

Sermon for 13th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17), 30 August 2020

Lectionary readings: Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

*In the flaming bush
you promised deliverance to your people, O God,
and in the cross of Jesus
you embraced our suffering and pain.
In times of misery,
show us the transforming power of your love
that we may know the hope of your glory. Amen.ⁱ*

I spent last Sunday afternoon at The Clark Art Institute, enjoying connecting again with their collections after a Covid-induced hiatus of some months. Sort of like reading the Bible and discovering verses you hadn't taken in before, there were paintings I hadn't noticed, although I'd passed by them several times. One of them – Théodore Géricault's *Trumpeter of the Hussars* painted some 200 years ago drew my attention. I had never noticed the trumpet before. I thought of a member from my former church who played the trumpet with the Eastern Wind Symphony. I had enjoyed their concerts: Richardson Hall in Princeton and even once at Carnegie Hall.

Three years ago this month, I had left my parish in southern New Jersey after more than 10 years to begin a new life up. I gave in to memory, if not to nostalgia. I had loved living in its rectory, overlooking the church and its beautiful gardens. If there was a maintenance problem, I called the Men's Service Group, a *de facto* buildings and grounds committee. The sidewalk immediately outside my front door took a half-circle detour of about six feet. I wondered what those walking on it for the first time might think. Some flight of fancy or folly on the part of those who laid the cement? Would they know that the Men's Service Group had been in charge of the project? Or would they figure out the reason, to save a holly tree, even as it was also for a warden willing to humor a rector. Unfortunately, the holly eventually had to be taken down by the borough because of the danger to safety its aging and dead limbs presented. I remember crying at the loss of tree. For me the sidewalk showed an attempt to honor and protect a part of God's creation that also gave beauty to the neighborhood. For the rest of the time I lived there, it served as a reminder to pause or slow down, such as happened to me when I was rewarded by seeing a red-tailed hawk sitting in the circular opening of grass in the middle of the detour before it flew up to the apex of the roof on the parish hall just beyond.

I hope your summer has included some slowing down—not only that caused by the pandemic. I mean some mindful ease, some spiritual reading, sharing the love of family and friends, serving others, turnings aside from your predictable path that have enabled you to better hear God's call on your life and on this parish. I hope you have stood and centered yourself on whatever ground for you is holy and allowed yourself to respond to God's invitation meant for you only.

Moses was fortunate to have the direct confrontation that is described in our passage when God saw that he had turned aside to look at the burning bush, even though God's call on his life was not at all what he had imagined. But God desired to use him to relieve the misery of his people. Moses protested that he was hardly worthy of such a task. But God promised to be with him and also helped Moses to understand that he/she is God, the one in charge forever, from before naming began: "I am who I am." And you are the one I have chosen – not based on Moses' merits, but purely on God's choice.

In our gospel for last week, the apostle Peter has just acknowledged Jesus as "Messiah, the Son of the living God" when Jesus asks his disciples "But who do you say that I am?" Jesus tells Peter: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

In today's gospel, Peter draws Jesus aside as he begins to speak of his suffering and death in Jerusalem, followed by his being raised on the third day. Peter can't handle this terrible prediction – "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Peter's anxiety also means he cannot appreciate the rest of what Jesus tells him, that the power of God will be manifest in something humanly impossible, in his being raised on the third day. Jesus tells Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." This startling language from Jesus is evocative of his words to the devil in the wilderness who tempted him to take the easy way out at the beginning of his ministry: "Away with you, Satan!"

We can understand this passage as illustrative of the anxiety we feel--like Peter--when confronted by things like suffering and death. Often we can't quite trust in the depths of our being, even as people of faith, that they are transitions to something beyond our human experience, a life even closer to God. Our anxiety prevents us from fully listening and being present to another and to the fullness of God's message in God's time and prevents us living with the fullness of Christian hope that death is never the final answer.

As so we tell Aunt Lucy that surely she will rally, for example, that she just needs to think positive thoughts and she can beat this illness. Or we tell Dad who is clearly dying and no longer interested in food that he really needs to eat -- when eating is no longer appropriate or helpful in any way. With our so-called "good intentions," we may be denying Aunt Lucy the need to express her fears or her sense of the meaning of the weeks ahead or Dad of the time he needs to prepare his soul. Often people – even children – have a sense of their impending death. Instead, we may be reinforcing in people who are dying their sense of isolation and loneliness. Imagine Jesus' loneliness as he tries to convey to his beloved disciples what he needs for them to hear or his experiences of abandonment as he hung on the cross, the loneliness of Everyman in the medieval mystery play, unable to enlist his friends in his journey toward his meeting with death.

Whether you are a Jew, one of God's chosen people, or a Christian, a member of the Body of Christ, you are not promised freedom from suffering and death...but the whole biblical witness testifies to a God

who is present, a God who is in intense relationship with us. Gordon Mikoski suggests that the Eucharist helps us reconnect with sorrow: “‘So much of our American life is built on triumph and success and beauty and happiness. . . . The Lord’s Supper isn’t really about those things. It’s about remembering a very sad story . . . [about] loss and death.’ To lift up sorrow and loss does two things, he says: it helps people to deal with their own sorrow and loss, even feelings of godforsakenness. And it helps people move toward solidarity with others having such experiences.”ⁱⁱ

In our lesson from Exodus, we have a God who observes the people's misery, hears their cry, knows their sufferings, comes down to deliver them, and lifts them up. The process of deliverance and healing, of course, sometimes does take the form of death. But thanks to Jesus who saves us, death is not the final answer—new life in Christ is. Peter’s anxiety and desire to save Jesus ignored Jesus’ sense of his calling and rendered him unable to hear what else Jesus was saying, about being raised on the third day.

Gordon S. Mikoski, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, notes that the Lord’s Supper helps us to remember sorrow. “So much of our American life is built on triumph and success and beauty and happiness. . . . The Lord’s Supper isn’t really about those things. It’s about remembering a very sad story . . . [about] loss and death.” To lift up sorrow and loss does two things, he says: it helps people to deal with their own sorrow and loss, even feelings of godforsakenness. And it helps people move toward solidarity with others having such experiences.”

If we look carefully at the Jesus’ exchanges with Peter in last Sunday’s gospel and today’s, we see that people of faith like Peter, the rock, live in the world of every day and also, at least at moments, in the realm of God. It is only through God that we can understand that taking up the cross of Jesus is the way to save our lives. It is only in the realm of God that Peter was able to affirm Jesus’ identity as the Messiah (or the Christ), the Son of the living God, as he received the sudden flash of divine insight. In the text Jesus affirms: “For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” It is in this divine sphere that God tells Jeremiah: “If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Most of the time we speak out of our own minds which have been influenced by our families and our culture -- not at all a bad thing, of course -- but then occasionally we are graced to experience in our own spirits the mind and heart of God. As we draw closer to Christ or as we turn aside to see a bush aflame, we find ourselves weaving between the old world and the world to come increasingly infused with the light and life of God. It takes a community and shared insights into God’s nature from scripture but also from God’s continuing revelation to God’s people to enable us to develop a fuller picture of the God we worship and of God’s work in the world – and that enables us to live lives transformed in Christ, growing into the persons God had created us and enables us to be, so that, like Moses, we participate in the saving mission of God here on earth. *Amen.*

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ⁱ <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=157>

ⁱⁱ *Cloud of Witness* audio journal, Volume 11, [<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2007-10/century-marks-1>]

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeremiah 15:19