



Call for Repentance

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
The Third Sunday during Lent ~ March 7, 2010*

Exodus 3:1-15

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. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, '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, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.'

But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you."' God also said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you":

This is my name for ever,
and this my title for all generations.

The sign on a church somewhere on 11th Street below Washington warns, "Repent Now! Avoid the rush at dooms day." It captures well the urgency of today's Gospel. Jesus' threat to cut down the fruit tree that bears no fruit is aimed at procrastinators near and far, now and then. He'll give it another year, one more chance, but that's it. What in heaven's name are we waiting for?

What is it that is called for – this repentance – and what will it mean for my life should I repent? Literally, repent means "to turn from sin out of penitence for past wrongdoings, [to] abandon sinful or unworthy purposes and values, and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one's life." (Webster's) Repentance involves intentionally renouncing and ceasing one way of being, one way of living, that we might turn, embrace and live into another way; a shift from the way of sin to the way of salvation. Turning from sin toward salvation means turning from those beliefs and behaviors that diminish or damage our relationships, and now believing and behaving in ways that provide for reconciliation in our relationships. Repentance is an act of reorientation.

The desire for repentance emerges from within us when we begin to recognize that who we are being and how we are being, is not all we might be. Poet, Beth Resler Walters (*Women at the Well: Meditations on Healing and Wholeness*, Judson Press, 1996), speaks of attending to a voice within. “That holy, caring voice was saying, “Whatever your call is, Beth, this ain’t it.” She continues: “God said the same to Moses, grieving over Israel’s painful slavery and saying that whatever their destiny was to be, “This ain’t it!” The start of their restoration was first for them to come out of whatever it was that was destroying them.

“Jesus looked at a disabled man who had lain by the pool at Bethesda for decades, at a woman whose life had brought her disdain, at a tax professional of dubious ethics, at a man with myriad psychological problems, and he saw what they could be. Whatever the possibilities in their lives, his vision of wholeness for them started with knowing, “This ain’t it.”

The desire for repentance may emerge from this recognition. The event itself, to the extent that there is an event, is compelled by an encounter with the Holy, an encounter with the Living God. When – in my life – I have repented of sinful beliefs and behaviors – when I have said “I reject this miserable view of my self” or “I shall no longer treat this person or those people in that manner”.... On those occasions when I have had eyes to see and courage to act, I believe it is because God was present, a gift of grace from God. We see this happen with Moses as he encounters God in the burning bush.

Earlier, we learned that Moses was frustrated and angry with the oppression and slavery of his people under Pharaoh in Egypt. He has already recognized, “This ain’t it.” The story is very clear on the next point, and one we may take note of in our own journeys: God heard their cry. “I have observed the misery of my people...” “I have heard their cry...” “I know their sufferings, and have come ... to deliver them.”

Moses’ reorientation in his encounter with God has three stages. He approaches the Holy, who says, “come.” He meets God. God sends Moses forth in a new direction, with a new mission. In this, God promises to remain with him. What this narrative suggests to me is an affirmation that God, who knows our plight intimately, seeks to draw us close, accepting us as we are out of God’s abundant mercy. And then, transformed and transforming, God sends us out; an encounter with God compels and demands a personal change.

To the extent that our faith has any vitality, we are not free to remain as we are. An encounter with God will change us. And in this, as Moses quickly realized, there is promise, and there is also cost.

While in most cases repentance begins and ends as a personal act with personal consequences, on occasion the reorienting of one individual can have a far-reaching effect. As we are on the path of repentance, of being saved and becoming children of God, this effects first our own lives, and then takes on a larger social dimension. From Moses’ experience at the burning bush shall come the exodus and the liberation of his people.

In his exploration of the discernment of our vocations, Parker Palmer (in *Let Your Life Speak*, Jossey-Bass, 2000, p.31) observes that “the [great liberation] movements that transform us, our relations, and our world emerge from the lives of people who decide to care for their authentic selfhood.”

He comments on the legend that when asked why she sat at the front of the bus, Rosa Parks responded, “I sat down because I was tired.” “But,” says he, “she did not mean that her feet were tired. She meant that her soul was tired, her heart was tired, her whole being was tired of playing by racist rules, of denying her self’s claim to selfhood.” “Rosa Parks sat down because she had reached a point where it was essential to embrace her true vocation – not as someone who would reshape our society but as someone who would live out her full self in the world. She decided, “I will no longer act on the outside in a way that contradicts the truth that I hold deeply on the inside. [That is repentance!] I will no longer act as if I were less than the whole person I know myself inwardly to be.” (p.32) Palmer cites a number of liberation movements that began because an individual or individuals could no longer abide within the oppression that they were experiencing.

Consider the context of Moses’ life, a context of oppression. He is just one of the multitude of Hebrews, living in slavery in Egypt. At an earlier time, he had said, “I [am] an alien residing in a foreign land” – as were all his tribesfolk. And we read, “the Israelites groaned under their slavery.”

It is said that there were as many as 600,000 Hebrew men. The Florentine dictator, Savonarola, expounded on this text and observed, “the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew.” But a medieval commentator wondered why, given their numbers, they had not simply fought back. He concluded, “they were psychologically incapable; they suffered from a slave mentality; for centuries they had not defended themselves – not, at least, by fighting.” (See Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, Basic Books, 1985).

Rabbinic scholars have explored the text that immediately preceded ours today (2:11-25), when Moses, “saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. [Moses] looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian.” It is not the case, interpret these rabbis, that there was no one there, it is that there was no one with

the personal strength, no one with the backbone, no one ready to champion the cause of God, so Moses acted himself. Rabbi Hillel concludes: “where there is no man, try to be one.”

The context of Moses’ encounter is one of slavery and oppression, that has produced a numbing, deadening effect. The Hebrews feel the burning stripes of their bondage in their own bodies, yet are incapable of standing up and responding. They are incapable of breaking free of the tyranny that defines their life.

While there can be no experience that is “like” slavery, many know what it is to be in bondage to forces that bind us, numb us, overwhelm us. Even those of us with a great many choices submit to the inevitability that some things just are the way they are. Our relationships with certain people; the disparity between poor and rich; racism and the systematic oppression of those who differ from the ones in power; the endless urban American cycle linking poor education with crime with a booming business of incarceration with broken families with poor education and round again; war in Jerusalem and the Middle East; the lobbying power of big-business overwhelming the voice and the needs of individuals and neighborhoods. Enough already! You know these things – and are made numb and depressed by them.

If someone is going to lead us out of the various forms of oppression that we endure in our society, it might just have to be you. And that is scary. What we see in Moses’ situation is that an encounter with the Holy leads directly to a second encounter: one with Pharaoh, the one who is the source, the cause and perpetuator of oppression. We cannot encounter God and expect to not encounter the powers of darkness – within our selves and in our society.

Promise and cost. “Come, I will send you.” There it is; the hinge of repentance and true faith; come in to God’s mercy; go forth in God’s justice. As Brueggemann concludes (Walter Brueggemann, *Exodus*, Abingdon Press, 1994, p.713): “The grand intention of God becomes human responsibility, human vocation. It is Moses who will do what YHWH said, and Moses will run the risks that YHWH seemed ready to take. The connection of God and Moses, of heaven and earth, of great power and dangerous strategy is all carried in the statement “I will send you.”

“It is Moses (not God) who will meet with Pharaoh.” It is Moses (not God) who will bring out “my people.” It is Moses who acts in God’s place to save God’s people. ...the joining of God and human history. And the joining is done through the vulnerable, risk-taking body of Moses, on whom everything now depends. He must frontally challenge the enormous imperial power of the status quo.” And, methinks, so must we.

When you go home this afternoon, find a small card and write on it: “I AM has sent me.” Carry it with you.

Let us pray.

Holy, living God: Hear our cry, and the cries of your children everywhere. Draw us to yourself. Strip us of our numbness. Open our hearts and lead us to repentance. For the sake of our souls. And send us forth in your power and presence that we might lead the way of your justice in our lives and in our world. For Christ’s sake. Amen.