

Lent 3, Yr.C

March 24, 2019

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

I know you've heard me say this many times, but I think it's a basic truth that who we think God is is a crucial part of our faith. This morning's readings touch on that question.

In the Luke reading, the people questioning Jesus are coming from a place that defines God as the one who punishes sinners. These people died, and in a horrible way, therefore, they must have sinned. It was a common thought in that period, but Jesus isn't having any of it. For Jesus, that's not how God works or who God is. If you contrast that view with one in the psalm, you hear something very different. You hear about God's loving-kindness, about God as helper, as refuge, the one that the psalmist longs for, the one in whom he finds joy and contentment. Diametrically opposed understandings of God, wouldn't you say?

And then there's the reading from Exodus, one of the most important readings in the Bible. You'll remember the story of Moses. How he was born

into a time when the Israelites were slaves of the Egyptians. How his mother hid him in a reed basket on the Nile and how he was found and adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter. You'll also remember that, although he was raised as a prince in Egypt, at one point, when he saw an Egyptian overseer abusing a slave, he intervened. The overseer was killed and Moses left the country as a fugitive. When we come in today, he's in quite a different position. He's married and he now tends his father-in-law's flocks. Maybe he's happy doing that; maybe he's had enough excitement to last him a lifetime. In any event, he sees the burning bush and he turns aside to investigate. When he does, he hears a voice calling his name and he responds, "Here I am." And that turns out to be the beginning of a profound, life-altering, life-consuming relationship. Then he hears that he should be taking off his shoes because the ground he's standing on is holy ground. There's a hymn about holy ground which has a line which says that wherever the Lord is present the ground is holy. And if you think about that, isn't that everywhere? Because there's no place where God isn't. Remember the Sufi story about the wise man who

was sleeping under a tree and was rudely awakened by someone objecting that his head was pointed in the wrong direction because it wasn't pointed toward Mecca. The wise man obligingly changed his position but then asked, "But my friend, can you tell me any direction in which God isn't?" Paul has said that in God we live and move and have our being. Someone else has said that we live in a God-soaked universe. So it's ALL holy ground, because God and God's breath is present and enlivening it all, moment by moment.

Going back to the Exodus text, it seems that Moses doesn't know God because God has to introduce himself: I'm the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. At first, Moses hid his face. But as the text continues, one gets the feeling that he and God are having a genuine, face-to-face conversation. We find out more about God in this conversation. We hear about God's concern and compassion for those who are suffering. The text says that he "observed" the people's misery, that he has "heard their cry," and he "knows" their suffering. The word "know" in Hebrew means much more than disinterested knowledge. It means to understand; to, in some

sense, actually feel the pain the other is feeling. I KNOW their suffering, God says. And I'm going to do something about it. I'm sending YOU. Up until this point, you get the feeling that Moses is nodding along, saying in effect, yes, they are suffering; yes, it's right of you to be concerned; yes, it's good that you're going to do something about this. But then, when he hears that HE'S the one being sent, the conversation changes. We have some of that part of the text: wait a minute, who am I? I don't have any credibility! And, as has been pointed out, Moses' picture is probably posted in all the Egyptian post offices. And then it's the question about God – what's your name, who shall I say told me to do this? And right there is that line usually translated I AM WHO I AM. It's sometimes translated as I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. In this case, when Moses asks for a sign, what he gets is assurance of God's presence: I WILL BE WITH YOU. After some further objections, God runs out of patience – it's like that T-shirt that says, I ONLY HAVE ONE NERVE LEFT AND YOU'RE STANDING ON IT. So Moses acquiesces. But if you follow the whole story, what you see, after this rather unpromising beginning, is

the blossoming of a relationship of trust. Later in Exodus there's that line that says that Moses talked with God face-to-face as a man talks with his friend. A relationship that began with curiosity and ignorance ends in loving friendship. And it should be emphasized that it was God who initiated all of this. God who desires a relationship with us, who wants our cooperation, but above all, our love.

That's what we're hearing in the psalm, this longing for God, with a soul thirsting for God as in a "dry and barren land." So perhaps there are really two questions here. If the first one is WHO DO I THINK GOD IS? The second must surely be GIVEN THAT, DO I WANT A RELATIONSHIP WITH THIS GOD? And maybe there's a third: HOW BADLY DO I WANT A RELATIONSHIP? WHAT AM I DOING TO FOSTER THAT RELATIONSHIP?

I'm not particularly comfortable with what I call show-and-tell sermons, but this morning, I'm doing a little bit of that because I want to show you a T-shirt that I got when I lived in Dallas. I remember using it with a small group when we were talking about prayer and asking people to tell me what caught their eye, what

they saw, what they thought was happening when they looked at the shirt. All the answers were interesting; some were surprising. One person pointed out that the person on top of what appears to be a mountain was going to have really sore feet because the mountain was awfully sharp. Another said that she was sure that the person was leaning over WAY too far and was in great danger of falling off completely. A third said that, if the person got what he or she was reaching for, the star, they'd burn their hands. By that time, I was looking at the shirt in a whole new way because what I'd seen was a straightforward metaphor for our desire for God – a perfect illustration of this morning's psalm – we're stretching, reaching, trusting.

Spiritual writers, probably from Augustine on, talk about human desire. You'll remember that Augustine said that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Long before that, Plato said that we are on fire because our souls came from beyond and that beyond, through the longing and hope that its fire creates in us, is trying to draw us back toward itself. The nature of human desire is that there is a sense of something missing from our lives, some

empty place inside us, which leaves us forever restless, dissatisfied, aching, searching. For me, that's what the T-shirt says. That this person desired God (represented by the star, of course) enough to do whatever was necessary to make the climb. And desired God enough so that nothing else, including the fact that his or her feet hurt, mattered. Desired God enough to reach out, perhaps trusting that God would never allow him to fall; that God was, in fact, holding her up in spite of that awkward angle. One final point – and that is that it is God who has invited that person, God who has drawn him or her to the top of the mountain. It's God who wants a loving relationship with each of us. What an incredible and blessed invitation! Amen.