

Sermon

You are Setting your Mind not on Divine Things but on Human Things

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Let's re-read these words...from Exodus. Listen again.

"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. 2There 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. 3Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." 4When 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." 5Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

On Holy Ground...what does that mean to you? I think in essence all aspects of creation, made by our Creator, is indeed Holy Ground, correct? So why did God feel the need to stress that to Moses ... take your sandals off, you are on Holy Ground. In Sikh Temples, like the one here in Niagara Falls, you must take off your shoes before entering – women must cover their heads. Is it because this ground is different? Is the ground here in this space different then if I go to the house next door or down the street? No...it's not different. We are. When we

establish practice where we bring God into our consciousness, it then becomes Holy not for God alone but for us. God is ever present, God is with us at all times, God is within us at all times, but we do not feel or acknowledge it. So in this conversation with Moses, God makes a point of bringing Moses into his consciousness. We will talk about the conversation God has with Moses in a minute, but I want to lean into this a bit this morning. I want you to think about a time, or many times, when you had a “burning bush” moment with God. It may not have been quite as obvious, quite as elaborate, but I’m certain that you have had epiphanies. For me, I’ve had a few – I wouldn’t say many, but it has happened. Some were with other humans, some in nature. But there was definitely a switch in my consciousness. These moments are genuine and real and not reserved only for Moses.

But in our scripture from Exodus, God seems to be in an obtuse mode up until this point with the Israelites. In this moment, it signals a turning point for Moses. The Israelites are in Egypt because they sold themselves into Egyptian slavery in exchange for grain during a famine. At the beginning of the book of Exodus, the Israelite hero Joseph dies, and “a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph”. This new pharaoh fears the fruitful and prolific Israelites will overtake the Egyptians, so he encourages his people to deal harshly with the Israelites. Ruthless Egyptian taskmasters oppress the Israelites and ultimately the new pharaoh initiates a genocidal program focused on killing Israelite boys at their birth. An Israelite boy named Moses’ life is spared, and he helps lead his people away from oppressive Egypt.

Not Moses has a theophany on this day – theophany is a word derived from two Greek words meaning “God” and “to show”. Here is scripture, the Lord explains to Moses that as a result of observing the misery of the Israelites, this god will deliver them from the Egyptians and relocate them to a better place. Moses does indeed lead the Israelites out of Egypt, they enter the land of promise, and eventually establish themselves as a vibrant monarchy.

What does it mean to you that God was observing these people in their suffering – famine, slavery, a brutal pharaoh – God was watching...why? Why did God not intervene sooner? Do you ever feel that way in your own lives? Why isn't God intervening? The scripture doesn't say that God didn't – but within this God has given us all we need – resources, help, friends, family, strength of body and mind – but sometimes we need to take off our shoes and allow ourselves to be fully in the presence of the divine. Not in an obtuse way, in a fully conscious way – wide awake, burning bush way.

Our gospel today is from Matthew ...it recalls some teachings that the disciples will find hard to swallow. Last week in our Gospel, Jesus told them do not tell them I am the Messiah...Why? Because Jesus is about to shatter their image of what this Messiah was sent to do.

Matthew 16:21-28

²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him

Inspired by www.workingpreacher.org – Commentary by Richard Ward, Fred B. Craddock Professor (Emeritus) of Homiletics and Worship Phillips Theological Seminary Tulsa, Oklahoma, (Matthew 16:21-28) and commentary by Kimberly D. Russaw, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, (Exodus 3:1-15)

aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” ²³But he turned and said to 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.”

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? ²⁷“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Peter, one of the future leaders of the faith, exclaims no! to this news. The disciples were hoping this would end in Jesus’ victory as King, as someone to be revered. To imagine his demise is too much. Peter even takes Jesus aside to counsel him, to steer him – and Jesus really presses into him – Jesus calls Peter Satan – “Get behind me Satan!”

Our society looks upon this as losing – as defeat. Jesus didn’t win – he wasn’t King – he was put to death by the enemy. We the church far too often claim “victory” over earthly things is Christ’s name not realizing that Jesus’ way is often the way of losers...The winners are those who know how to master the game of life and have the goods to prove it. There are religions that thrive on the

idea that prosperity is victory in Christ. Others look upon their bad luck and say, “this is my cross to bear”.

Let’s be clear about what exactly our “cross to bear” actually looks like. In the alternate reading from our lectionary today, Paul explains it quite clearly in Romans 12: 9-21. Here my apostles is your cross to bear...

Romans 12:9-21

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Is it time for you to remove your sandals, sit quietly in a space of your choosing, and seek God's voice? Do you feel you truly understand your own personal calling? Are you hurting today and needing to feel God's presence? God may indeed be at a distance but that's not God's choice, that's ours. You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. Those who carry the cross of compassion have not only gained a meaningful life, they have moved ever closer to the divine. We have so many opportunities to serve our community. Paul's list from Romans is punctuated with actions that make life meaningful. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer...do not be overcome by evil – by human things, but set your mind on the divine.

Amen