As we have been hearing from Fr. Mark, we are encouraged to take at least ten minutes out of each day and be in the presence of God. During these ten minutes, our prayers and attention should focus specifically on the presence of God, on God being directly in our room, with us and loving us.

There is a famous story about St. John Mary Vianney, the Curé d’Ars. He had been sitting at the back of the Church in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, when someone asked him what he was doing there all day. And he answered, “Nothing, I just look at Him, and He looks at me.”¹

We are not required to attend Eucharistic Adoration and for many of us, this type of prayer does not suit, but the concept of looking at God and recognizing that God is looking at us for even ten minutes a day is this type of prayer. When we look at God, we see the face of love, the face of the One who loves us limitlessly, eternally, unconditionally, and personally.

Praying in such a new way can terrify us. There is silence. There is no visual image. It’s not like we can sit at a table and Jesus appears and we have a cup of coffee with him and chat. There is no voice that clearly belongs to God granting us Divine Wisdom.

On the other hand, should we actually see or hear Jesus, we’d freak out. Depending on what we hear Jesus (or the voice) say, it might be a Divine voice, it might be our imagination, it might be drivel, it might be a sign we need professional help. If we’re not sure, ask a dear friend who can keep a confidence.

Now this doesn’t mean we might not hear God in our hearts - I hear God in my heart when I spend my quiet prayer time with God; inspiration pops into my mind when I remain in the presence of the Holy Spirit; I converse with Jesus in my thoughts, letting God know how I feel - joyful, scared, peaceful, even angry, sometimes with Him. After all, God knows how I feel whether I tell God or not, so I might as well own up to it.

Now throughout the Bible, we hear of many instances of people speaking to God. The two of the stories we will discuss are direct encounters with God, although over and over again, the Bible
speaks of people praying to God, praying outside their traditional group worship services.²

The first person we shall discuss is Moses. On many occasions in the Book of Exodus, Moses speaks directly with God. Let’s look at these passages closely. They teach us much about developing a relationship with God.

The initial contact between God and Moses occurs in Exodus 3, and is known as the call of Moses.

As we can see, Moses is simply about his business, doing a regular chore - tending to his father-in-law’s flock. But then he notices something weird: a bush that is on fire but not burning up. I’ve always wondered how many people have looked at burning bushes and never noticed that they were not being consumed. I’m sure I have. In other words, I’m sure I’ve missed the subtle signs of God calling to me.

But Moses didn’t. And what an encounter with God he has! First, he learns how to approach God respectfully. At that time it meant going to worship barefoot, because people wore sandals

² Indeed, my favorite instance of personal prayer is in Genesis XX, when Isaac prays on behalf of his beloved wife Rebekah, because she has been unable to bear children. God hears him and Rebekah becomes pregnant with the twins Esau and Jacob. This is the only instance in the Bible where a husband is described as praying for his barren wife.
everywhere and sandals collected dust, manure, bits of decaying things, etc. However, the soles of one’s feet remained clean. Therefore, God wanted Moses to approach him respectfully, clean, in his “best clothes” so to speak.

God identifies himself as the God of Moses’ ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God then commissions Moses to go to Pharaoh with the message that God has heard the suffering of his people, the Hebrews. Moses is also to tell Pharaoh to let God’s people go.

Moses’ response comes impulsively, straight from the gut: he tells God flat out, “No.” He then gets in an argument with God, because God has a response for every excuse Moses has to not follow God’s commission for him. And Moses has a lot of excuses.

First, he says he is a nobody: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

This is probably one of our own go-to excuses as well. Especially if we feel called to some monumental task.

Imagine if we felt called by God to go to the mayor of our city, the governor of our state, our Senator in Washington or even the President, and tell him or her, “Stop this injustice. Change that
law because it oppresses people. Allocate extra money to fund this program to assist the working poor/the homeless/etc. Tax the rich and force companies to pay their workers a living wage.” And then pestering this official until they do so.

At the very least, this politician would laugh at you as if you were a kook (the cheek!) and remove you from their office. If you persisted, they might call mental health authorities. Eventually, they absolutely would call the cops.

So again, we would probably echo Moses’ reply: “Who am I to do this?” After all, Pharaoh wouldn’t consider what Moses called for as justice. In Pharaoh’s mind, as in any other slaveholder’s mind, the Hebrews were only slaves.

God assures Moses that God will be with Moses at all times, at his side, granting Moses authority. When Moses leads the people out of Egypt, to serve God at the mountain, Moses will reveal to God’s people his authority as well.

Not being convinced, Moses says he has no way of convincing the Hebrews that he speaks for God, since he does not know God’s name.

God then tells Moses the Divine Name. The usage of the Divine Name has become controversial over the millenia. In the Hebrew Bible, the Divine Name, YHWH, is used over 8,000
times by the Biblical authors. Clearly, these inspired authors, who compiled and wrote down the Tanakh\(^3\) were quite comfortable with using the Divine Name\(^4\). In the Ancient Near East, the knowledge of someone’s name meant that one had a close and deeply personal relationship with that individual. It could also mean that one had a certain power or influence over that person. Later, we shall see that for humans, this power over God meant that God considered their words carefully. As their relationship progresses, we shall see that God does listen to the counsel of Moses.

However, Moses continues with his excuses: “What if they don’t believe me?”

God reassures Moses by showing him how God will turn his staff into a snake and back again as a sign that Moses speaks for God. Another sign God gives Moses is having his hand become leprous and then clean again.

\(^3\) The Tanakh is the Jewish name of the Hebrew Scriptures (which is different than the Christian Old Testament because the Books are arranged differently and some Christian Old Testament Books are not present in Hebrew Scriptures). The word Tanakh is a Hebrew acronym for the organization of the Books: “T” for “Torah” - the first five Books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy); “N” for “Nevi‘im” or “the Prophets;” and “K” for “Ketuvim” or “the Writings.”

\(^4\) By the Middle Ages, the term “Lord” was designated instead of “YHWH.” Now, in some Jewish traditions, people refer to the Divine One by the term “Hashem” which means “The Name.” Others write the term “G-d” and remind people that if they print out the page, they should consider that the printed page contains the Sacred Name and they should treat it accordingly.
But Moses isn’t convinced yet. His final excuse is that he is not eloquent. The Hebrew literally says that Moses claims to be “heavy of mouth and heavy of speech.” No one is sure precisely what this phrase means, although many scholars believe it means that he stutters. However, it certainly means that Moses has some sort of speech impediment. My husband, daughter and nephew went to speech therapy because there were certain letters and therefore words they couldn’t pronounce correctly and others had difficulty understanding them. “Heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue” could certainly refer to a speech impediment.

God tells him that God will improve Moses’ speech so there will be no problem.

Finally, Moses simply exclaims, “Send someone else!”

God has had enough. God angrily tells Moses that Aaron will accompany Moses to Pharaoh and between the two of them, they will speak for God to Pharaoh.

Now, when God calls us, however we discern this calling, it is unlikely we will feel God’s wrath if we avoid the calling. After all, we have the free will to say “No,” as did Moses, and God certainly isn’t going to be angry with us about it. Disappointed
probably, persistent, I would expect, but angry? No. If we have a close relationship with God, or want one, we instead might feel as the prophet Jeremiah did:

Whenever I speak, I must cry out,
violence and outrage I proclaim;
The Word of the LORD\textsuperscript{5} has brought me
reproach and derision all day long.
I say I will not mention him,
I will no longer speak his name.
But then it is as if fire is burning in my heart,
imprisoned in my bones;
I grow weary of holding back,
I cannot!

\textit{Jeremiah 20:7-9}

So, Moses sets off for Egypt with his wife and son, and meets his brother Aaron on the way. Together, Moses and Aaron approach Pharaoh. Through the terrible signs of the plagues, the Hebrews come to trust Moses and Pharaoh is forced to release them from slavery.

At the Event at the Sea, through Moses, God protects the Hebrews from Pharaoh’s oncoming chariots, moving the waters for the Hebrews to

\textsuperscript{5} Whenever we see the word “LORD” written in all capital letters in the Bible, it is replacing the original Hebrew “YHWH.” In the Middle Ages, Jewish scribes placed the vowels for “Lord” (in Hebrew - “Adonai”) around the word “YHWH” to remind anyone reading the text that the Divine Name should never be spoken, but rather that the word “Lord” should be said instead.
pass. The foolish charioteers believe that the waters will remain open for them and drown when they do not. The Hebrews, who are a disparate group of people (Exodus 12:38 - “A crowd of mixed ancestry also went up with them”) are now a nation.

During their wandering in the wilderness, Moses acts as prophet to the Israelites, thereby earning him the title of the greatest prophet of Israel. The primary duty of a prophet of Israel was not to foretell the future, as we might think. Rather, it was to mediate between the people and God. We can see how this is true when we see how often the books of the prophets state: “And the Word of the LORD came to ...”

God tells Moses that God will provide quail and manna (sometimes translated as “bread”), and has Moses strike a rock to bring the Israelites water. God also uses Moses and his upraised hands to provide the Israelites with encouragement to defeat the Amalekites. This action also builds community, as both Aaron and Hur must hold Moses’ arms upright when the prophet gets weary during the battle.

Most importantly of all, God presents Moses with the Ten Commandments and the 613 laws for how the Israelites should live. Such an act reveals
to us quite a level of trust between God and Moses. The Israelites were quite new to independence. They had never governed themselves, either internally or externally. All the Laws God gave Moses, especially the Ten Commandments, were designed to assist the Israelites in learning to govern their personal behavior as well as how to live as a society.

God has called Moses from his place as a murderer on the run (Exodus 2:11-15) to bringing social justice to slaves to becoming a great leader for them and teaching them God’s holiest of Law, the Ten Commandments.

Now, in the words of the New Testament, this would be called bringing the Kingdom of God into the world. Throughout the Bible, God has worked through people - even greatly flawed people - to bring salvation, the Kingdom of God, into the world.

God does not come down in the fiery chariot with armies of angels to solve the world’s problems. We are called to do so.

And we must remember what God told Moses when God first commissioned him from the Burning Bush: “I will be with you” (Genesis 3:12). And Jesus is with us always as well, for Jesus is Emmanuel: “God-with-us” (Matthew 1:22-23).
While we are the ones who act, we do not act alone.

Back at Sinai, the Israelites vow to follow the Commandments of the YHWH.

Of course, this oath doesn’t last long. God instructs Moses to come upon the Holy Mountain again (Mt. Sinai) to receive the Ten Commandments on stone tablets, written by the hand of God directly, as well as further instructions.

Moses, accompanied by his right-hand man Joshua, obeys. God presents Moses with additional laws and detailed instructions on the building of the Ark of the Covenant, the behavior and clothing of the priests, the sacrificial altar, and so forth. Apparently, presenting this information takes a significant amount of time.

So, down below the mountain, the Israelites get restless. Too restless. They tell Aaron to make a Golden Calf that they can carry before them since Moses apparently has disappeared. Aaron agrees (seemingly without any bullying). There is some speculation that the Golden Calf is actually a representation of YHWH, something considered to be prohibited by the Ten Commandments, rather than a false god to be worshipped. This theory is evidenced by Aaron’s words in Exodus
32:5: “Tomorrow is a feast of YHWH.” Nevertheless, it is considered a false idol, as the Israelites are never to make a graven image of God.

God furiously informs Moses of the corrupt behavior going on far below and tells him to get back to them.

Then God says something incredibly interesting. God says, “Let me alone, then, that my anger may burn against them to consume them. Then I will make of you a great nation” (Exodus 32:10). Apparently God needs time to work up to being angry enough to punish the Israelites as they deserve. God doesn’t want to give them the death penalty, but God believes they deserve it. If God is in the presence of God’s favorite human - Moses - God apparently feels that God will have too much sympathy for the Israelites and never give them the penalty they deserve.

We can see here that already, through the Biblical authors, humans have the understanding that God’s inclination is towards mercy - God knows we deserve punishment for our sins, but God doesn’t want to punish us.

We can also see what close friends God and Moses are. Imagine God telling us how God feels,
what God is planning to do, how intense God’s feelings are. Profound.

In response to God’s words, Moses pleads with God, reminding God that the Israelites are God’s own people whom God brought out of slavery. Moses also points out that the Egyptians will gossip and say God only brought the Israelites out of Egypt to kill them. (How interesting that Moses appeals to God’s vanity - “God, do you really want the people you’ve just impressed and arm-twisted into obeying you looking down on you now?”

Our position would be: why would God care what people think of God? Well, in those times, people attributed more human characteristics to God, and this belief is revealed elsewhere in the Old Testament (see Psalm 74 for example).

Moses goes on to remind God of the faithfulness of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and God’s promise to Abraham to make his descendents as numerous as as the stars and that God would give them the promised land in perpetuity.

We can see here a Biblical example of intercessory prayer. Moses is praying for his fellow Israelites, asking God to have mercy on them. We, too, intercede for our friends and families, and for the world at large. We ask God to
heal them, to protect them, to help them return to God, to have mercy on them.

Impressively, God listens to Moses’ words, and, according to Exodus 32:14, God changes the Divine mind and decides not to kill the people for creating and worshipping the Golden Calf.

We have always been taught that God is immutable, meaning unchanging. We always believe that this means that God would never change the Divine mind. But God’s immutability actually means that God’s character never changes. God’s character is love, God is love.

So what do we make of this exchange between God and Moses? Could we too change God’s mind about something God intended to do? Well I don’t think that this example in the Bible speaks to an action God would actually take in the first place. God never goes around slaughtering people who break the Ten Commandments. And God didn’t here, despite the fact that Exodus 32:26-28 describes the deaths of those Israelites who hadn’t turned back to God. Rather the people died of some sort of disease and/or violent conflict within the group which perhaps stemmed from ideas about appropriate worship of YHWH.

But the question remains: could we change God’s mind? Well, in the end, we never have to.
What are God’s intentions in the world? Does God intend for little kids to die of brain tumors? Does God intend for people to lose their jobs and go bankrupt, losing their houses and end up living in their cars or on the streets? Does God intend for people to suffer from severe depression, bipolar illness, psychosis, suicide? Does God intend for people, including children, to be raped, murdered? Does God intend for people to divorce, for one partner to cheat on the other, causing heartbreak and agony? Does God intend for grave injustices to exist and continue in our world? Does God intend for a natural disaster to kill thousands of people? Of course not. None of this is “God’s will.” None of this is God’s doing.

When we look at Jesus’ actions in the Bible, in the ways he preached, healed, and cast out demons, Jesus fought again such issues. He healed every ill person he came in contact with; he cast out every demon he encountered. He preached against injustice and violence in his parables; he called out the lawyers (the scribes) and elders of his own religion for their hypocrisy; he publicly embarrassed the most important leaders of his time, knowing it endangered his life, in order to point out how they mistreated their own people and collaborated with their
oppressors. Furthermore, he openly stated that his actions were the will of God.

We are, of course, confronted by the fact that every death or vicious crime or financial hardship or divorce or injustice or natural disaster doesn’t go away; they are not stopped by the will of God. But they certainly aren’t the will of God. So we have no reason to talk God out of letting them happen because God isn’t causing them.

So what is the use of prayer, of building a relationship of intimacy with God as Moses did if God doesn’t fix our problems? Why should we spend our ten minutes with God? We have seen enough examples of our prayers or the prayers of others going unanswered. Children still die. Psychic wounds still torment people. Divorces still rip apart families. Injustice continues. Violence and atrocities abound. So, why pray at all? Why talk to God at all?

Because the point of prayer is relationship. We pray to be friends with God. We pray to be closer to God. We sit with God for at least ten minutes a day in order to get to be friends with God, to share our joy with God, to share our pain with God, to yell at God, whatever. In this way, we will notice God in the world around us and see Jesus in everyone, even in those in whom we don’t
want to see the face of Jesus. We will become more compassionate, more forgiving, more loving to others. We will be able to stand up for others, live a life against injustice, a life of righteousness and courage.

We pray for the healing of our loved ones and others, because God does listen to us and will bring others if not physical healing, then the healing of peace. We pray because God is our best friend.

Throughout the incredibly difficult journey through the wilderness, Moses endured because of his friendship with God. A journey in the wilderness that went on endlessly. Days and days of monotonous, drab, hot landscape. Weeks upon weeks of people whining, “Are we there yet?” Hearing behind his back, “Moses sucks! He’s a terrible leader! He’s gotten us lost out here to starve!” But when there was a problem, everyone came running to him crying, Moses, “Save us, save us! Ask God to save us!” So Moses always asks for God’s help, and God always comes through for him.

One issue that bothers many, though, is that Moses never actually gets to dwell in the Promised Land; he only gets to see it. They feel that he has missed out on a great reward for his tremendous
and tireless efforts. Personally, that issue has
never bothered me. I don’t believe it was ever
Moses’ mission to dwell in the Promised land. I’m
not sure he even wanted to dwell in the Promised
Land. His calling was to bring God’s people out of
their slavery, form them into a united people, and
bring them to the home God had prepared for
them. When he got to see that he had finished,
that the Promised Land lay shining ahead of them
all, then he could rest. One could think of it as
having one’s children finally leave the nest. After
all the love and struggle and joy and tears and
anger and pure happiness, our children are finally
able to spread their wings and live their own
splendid lives. We must let them go, let them
move on. The journey is now theirs, not ours.

But Moses is not abandoned, even at that time.
God, as always, is his dearest friend.

When we realize God is our best friend, we
will be able to see the burning bushes God sets
before us and hear God’s call to us. We might not
be called to approach the Pharaohs in this world,
but we will be called to bring the Kingdom of God
into the world. And with God at our side, we will
accomplish mighty deeds in the world.