

LENT III – 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

Why do we read Holy Scripture? What is in Scripture that is so real, so powerful, so true, that we read it again and again and again? It has been read or told countless times before we were born, and we imagine that it will be read as many countless times in the future, as long as there is someone left to read. I suppose we could say that's up to us, to the way we speak about how it influences our lives, how it shapes our sense of reality, not only as we are able to observe it in the world around us and within time, but also how we imagine it, how we let it inspire us with hope and courage to love. For loving is the command of the God we meet in scripture, and loving takes a great deal of hope and courage, because loving has to overcome so many obstacles, not the least of which are the prejudices that we carry in us which are based in fear—**fear of the other, fear of failing, fear of losing and fear of our very selves.**

I think today's story in Exodus is one of the most important stories in the entire canon of Hebrew Scripture. It is the story of Moses' first encounter with God, a life-changing event for him personally and one that allows him to respond to an inner call not only to save his people from slavery and subjugation, but also to lead them into a Land of Promise, and a relationship with God that is profound, even if not always wanted.

There are two parts to this story: the beginning of the encounter, which includes God's disclosure of concern for the misery of the people God reveals as his own. It is also Moses' request for a sign and some

credentials. Secondly, God discloses his identity, his name. This grants Moses access to God, the invitation to call upon God when in need.

Moses is not in Midian by accident. This is generations after the time of Joseph in Egypt, and even though Moses was raised in the palace by Pharaoh's daughter, it is known that he is a Jew. [On a side note, we are told the names of Moses' sister and brother, Miriam and Aaron, but the names of his parents are never revealed.] One day Moses saw an Egyptian beating on a Jew and Moses fought with and killed the Egyptian. The next day he came upon two Israelites fighting, and when he tried to break them up, he was challenged by one of them, "Why? Are you going to kill us, too?" Pharaoh wanted to kill him and was actively hunting him down, and Moses was seen by other Jews as a palace brat with no sense of his own identity as a Jew. There was no place for him in Egypt. Moses went to Midian, married, and worked as a shepherd for his father-in-law. This revelation happened to a man who had become a nobody, a man without a people, without a home.

Out in the field, Moses saw a bush on fire, but it was not being burned to cinders and then ash. It continued to live, and it grabbed Moses' attention. When he heard the voice, it stopped him in his tracks, and he was told to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. That's when God disclosed both a deep sadness and the intention for Moses to take the people out of Egypt and into the Land of Promise. Moses could hear what God was saying, but there is no way that he could imagine doing what God was asking, for there was as yet no mention of the powers he might have, like causing all the plagues that were finally persuasive to pharaoh. Those we hear about later.

Understandably, Moses asked God for a sign that this was true, that he, Moses, would be able to do what God was asking. God gave him a sign, that is, God told Moses to look for a sign that he and his people would worship God on that very mountain one day! The sign was in the future.

Would you have trusted that sign enough to turn your whole life around, to go back to where there was certain danger, and possibly even death? I wonder. When I heard a call, it did not sound like a call to die, even though later I learned that was a part of it.

Moses does ask one further question. He needed some authority, some credentials, not to mention some skills to do what God was asking, and he said, "Who on earth are you, anyway?" God gave him a name: "I am who I am!" God is saying, I have no nationality that limits me, no race that stereotypes me, no gender that characterizes me. I am who I am. I am life itself, the very essence, the core, the foundation of all that is and all that will be. I am the source of all beginnings and the goal of all endings. In me is the fullness of all that is to give you and all people the possibility and the ability to be who you are. And so, I call and charge you, Moses, to be all of who you are.

In our era of so-called "fake news," does this ring true? I am not asking if you can intellectually affirm some theological principle. I am asking if you find this story to give us a glimpse into the essence of reality, a touchstone with which we can measure the depth and breadth of life. Does this give you the possibility to distinguish between what brings life and what brings death? To distinguish between building up and tearing down? To distinguish between bringing together and ripping apart?

Having heard God's self-description, "I am who I am—I am the essence of life always going in the direction of creating more life," does this give you the tools to weigh what is fake and what is true?

Remember, when we are talking about the news of humanity, we are not talking about ideas or motives or intentions, and certainly not subjective interpretations; we are talking about behaviors, about actions, and about the consequences of those actions, the effects on the world around us.

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Today's gospel doesn't speak very clearly to this matter; Jesus is speaking to his fellows about the nature of punishment. I suppose we could ask Jesus if the Ukrainians are getting what they deserve, if the children killed in the schools have done something so heinous at their age that they deserve death, and if they were all in on it and deserve it together.

Jesus' life as a whole does speak clearly about God's intentions for humanity, and I am going to leave that to your memories and imaginations to fill in.

Today is a day we have the heart of God revealed directly to Moses, and I want to look at how it speaks to the world we are living in, particularly the war in Ukraine and its consequences for all of humanity.

The other day the Russian President, Putin, spoke in religious terms about his calling—he used religious language—to restore Russia to its former glory as a gigantic nation built of many countries who had surrendered their sovereignty to him, perhaps sometimes willingly out of desperation for survival but most of the time under coercion of various kinds, most likely with the threat of death and destruction. While the impulse to bring people together can be seen as inspired by God, we can also discern *whether the methods used* are similarly inspired by God. The atrocities of targeting the innocent for death and destruction put the lie to any such claims.

I have been musing on the leadership on the other side of this conflict, in Ukraine. I do not remember hearing President Zelenskyy make any claims about a personal call from God to lead his people, but he is acting like that is true. One example of this is in his reverence for and service to the history of his people, what has made the Ukrainians the people who they are, the life experiences from the distant and near past that have shaped their character, inspired their courage, sustained their hope. President Zelenskyy is always calling attention to their essence and shining the light on their past as a way of living into and through this awful present. He uses their courage to build courage, their hope to instill hope. He has himself embodied and bears witness to their identity and hope as a people.

President Zelenskyy also raises the question that nags at our hearts and doesn't seem to go away: How do we live through a war in which little children are killed, in which we tolerate or accommodate the killing of little children? I am grateful that I am neither the President of the United States or his advisors, nor one of the leaders of NATO and their advisors.

I understand the arguments about escalation and the great hesitancy to do anything that might bring about WW III, and yet I understand the anguish of those whose own children's lives are at stake. Eight decades later, people still argue about dropping atom bombs on Japan to bring WW II to an end. Was that the right thing to do? I imagine our descendants will be arguing about whichever decisions are made to try to bring this war to an end. My father was not conscripted during WW II because he was working on something called "the Manhattan Project," and I think he was grateful for the rest of his life that he did not know what he was helping to build every day for about five years. Only a very few people can bear to know the dreadful consequences of their work ahead of time.

What we are learning again by living in and through a war that is much closer to home is how much easier it is to kill someone else when we can demonize them, so they don't look like a real human being to us.

It is much easier to kill others when we don't look them in the eye or even see them across a battlefield. It is so much easier to toss a bomb across hundreds and thousands of miles of land or water, landing where we have planned, but without our having the ability to see the direct consequences—especially dying children. We can excuse ourselves for inhuman actions if we cannot see the humans who are our targets, or if we diminish them as less than human. We have been building up to this in our own society over the past several years, demonizing each other when we disagree. It has been a terrible descent of our human spirit.

Perhaps this war will move us to restraint, move us to see each other as human again, rather than as enemies, as despicable, as worthy of death. Let us be grateful that we humans have the capacity to learn from the problems of others and are not so stupid as to have to make every mistake ourselves before we can learn from them. Now is the time to learn. God calls us to open our hearts not to hate more, but to love. *Amen.*

+JLJ