

Lent III: Year C—March 20, 2022

All Saints', Littleton

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Exodus 3: 1-15

Psalm 103

I Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13: 1-9

This morning we begin our lessons from Scripture with the great passage from Exodus about the burning bush. I began to think about what Moses might have been thinking in encountering this burning bush, when he said, “I must turn aside and look at this great site, and see why the bush is not burned up.” I think, unfortunately, our distance from tribal and agrarian living has sometimes left us a little impoverished as we approach scripture. As I contemplated what the burning bush might have meant to Moses, I tried to imagine what fire meant to him and his people.

What are the two things that fire would have meant to them, that for us have little significance anymore?—light and warmth of course. We live with the convenience of electric lights and oil or gas burning furnaces, but to them, fire meant warmth, and in the evening, a source of light. For those of you who burn wood as a primary or secondary heat source, what is the significant chore related to a wood fire?—chopping, splitting, and carrying wood! What a chore! And what would you do if you saw a stack of wood that continued to burn, but it didn't consume the wood? Well, I'd imagine that you would want some of that wood. Think of the convenience! So certainly Moses would be interested in this phenomenon; and he drew close to investigate to find that the bush could burn without consuming the branches...but it also talked!

This is the way God encountered Moses to give him his mission. Moses was respectful and awed by the experience, but when it came time to understanding what it was he was supposed to do, he asked who should he say has sent him. I guess you have to imagine that Moses was searching for away to convey to his family and the Israelites in captivity what had transpired without sounding like a total idiot. Can you hear him trying to convince his family? Yeah, I had been out with the goats for a long time, and it was rather

lonely, but I really hadn't gotten into the wineskins too much, .....and then there was this bush that was on fire, but didn't burn up, and it started talking to me. I can hear his relatives giving him something of an equivalent of .....”Yeah, right!”. Well, he probably did have a tough sell.

But of course what is so interesting about the seminal passage from Exodus is how God chooses to identify God's self to Moses. When Moses asks who shall I say sent me, God replies, tell them “I am' has sent me to you”. What an intriguing way for God to respond.

Now you have to understand that for cultures in this time and period, the naming of something carried with it a certain kind of power, and, to a certain degree, power over the thing or person. In telling Moses to tell the people ‘I am' has sent me, God was refusing to be named by Moses and the people. God, refusing to be named or characterized, simply said ‘I am', not ‘I am holy, I am good, I am beautiful, I am eternal, etc.’—just ‘I am'. In some translations they have it as ‘I will be who I will be'. The Jews have taken this name so seriously that the 4 Hebrew letters from their alphabet that signify the name of God –*yod, he, vav, he*, called the Tetragrammaton—actually has no pronunciation. Wherever they see those 4 letters in the text while reading aloud, they substitute a word like *Adonai* or *Elohim*, because the name of God is too holy to speak. Christians have put some sound to those 4 letters and have come up with the word *Yahweh*, or *Jehovah*. And in every generation we carry on this battle of trying to name God, and thereby, in some way, sometimes unintentionally, we try to box God in, for in ‘naming’ we start defining doctrine about God!

I think there is something also useful about us taking some refuge in this statement, and, to the degree that we are created in God's image, it is important to remember that first and foremost ‘We are’, we just are. Not ‘we are this’ or ‘we are that’, just ‘we are’, or I AM. Or, to play with the verb a little, “I be who I be!” So often we become so obsessed with what we do, what we own, or who we're related to that sometimes we just forget that the very fact that ‘we are’ is so important—and that it is important to remember sometimes to just ‘be’! If we are made in the Creator's image, then maybe we need to emulate something of his character to also say, ‘I am that I am’....by which I mean not an arrogant ‘take me as I am or not at all’, but a deep understanding that being created in God's image is this fundamental good that we need to discover and embody in our lives.

And, in this season of Lent, if there is a real grace to a Lenten discipline, it is to rediscover or go deeper into one's most authentic self as

God created us. Is that the way you think of Lent? Do you understand all the penitence and self-denial of Lent as a means of coming to letting go of the false self, to find the most authentic self and nurture that? This really gets at a core understanding of our faith—it is not just something you ‘believe’, it is something you ‘practice’; and just like as in anything else, if you don’t practice, you will not grow or get better in it—meaning, of course, your most authentic self. That’s why once a week on Sunday just doesn’t cut it.

What I’m trying to convey—at the end of the day, is that God is much less interested in what we say about our faith, than how we live our faith. It is said that once, when the archangel Michael was complaining to God of the racket and jumble of voices from the earth that Michael suggested God had made a mistake by giving humans the power of speech. God replied, “I don’t listen to their voices, I listen to their lives!”

This provides me with a good segue to the Gospel lesson this morning. This was a hard lesson—a rather good one for Lent. In it Jesus teaches the valuable lesson that people who suffer calamity are not more sinful than we are just because something terrible happens to them. He says, “ Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners”, and, “ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—were they worse sinners?” At the time in Jewish theology, there was the notion that calamity followed bad behavior—so the victim/s must have done something wrong. But he answers his own questions with, “No, I tell you: but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

What was Jesus teaching here? Well, clearly he was teaching that calamity is not related to sinfulness like a cosmological cause and effect –as in Matthew he says, ‘it rains on the just and the unjust’ (5:45)—sometimes bad things happen to good people, as in the title of Rabbi Kushner’s well-known book. But the ending of his teaching is the most troubling and enigmatic. Why did he say, ‘unless you repent, you will end up like these poor souls.’ I suppose we could simply say that he wanted to put the fear of God into them. But I think to be consistent with Jesus’ life and teaching we have to look for something deeper.

And here we can develop that good Lenten theme: repentance. What does it mean to repent? The word ‘repent’ is the Greek word ‘metanoia’, which literally means meta-noia, and *meta* can either be ‘beyond’ or ‘large’, and *noia* is mind or thought (like paranoia), and so this really means to go *beyond* your mind or to the *larger* mind! So, the fuller, deeper meaning for repenting in Christian life is not just that we are sorry for something we might

have done, but it means to go beyond your mind, the larger mind where you will find God. Repentance, in good Christian understanding, is to identify those things that cheapen who we are, that tarnish the goodness and glory of how God made us; and renew our minds so we might be whole again.

Jesus was teaching that if we don't repent, or turn from those things that cheapen and tarnish the God-image in us, then we are worse than just dead. When Jesus tells us we will perish, he is talking about our 'being-ness' with God. It is as if by not acknowledging those things that separate us, we are being bled dry spiritually by them and there is no wholeness to our being.

Learning to sit in silence and pray and 'repent', is about turning away from those things that keep us from God, and renewing our minds so that we grow more grounded, centered, and whole. This is why the journey of Lent is so important. It's not about self-mortification and recalling our sins as some weird exercise of piety. Self-examination and self-mortification are a means to reclaiming the blessing and grace that God created us for. It is a time of calling us to wake up to the beauty of God who is the Great I AM, and calls us to be, in God's image who we are too.

This is echoed in our baptismal covenant when we are asked : "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" That dignity of every human being is all caught up in the stamp of the Creator on each one of us!

Again, you may be thinking, 'well, this is all fine and good, but what does it have to do with the price of bread?!' (which of course is going up and up!), or, more importantly, the war in Ukraine. Well, if we practice well, and truly get the glory of our createdness by God, then it will inform and fuel our our actions, our voting, our sense of mission on earth to bring about the kingdom of God, and we will not be able to help ourselves from 'striving for justice and peace among all people and respecting the dignity of every human being!'