

The Third Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2016
Year C, Lent 3

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Exodus 3:1-15
1 Corinthians 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Story of the Burning Bush. We all remember it from Sunday School. This is a theophany, that is a manifestation of God, an appearing or showing of the Most High. “There the angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of a bush.” The angel is the expression in time and space of the invisible and transcendent god. For the rest of the story the angel drops out and the story is told as though God himself were present and speaking. Quite frankly it makes little difference.

It is important to note that the episode starts with God. Moses is just minding his business. God has an agenda, he has heard the cry of his people. The end of the preceding chapter leads into this story. “After a long time the king of Egypt died. (Seti I succeeded by Rameses II around 1300 BC.) The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of their slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

God has compassion on his people and decides to act. God speaks, calls Moses by name, “Moses, Moses. I am the god of your ancestors. Of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob.” That was 400 years earlier. How many here can name your ancestors who were alive in 1616?

God tells Moses, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey... The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.”

God hears the cry of his people. God knows their sufferings. God comes down to deliver them and to bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey.

This is sounding pretty good to Moses. Until the next sentence when the conversation takes a nasty turn: “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

I will send you. God uses human beings to do his work. Or rather, God invites us to share in the work of God. God delights to allow us to share in the joy of redemptive work.

Who is this that God has chosen? Who is it that will perform God’s mighty acts? He was raised in Pharaoh’s household. When he grew to adulthood, he discovered he was a Hebrew. He was moved to unthinking rage by witnessing a slave being mistreated by a master. He killed in response to the injustice. Then he tried to play peacemaker between two Hebrews who were quarreling. When Pharaoh learned of the homicide of the Egyptian, Moses fled the country. After crossing the Sinai, he came to a well where he saw some women being bullied by local ruffians. He came to the defense of the women and singlehandedly drove off the gang. The father of the young women, when he heard the story, insisted that Moses come and stay with his family. Moses married one of Jethro’s daughters and settled down to shepherding. Things were peaceful and his life was good, but he was in exile from his people. When a son was born he named him Gershom saying, “For I am a stranger in a strange land.” Later on the text will say that Moses is

eighty years old when he confronts Pharaoh. He spent the first forty years of his life in Egypt until he fled. Then the next forty years with his wife and child sharing in Jethro's sheep ranch.

Strong, passionate, fierce in the defense of the oppressed, and in exile. The man who struck out in the might of his youth, is now less sure of himself. He has learned his finitude. He knows that he cannot fix all that is wrong with the world. But still the fire is there in his heart. And it leaps in response to the fire in the bush.

Now he's ready. Moses notices the burning bush. He is aware. He had to turn aside. And when God gives him his mission he expresses his own sense of inadequacy. Who am I? God makes up for the inadequacy: I will be with you.

And then comes the crux of the story. Moses asks for God's name. His ancestor Jacob had asked the name of the angel who wrestled him into a new name and a new character, and did not get an answer. God answers Moses. "I am who I am. Yahweh." The LORD. All with capital letters to mark it as the name of God and not a mere title. A proper noun. Not a thing or an idea, but a name. The meaning of the Hebrew is ambiguous. It could mean "I am who I am." Or "I am becoming what I am becoming." Or "I am the one who causes to be." Not a distant, transcendent abstraction, but one who is active and present in historical affairs.

Our God is involved with us. We're in a long term relationship. At this point in history we are not dealing with monotheism. A plurality of gods was assumed. Each people had its own god. This is about the particular relationship of this god with this people. This is private and intimate. Like a marriage. Yahweh loves us like a jealous husband. Or as a mother loves her child.

So what? Two things.

1) Our calling. We are called to specific service when we are ready in God's eyes not our

own. Moses thought he was ready to be a liberator when he was a young man. God doesn't think he's ready until he is eighty. By the time Moses has matured enough and learned enough about his own limitations, he has considerable doubts about his ability to carry out the mission.

God uses passion. Tempered perhaps, matured. But by God there is still fire in that heart that leaps in recognition at the sight of the bush's flame.

2) Our God. Our God is not an idea. Our God is not a philosophic principle: the ground of being, the unmoved mover. Our God is not a theological abstraction: immutable, perfect, without shape or size or place. This guy has a name. And his name is Makes-It-Happen. Makes-It-Happen loves us. Makes-it-Happen may love humanity; but I know Makes-It-Happen love us, his people, the people he made promises to. The people he rescued out of the house of bondage. I know we live in a pluralistic society. We need to understand that others have parts of the truth that we need. But when it comes to my life, to my kids, to the reason for living and a cause to die for, when comes to real life, I need more than a generic god where one size fits all. I need a God who knows me, who loves me, who cares about the choices I make. Who calls me to specific tasks not general virtue. I need a jealous, loving, possessive, passionate, pushy, impossible God. And that, thank God, is what we've got here.

Yahweh is our God. We belong to God, and nobody gets to mess with God's people. When God wants something done, God calls on us. And the flame of love that is ignited in our hearts will leap in answer to the voice in the bush's flame. With our God, we too will confront our Pharaohs. With our God, we will cross our deserts. Our God will forge us into a people. Our God will lead us into the land flowing with milk and honey. Our God loves us enough to call us. Our God loves us enough to travel with us. Our God loves us enough to save us from slavery.. Our God loves us enough to die for us.

May we always have a fire in our hearts that answers to the fire of God.