

“Crossing Bridges”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 30, 2020

Introduction:

Today we’ll be reading from the book of Exodus, picking up the story of Moses we began last week. Now aside from the burning bush, two things always stand out to me in this story. First: The fact that God is not distant, refusing to enter the world and get his hands dirty. Rather God is present; coming near to hear and understand the suffering of God’s people. The second thing that strikes me about this passage is the way God chooses to use wholly inadequate people as partners in bringing relief for that suffering.

Scripture Reading: Exodus 3:1-15

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.” ⁶He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. ⁷Then 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, ⁸and 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, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” ¹¹But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” ¹²He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.” ¹³But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” ¹⁴God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” ¹⁵God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

Sermon: “Crossing Bridges”

As a child growing up in South Carolina, my parents took my sisters and I on regular trips to the old port city of Charleston. The northern approach to the city was at that time dominated by the twin Cooper River Bridges. Towering high above the water’s surface, these bridges could be seen for miles. As we drove south toward the city, we would play a game where everyone strained to be the first to see the bridges peeking over the tops of the trees. As we got closer, excitement would build. At the base of the southbound Grace Memorial bridge, one couldn’t help but be impressed by its sheer size. At 250 feet, it was 15 feet taller than the Brooklyn Bridge. But driving over that thing, well, they say there are no atheists in fox holes. There weren’t any driving over that bridge, either.

From a great distance, you could certainly admire what that bridge added to the Charleston skyline. And drawing closer to the water’s edge, you could truly appreciate the great height and grace with which it soared across the river. But you would have to get in a car and ride with me over that rickety, narrow strip of steel and concrete and experience it for yourself to really *know* the terror of crossing that bridge.

God says to Moses here, “I have observed the misery of my people... I have heard their cry... I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them...” This is the language of approach. From a distance God sees what is happening. Coming closer to where the people are, God hears their cries. Coming closer still, God is able to experience their suffering with them, and finally God closes the gap, and comes to save them.

The word used here when God says, “I *know* their sufferings,” is the same Hebrew word used for sexual intimacy in marriage. It is the same word used when Adam “knows” Eve and she bears a child. That God’s knows their suffering here

means that God is not just aware of it, but that God is intimately in tune with it. God has experienced it. God has crossed this particular bridge of suffering with the Israelites.

But the second thing that always stands out to me is the method of God's intervention. We love the story of the burning bush. We love that miraculous image. But that wasn't the real point of this story. The burning bush was just a means for God to get Moses' attention. Was Moses deep in thought? Was he distracted? Had he purposefully been avoiding God's call for him to go back to Egypt? Whatever the reason, God needed something dramatic to get his attention. So the central point of this story is not the miraculous flaming shrubbery, but God's calling Moses to go and speak to Pharaoh about what God wants Pharaoh to do.

Now let's think on this for a second. The God we know, who spoke the universe into being; who made living creatures in all their physiological intricacy; who spoke to Abraham and called him to go to a place I will show you; this God of whom the Psalmist says "Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him."¹ This God could liberate the Israelites from Pharaoh's clutches with a word, a stroke of lightning, by the earth-shaking sound of her voice. But instead this God chooses to send Moses. Moses the delinquent. Moses the stutterer. Moses the doubtful. Moses the reluctant. Five times Moses will counter God's call with reasons he is unqualified. Yet God chooses him to go and speak truth to one of the most powerful men in the ancient world.

This has been a difficult year and it's not even close to being over yet. 2020 has brought us a pandemic, closed schools, a tanking economy, people out of work, social unrest, wide-spread protests and just this week a category four hurricane hit the US Gulf Coast. Sometimes it feels like this has been the year of God's wrath. And yet what we hear in this story is that God sees our struggles, God hears our cries for help, and God comes to us, into our midst, and knows our suffering intimately. And in the middle of all of this, God comes to save.

And who does God call into partnership to accomplish all this? Who does God send? Not superheroes, but ordinary people like you and me. We the delinquent, we the stutterers, we the doubtful, we the reluctant. We are so like Moses. Yet God has not armed us with a staff that turns into a snake; God has not equipped us with words to call down plagues upon troublemakers. And yet our task often seems no less daunting: to change the world; to discern and implement God's will; to be instruments of the Kingdom of God.

Certainly, we can act as individuals. We answer God's call when we fulfill Jesus' mandate of Matthew 25, to feed the hungry, satisfy the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned. We love God and our neighbors. But there is so much more that we can do when we come together as the gathered community; when we pool our energy and shape our society to be more compassionate, more supportive, more empathetic, more closely resembling God's Kingdom. We have this opportunity when we take an active role in how our communities, our state, and our nation are governed. We have this opportunity when we vote.

Now, it's true, Jesus never talked about being active in government. But that's largely because democracy was still a fledgling concept in the world and Judea was merely an outpost of the Roman Empire. Participating in government decision-making on a community, regional or national level just wasn't an option for the people to whom Jesus came.

But today it is. Jesus spoke of rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. But he did so in a world that knew only Caesars; a world in which the people he was talking to were subjects of an empire, not voters in a democratic republic. Were he preaching today, he would absolutely have something to say for those of us who have a voice in how our communities function, and yet allow injustice, to thrive. The Son of God who commanded his disciples "You give them something to eat" and who healed anyone who came to him, without question, would absolutely have something to say about a system that is comfortable with hunger and with the astronomical costs of healthcare.

Our government is not something "out there," foreign, separate from us. Our government is an expression of our will. And if we are a people called to discern and live into the will of God, then the government we elect should absolutely reflect our desire to do God's will.

The good news of this story that is repeated over and over throughout scripture, is that God is not distant, but is in fact here, walking with us, experiencing our hardships, and knowing our struggles. But the challenge of this story, is that God expects us, God's people, saved for service not for privilege, to be the instruments by which God will bring in God's Kingdom of justice and compassion.

As we move through a volatile campaign season, drawing ever closer to election day, we must accept the imperative to be a part of the change God is making in the world. We can't be turned off by the hurtful, hate-filled rhetoric. We can't allow ourselves to become numb to the issues before us. We can't succumb to the wrong-headed notion that nothing will ever change. We have to be educated on the issues. We have to learn about the candidates, and we have to make our voices heard.

You know, the Grace Memorial bridge always scared me when I was younger. The thought of it still gives me the willies, even now. But I never once considered not going across. Whatever the bridges we face in this world, whatever the obstacles, whether personal, community, or national, God knows them well, and God goes beside us as to face them.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Psalm 33:6-9, NRSV