**St. David’s Episcopal Church**

Bean Blossom, Indiana

Year C, Lent 3

March 20, 2022

Sermon by the Rev. Kate Wilson

Exodus 3:1-15 Psalm 63:1-8 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 Luke 13:1-9

*Just a Piece of ……. Holiness*

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Today’s readings are a topsy turvy view of God the Creator and Jesus. Exodus presents a loving and forgiving God who sets Moses’ path right. Jesus appears to be full of blame and warning: “You’d better watch it or you’ll get the same as those guys!” Curious.

Exodus tells of the well-known burning bush; the bush that blazes yet is not consumed. It grabs Moses’ attention. He finds that supernatural bush to be a manifestation of Yahweh, and Yahweh demands he bare his feet, as he is on sacred ground. He is terrified. You might say a big event is afoot.

But wasn’t it Moses who, as an infant, was discovered in a basket floating in the Nile and plucked out by the Pharoah’s daughter? How did he get from Pharoah’s palace back to the dusty lands of the Israelites? What happened between A and B is important, because we see how often acts of God intervene in our lives. We may not be aware of them, and I suppose Moses was unaware, but we may just see them in retrospect, if we re-inspect them. Such opportunities to see God in our lives!

Let’s connect A and B.

Moses was born during a time when Pharoah commanded midwives to kill all male Hebrew infants, because the Hebrews had becoming numerous and powerful. Joseph had brought his family to Egypt during the famine, and they multiplied, gradually gaining the numbers and power that threatened *this* Pharoah. But in his woven basket, Moses was set on the Nile and discovered by Pharoah’s daughter. Unknowingly, you might say as one of those acts of God, she hired Moses’ own mother to nurse the baby, and to return him when he was grown. And so it was.

Moses was thoroughly raised, then, by his own enslaved mother at the behest and protection of the Pharoah’s daughter. He saw the injustices his people suffered. Now in the house of Pharoah, dressed as an Egyptian and sporting Egyptian hair and beard styles, he went out to visit his people at work and saw an overseer beating one of his own. He snapped. Some might call it righteous anger; others called it murder, and despite his Egyptian appearance, several Hebrews recognized Moses as the murderer. Would they report him? Moses ran for his life to escape his just due.

The story today opens with Moses, now married to Zipporah and the father of a son, tends the flocks owned by her father. Do you suppose Moses told his father-in-law or wife that we was wanted for murder in Egypt or that he was not the Egyptian the daughters thought him to be way back when, but was the Hebrew sons of Levites himself? Would they have welcomed a lying murderer into the family? So let’s say Moses wasn’t quite a hero in these days. He smelled as bad as any other shepherd and wandered with them in all weather. Years have passed and Pharoah has died.

In our salvation story, it is time for God to act once again. It is time for God to make a man and leader out of the heap of deceit Moses had become. Perhaps God views this long period of Moses’ life as his years of repentance. Perhaps he is now calling him to reconcile with his own history and with God. Perhaps God sees someone who has reconciled himself as a leader who understands the new life given through reconciliation, and as someone who will be suited to enacting a full covenant between God and God’s chosen people.

That sounds like a long shot, but with God in the center there is always hope.

And here Moses is on Mount Horeb, also called Mount Sinai, with a flock of sheep. It’s a curious place to take sheep; it rises as a huge rocky pile from the Sinai desert and is barren of much vegetation of any kind, let alone something that might qualify as a full bush. Yet here one is, and it is burning, and the fire does not consume it. And the bush calls to him, in a voice Moses believes is an angel. Moses answers, “Here I am”.

It is not an angel. The voice reveals itself to be God and commands Moses to remove his sandals. He stands on holy ground.

The reading says “And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.” Moses was afraid: Has God come personally to avenge the murder Moses committed so long ago? Is his time of deceit over?

God has not come here to punish Moses but to call him to God’s critical and dangerous work.

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,

Thus, this Old Testament God, whom we so often see as a God of wrath, hears the cry of his people and has come to turn their lives around, to free and ennoble them as his own people, and to call Moses to the seemingly impossible task of making God’s plan manifest.

Moses offers a number of “Yah, buts”: Yah, but what if they ask who sent me? And so on. Moses has gotten over his fear of God’s retribution but hasn’t quite given his “Here I am!” to the task. Isn’t that typically human, to stand in our obvious culpability and to object to or question our roads to healing?

For now, hold onto the image of a broken Moses, offered reconciliation by God and a call to his place in Salvation History. Let us review our brief Gospel and to explore the curiosity of the switching of roles between the Creator, who turns out NOT to be punishing but is on the very edge of creating a new order, and Jesus, who is making waves of his own.

You remember that Luke tells us of Galileans whose own blood Pilate mixed with their sacrifices, meaning that the Roman magistrate Pilate chose to kill them, and most likely in the Temple itself. Heinous. And he tells next of a dozen builders who were killed when the tower they were building fell and crushed them. Jesus uses these two news stories to put an end to an age-old belief of the Jewish people, that those who suffer are punished by God for their sins, or even for the sins of their parents. Those who told of these two horrible events wanted Jesus to say they got what they deserved. But their expectations are dashed. Jesus has been teaching his people how to live from love, not fear. He has reset the stage for us to chose love of God and of neighbor, and to be rewarded with a new kingdom, a new way of living, a way of peace. Jesus challenges a belief that those who died were not some way in sin. That death is a law of nature and not a punishment for sin.

It breaks my heart to share that as clear as Jesus is about this, there are still those who teach that illness and misfortune are payment for sin. As a chaplain, I meant a dying man in a hospital who was wracked with spiritual pain because his priest told him that his terminal cancer was punishment for an unabsolved sin. If only I had had these verses from Luke to share with him, adding them to the reminder that Jesus calls us to love. His life had been an act of love with his family, his children, his work, his community. Never did he turn to acts that were unabsolved, hidden as Moses’s murder had been hidden. Jesus warns in these verses of spiritual death being in the void outside of God. To the human being, that is living death, and a choice we can leave behind us, choosing to be one with the way Jesus brings. I have never forgotten that man, my horror at the perversion of Jesus’s message of love, or my powerlessness in bringing him peace. I pray the Jesus he knew his whole life soothed him in his death.

Now Jesus turns to the new message of love and hope as he continues with the parable of the fig tree, barren once again. His owner wants it destroyed – but the gardener, who is Jesus, wants to reclaim it. He wants to put it into a nurturing, life-giving environment by aerating the dirt it is planted in and enriching it with manure. If it fails to respond to these gifts, so freely and skillfully given, then says the gardener, he will remove it.

The manure is grace. Seriously. The manure is God’s grace and God’s wish for us to thrive.

Can you think of anything more humble than a pile of manure? You may have said it -“I’m just a piece of ­----- manure.” Someone you love may have yelled it, “Leave me alone! I’m worthless! I’m just a piece of ----- manure.” Sometimes, we spend years in that place, or we know someone who is lives there. Move, we urge them, don’t believe it! we cry. We are bereft because we can’t help them see how wrong they are. For people at this point, having low self-esteem is a step forward that demanded hard work and hard change. But look! That pile of manure is creation. It is new life. Jesus shows us that even that which seems worth less, worth less than others, worth less than their own time, worth less than their own love is a valuable requirement for re-creation.

That is the message that Yahweh took to a broken Moses on Mount Sinai. That is the message to each of us from Yahweh to us and from Jesus to us. And it is the message we carry away from this Eucharist to the those we encounter.

Every time we allow ourselves to be in touch with the Holy One is holy time. Every place, whether at this altar or our beds at night, that we listen and accept and love the Holy One is holy ground. It is sacred ground and we are within the sacred plan of creation. Any time we choose to engage in God’s listening and active reaching to his suffering people, in Ukraine, in Brown County, along our southern border, is sacred prayer. And most important, anytime we accept that healing our brokenness forwards God’s plans of re-creation and reconciliation is a trembling, radiant holy place of grace.

Any time and any place that God is with us is sacred ground.

Thanks be to God.