

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
March 20, 2022 – 3 Lent
Moses and the Burning Bush; Exodus 3:1-15
The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree; Luke 13:1-9
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning I want to speak about both our Old Testament lesson and our passage from Luke's Gospel.

Moses was one of the greatest prophets in the history of the Hebrew people. He lived in the 1200's BCE. Most of his story is told in the book of Exodus. Today's reading is from the third chapter of Exodus. In the first two chapters we learn how the family of Jacob (Abraham's grandson) entered Egypt and grew into a numerous people there. The rulers of Egypt felt threatened by the Hebrew people, fearing that they might become allies of Egypt's enemies. Therefore, Pharaoh oppressed them with hard labor, and he instructed the Hebrew midwives to kill male babies at birth. But "fearing God," – that is, fearing that they would be punished by God for murder – the women did not obey Pharaoh's command. The Hebrew people grew in number despite their oppression.

The Bible tells us the story of Moses' birth, a story you may remember learning in Sunday School. A Hebrew woman gave birth to a beautiful male child. She hid him for three months, but when she could no longer safely hide him, she placed him in a basket and put that basket in the reeds by the bank of the Nile River. Going to the river to bathe, Pharaoh's daughter found the baby and saved him. She hired the baby's mother to nurse him and raise him, and when the boy was grown up, Pharaoh's daughter made him her son and named him Moses, meaning "I drew him out of the water."

As a man, Moses was aware of the plight of his people. One day he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew worker, and in anger Moses killed the Egyptian. He then fled from Pharaoh and went to Midian, east of Egypt. Moses stayed there and married. The book of Exodus records that "after a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them" (Exodus 2:23-25).

This is the background to this morning's Old Testament lesson, an account of Moses' first personal encounter with God and his call by God to lead the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt and into Canaan, the Promised Land. Moses was alone, tending his father-in-law's flock in the wilderness, near Mount Horeb, an alternate name for Mount Sinai. Moses saw a bush that was blazing but not consumed. This attracted his attention. The burning bush was a manifestation of God's presence; God called to Moses out of the bush.

Usually in scripture an “angel of Lord” takes human form. But in this case the “angel of the Lord” takes the form of fire. One commentator remarks on fire being “a substance evocative of the divine because it is insubstantial yet powerful, dangerous, illuminating, and purifying.” We might pause to think of these qualities of God, especially in Lent. I think that many of us inadvertently “domesticate” God in our minds and forget who it is we call by name so easily. God is indeed powerful, dangerous, illuminating, and purifying, as well as loving and merciful.

From the burning bush Moses heard God’s call to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. What was Moses’ response? Certainly not a hearty “Here I am, Lord, send me!” Moses had one objection after another, a total of five. God had an answer for every objection, including Moses’ last try – “Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent.” Ultimately, Moses did go and do what God had called him to do.

I think it is important to remember this account of Moses’ call. As Christians we believe that God has called us to follow Jesus and to live our lives in accordance with that call. We are to be loving and merciful, generous to those in need, a healing presence in the lives of people who suffer, hospitable to strangers and outcasts, true to our best understanding of God and Christ. During the season of Lent we are exhorted to look honestly at our souls and lives. Is there a call from God that you or I are trying our best to refuse, as Moses did? Are we hoping that someone else will do God’s will, leaving us safe to be deaf to God’s voice? Is there a “no” in our hearts that needs to be softened into a “yes”? Will we listen for God’s call with a will to obey?

Let’s turn now to our lesson from Luke’s Gospel. The first section of this lesson raises timeless questions about why tragedy strikes certain unfortunate people, either through the evil deeds of other human beings (moral evil) or through natural causes and accidents (natural evil).

Human beings want to find meaning in life. We want to understand what happens. We want to know what causes what. We want to know the answer to the question “why?” That’s generally a very good thing. This question is the foundation of science, philosophy, psychology, and theology, and of learning how to negotiate everyday reality with other people, non-human creatures, and the material world. When we know cause and effect, we gain a measure of control in life and a measure of intellectual peace. But sometimes we want that peace of mind so much that we make false connections of cause and effect. This can be very dangerous, especially when we blame the victims of misfortune for their afflictions.

This is the kind of thinking that Jesus addresses. He refers to two tragic events that we know about only from this biblical record. The first was a case of moral evil: a bloody, vengeful act by Pontius Pilate against Galilean Jews worshipping at the Temple in Jerusalem. The second was a case of natural evil: the collapse of a tower near the pool of Siloam that killed 18 people. Jesus asks his hearers: do you think these victims

were worse sinners than other people? No! Life is not so simple. God's action in human life is not so simple, not so easily understood.

Then Jesus moves into the heart of his message – repentance. He sounds much like John the Baptist did. Nothing soft or mild. “Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” He follows this warning with a parable. A man had a fig tree in his vineyard that bore no fruit for three years. He ordered his gardener to cut it down because it was wasting the soil. But the gardener begged the owner to give the tree one more year to bear fruit. If it did, fine. If not, the owner could cut down the tree then.

This is a parable about judgment and mercy. These must be held together in tension. We must resist the temptation to focus on one and ignore the other. If we focus on God's judgment and ignore God's mercy, we may fear that God will punish us forever for our wrongdoing, that God will destroy us. That leads to fear and despair, and it damages our trust in God. On the other hand, if we focus on God's mercy and ignore God's judgment, we may not examine ourselves and our lives, recognize how we have turned away from God, and choose to turn back. If we trust that God will forgive us no matter what we do, no matter if we turn to God or not, we may waste the gifts God has given us instead of using them in God's service. We may miss our opportunities to grow in love, bear the fruits of love, and become the people God wants us to become.

The call to repentance in the Gospel often sounds harsh, as it does in this morning's reading from Luke. Repent or else! Bear fruit or be cut down! I think we need to take the call to repentance seriously, and it is especially appropriate to do that during the season of Lent. This is a time to examine ourselves, to turn away from what is unholy and to turn back to God. But we need to hear the call to repentance in the context of God's offer of forgiveness and mercy for those who turn back to God.

God is good. God is love. God is life. God desires what is good for us. God desires what is good for all creation, including the human family. We need the wake-up call of repentance that we hear in the Gospel so that we don't waste our time foolishly. Now is the time to grow in love! Now is the time to bear good fruit! For the sake of God's world, for the sake of our neighbors, and for our own sakes. In the words of the Ash Wednesday service, “Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... desires not the death of sinners, but rather that they may turn from their wickedness and live.” God wants us to turn from death to life. Because God is good. Because God is love. Because God is life.

In this holy season of the church year may we listen for God's voice with open minds and hearts. And with the psalmist may we declare to God, from the bottom of our hearts and in every circumstance of our lives, “My soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast” (Psalm 63:8). In Jesus' name. Amen.