

FIRST READING: Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15

A reading from the Book of Exodus:

Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. Leading the flock across the desert, he came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There an angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in fire flaming out of a bush. As he looked on, he was surprised to see that the bush, though on fire, was not consumed. So Moses decided, "I must go over to look at this remarkable sight, and see why the bush is not burned." When the LORD saw him coming over to look at it more closely, God called out to him from the bush, "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." God said, "Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your fathers," he continued, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. But the LORD said, "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey." Moses said to God, "But when I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' if they ask me, 'What is his name?' what am I to tell them?" God replied, "I am who am." Then he added, "This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you." God spoke further to Moses, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. "This is my name forever; thus am I to be remembered through all generations."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 103: 1-2, 3-4, 6-7, 8, 11.

The Lord is kind and merciful.

Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all my being, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

The Lord is kind and merciful.

He pardons all your iniquities, heals all your ills, He redeems your life from destruction, crowns you with kindness and compassion.

The Lord is kind and merciful.

The LORD secures justice and the rights of all the oppressed. He has made known his ways to Moses, and his deeds to the children of Israel.

The Lord is kind and merciful.

Merciful and gracious is the LORD, slow to anger and abounding in kindness. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so surpassing is his kindness toward those who fear him.

The Lord is kind and merciful.

SECOND READING: 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians:

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, and all of them were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was the Christ. Yet God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the desert. These things happened as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil things, as they did. Do not grumble as some of them did, and suffered death by the destroyer. These things happened to them as an example, and they have been written down as a warning to us, upon whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: Luke 13:1-9

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke:

Some people told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. Jesus said to them in reply, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did! Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them; do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!" And he told them this parable: "There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener, 'For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?' He said to him in reply, 'Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.'"

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 3rd Sunday of Lent C

Conversion through faith is a process. Change through faith takes time. Coming to know someone else including God requires compassion and patience. The story of how Moses became the first, great chosen leader for God's people seems to have happened in a flash. Moses, the shepherd, had a single, powerful vision of God in the wilderness and bam; he became priest, prophet and king as God's Messiah. I like to point out that biblical imagery does not always reflect to experience of the players in it. This isn't Moses autobiography. It's the bible and the story it tells is the faith in God of God's people, collectively and not individually. Paul told the story of his conversion relating that it took years and not in a flash of light and a thunderous voice. Moses' story is similar. Perhaps there's more to his story, but we'll never know any more than the scripture's narrative. My ordination as a priest took twelve years in the seminary. I felt the movement and never light and disjointed voices. He received his mission to save God's people in bondage with a singular vision. What does this tell us as people who struggle to know God and what God wants of us? How do we know for sure? We trust God through faith.

Perhaps the vision was not what he saw but what he felt. All of us have had a flash of intuition or a new thought dawn on us. Since I've been writing these reflections I can go back and trace the development of insights, themes and notions. Sometimes the initial idea may be keen but rough and under developed. All of us have experienced a process of maturation as we age. Moses was a person, a human being like us. Whatever his moment of inspiration actually was, it funded his life's mission and work. All of us have known this. Few of us have experienced the special effects. We all respond with faith, hope, love and trust; just like Moses did. I'm writing this and you are reading what I've written; a simple sign that this is true.

What we read in scripture is never a moment by moment history, autobiography or news item. This bible story of Moses wasn't written until the Hebrew people became a nation with a king, capitol and temple hundreds of years later. From their perspective, they knew how the story unfolded back to front. The stories of Moses and the exodus were tales told around campfires during the people's flight to freedom and promise. They were collected and compiled by priests, scholars and scribes before they became God's Word in writing. They had the advantage of looking backward in reflection knowing that Jerusalem's walls were strong, a descendant of David ruled and the temple contained the holy of holies. All that happened in the narrative had taken place.

What was the necessary component for this story to work? Moses' faith, right? I don't think so. It was Moses' curiosity. Most people, in the wilderness, run away from a brush fire; Moses, instead, approached it. If he didn't how history would be different! A burning bush that was never consumed by its flames and the thunderous voice drew him. This impossible event mirrored the impossibly tolerable experience of God's people's plight. They were slaves in Egypt. For them to be freed and become a nation seemed as impossible as Moses' vision was. Moses, according to his back-story had fled the pharaoh's court because he murdered a man. This made him a very unlikely leader and savior. The plausibility of this story may be very low, yet, the people came to live in the land of promise as a sovereign nation. These things took place.

Moses initial calling marked the beginning of the process of salvation for him and God's people. It also began for all God's people a new movement. Prior to the covenant with Moses, God formed one with Abraham. Both covenants have the same premise. I will be your God and you will be my people. I will make of you a great nation whose members will be more numerous than the stars of the sky and sands of the sea. This was the promise of covenant to Abraham. The promise to Moses added the notion of salvation. I will save you from slavery and give you a land that flows with milk and honey. Until Moses, God's promise was of creation; I will make of you. After Moses it also became I will save you.

This changed God's relationship to God's people to our day. God would form God's people on their path to become a great nation and God would free them and lead them from slavery in Egypt to freedom and nationhood in the Promised Land. The Hebrew people had a long, tough journey ahead of them that would take generations. The journey to faith and fidelity is also not an easy path. We face troubles, trials, temptations and sin as we journey through life as God's faithful. God, through Jesus death on the cross, has promised us salvation too; not from one place to another, as in Exodus, but salvation through the forgiveness of our sins. The promise God made to Abraham still underlies the covenant we have in Jesus' blood.

The story of Moses and the burning bush is a good and famous one. I have a hard time to focus on the special effects. This particular vision with all its miraculous oddness is, in the long run, a minor event in the life of Moses who now had to go and convince the Hebrew slaves in Egypt to rise up, rebel and take on a nomadic trek through the vastness of the wilderness. Moses could not recreate the specialness of his visions. Descriptions can never relate the depth of vision that Moses now possessed. He believed and his faith transformed him. Before he could convince the nation, he had to convince his father-in-law, Jethro and his wife, Zipporah and kids of it. What father would let his daughter and grand babies to embark on such a cockamamie life's quest?

I maintain that Moses' inner convictions and vision had to be powerful enough to convince family, Hebrew kin, and Egyptian people that the Exodus was a really good idea and the power of God would see it through. The means God revealed to Moses has always seemed so unconvincing. "Tell them I am who am sent me to you!" All God gave Moses was God's name, YHWH. There is great irony to this persuasion too. The name of God is too holy to be spoken aloud. What did Moses actually say?

Moses, his family, the Hebrew people and the Egyptians basically stepped out into thin air with no visible means of support and no safety net. This is also the same experience we all have as human beings as we live life. We have no guarantee either. They had a promise of freedom and a homeland. We have the promise of eternal life in the kingdom. The generation that first responded to God's call never made it to the Promised Land. Moses saw it just over the horizon as he lay on his death-bed. He never made it either and died before the promise became true. Our promise is the same. Eternal life begins after we first die; no one gets out of this life alive.

One needs faith in God for the promises to have any root and meaning. Moses believed knowing God in faith. The Hebrew people also had faith. They were all Abraham's descendants through flesh and faith. They already believed in God as did their ancestors. They knew the promise and nature of the covenant with God. They faced their lives and situation with the eyes of faith. They knew God's presence through, with and in God. As believers they actively sought God's abiding presence.

I started to reflect from the context of God's people's experience of nationhood; from knowing what God had done. From that can we come to a sense of what God will do? Much better is the sense of what God does now. I am in always the present tense. God is infinite, eternal and unconditional and always present. We can be grateful for what God has done for us as we can hope for God to do in the future.

Far more important and much better in sustaining us, is being aware of what God does now. Times were tough in the book of Exodus; God, as the eternal now, saw that God's people made it to the Promised Land. Our times are tough. How can we recognize God's presence now when we need God? In this moment and only with eyes of faith. God is only a thought away; God never leaves us. When we remember God we bless the Lord as the Lord blesses us.

Paul's letters dealt with lives and problems that the communities to which he wrote experienced. We can learn what the communities were like from that point of view. From this letter, we know that Christians in Paul's day had ritual and liturgy. He mentioned Baptism and the Eucharist. He linked those experiences to a major problem that the community faced. By invoking the Hebrew experience of Exodus and viewing the story using Christian imagery, he

explained to the gentile members their Jewish roots. They were linked to their Jewish members through faith. To the Jewish members he showed their continuity to their present times and Gentile members. Both were united in Jesus whose death and resurrection saved them. They were one in Christ.

There was another problem that Paul addressed. They saw the experience of conversion, initiation and worship as events that guaranteed salvation. Paul taught them that as the process of God's salvation revealed itself through history to their present day, salvation was an on-going gift and was not just as celebration in church, but something that was lived in daily life. When Paul mentioned the murmuring grumbles of the Israelites as they wandered, why? The Corinthians murmured too about their situation and relationships. Don't we all do too? Paul tried to tell them that their salvation is on-going. They could experience Jesus together amid the trials of life. Since we read this today, his message is also for us. How can we respond?

Jesus carried on a similar theme. Bad things don't just happen to bad people. Catastrophes do not occur to punish the wicked. They can happen to us all. Personal suffering is not the result of God punishing us. Jesus was fully human and fully divine as he suffered and died. Jesus chose the path to the cross. It led to his resurrection and to our redemption. He never sinned. Sometimes bad things happen to good people for no reason. Our faith is never a buckler against pain, sorrow, grief and catastrophe. Through faith we can experience God in the midst of trouble. If we approach God as sinners, God's love will forgive us; not so we can go sin some more but to try again to be better.

The true gift that faith gives to us is salvation. There are other gifts that stem from faith too. Faith can help us to find meaning in our trial, troubles and suffering. Most of us have faced the death of a loved one. Our first, and most human, experience can be, "Why has this happened?" Sometimes we add the more personal, "to me?" Sadly there is never an answer. To whom do we address the question? To God. That's seeking to know the mind of God and that'll never happen. Rarely can we fully know our own minds and why we do what we do. We can know God's heart. In Jesus we find *simpatico*. He was one of us in all but sin. We witnessed him weeping tears of grief at the death of one he loved, Lazarus. We can know Jesus' compassionate presence in our need. We can ask, "What does it mean?" instead. There we can find an answer. We may eventually discover many answers over time. The first of them will always remain the truth; we will never see, touch or hear them again. We may also discover the gifts that they gave to us. They remain with us all our lives and give us a glimpse of the eternal life with Christ they now share. In our memory, they live still. I know this from experience and maybe so do you; first in grief and later as gift.

Jesus gave us a framework to know God's mercy. His parable about the fig tree can do this. Who are the characters in the story and what is their purpose? Who owns the fig orchard; God, right? No, God's the gardener in the story. The judgment the owner made, "Cut it down," didn't happen. The gardener intervened on the fig tree's behalf to spare it. Who makes judgments of others? We do. The owner's more like we are, impatient. The gardener knows his trees. It can take five to seven years for a fig tree to mature so that it can produce figs. Fig trees can produce figs ten months out of the year. It takes time for them to do so. The tree was only three years old and immature.

How did the gardener propose to help the tree? This is a critical and poignant point. He will heap manure on it. What's another word that we use from time to time in manure's place? That's the image that Jesus chose to help the tree grow, mature and be fruitful. Doesn't this reflect the way our lives play out? We put up with a lot of manure. People, on a regular basis, tell me that I'm full of it. We can forget that it's also a fine fertilizer. We can learn from our mistakes in a practical and good way. God works through the manure. It can shape us into the people God wants us to become. We don't always like God's gifts. God's grace always saves and forgives.

When we ask, "Where is God?" we are in good company. Moses and the Hebrew people asked the question. So did Paul and the Corinthians. Jesus tried to answer the people of his time. Of whom do we ask it? We ask God. When we turn to God in wonderment, exasperation or in anger, what do we call our question? Prayer. This is a most powerful gift that God can give. As we believe, all we need do is face God. Through Jesus, God is a mere thought away and always there.

May God move us from tears to laughter as God moves us to the Kingdom.

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