our racial difference.

On the other hand, we hide our "queerness" as a result of the homophobia of the Asian American community. I'm sure that I don't need to tell you, in the context of the current debates over sexuality in the mainline churches, how some of the most "culturally-inclusive" Asian American parishes are also some of the most homophobic and least inclusive theologically. And, within the academy, Asian American theologians write volumes and volumes on liberation from racial, economic, cultural and religious oppression, but rarely address the need to be liberated from queer phobia and the fear of the erotic. Again, we queer Asian Americans end up blending in the crowd -- this time fearful of asserting our sexual difference.

For me, Moses and the faithful woman in today's gospel are biblical models of the queer Asian American experience. Like us, they occupy multiple positions of marginality. As a foreigner from Egypt and a murderer, Moses was marked by ethnic difference as well as moral transgressiveness. And, as a female and a person suffering from constant bleeding, the faithful woman was marked by sexual difference as well as uncleanness under the Levitical law.

Ethnic difference, moral transgressivity, sexual difference and Levitical uncleanness. Like queer Asian Americans, the multiple and fragmented identities of our biblical ancestors made them want to hide from God, who -- we are taught from an early age -- is the epitome of wholeness and perfection.

In the end, however, as the psalmist tells us, there is nowhere that we can flee from God's presence. God knows when we sit up and when we rise up. God knits us

together before we were born, and we are "fearfully and wonderfully made."

In the end, God found me anyway, even within the depths of the Gehenna of Wall Street law practice. The burning bush and the fringes of Jesus' garment were much too fabulous to resist! And God is helping lots of other queer Asian Pacific Islanders of faith around the world find their voices, too. Like the Rev. Leng Lim, we have started to reclaim our Asianness, our queerness, and our faith. We are starting to write about our experiences. And we are finding each other as well. In the last two years, we queer Asian Pacific Islanders of faith have begun to come together as a virtual community in cyberspace, growing from a handful to over eighty people. We cannot remain hidden. We are declaring how God's power has healed us in the presence of all the people. Our faith has made us well.

What is it that makes us hide ourselves from God? Perhaps it's our shame with respect to our marginalities and differences. Perhaps it's our hurt with respect to our fragmented identities. Whatever the reason, though, we can be sure that God will find us in the end. God knows that we are reaching out to be healed by Jesus. God calls us forth from the crowds to reveal ourselves, just as we are. And that's the really good news of the Gospel.

Amen.