

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45b; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

ACNA Readings – Jeremiah 15:15-21; Psalm 26; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:21-27

Introduction. God is both a loving redeemer and an all-consuming fire. From a certain perspective, it might seem easier to understand the *good side* of the Lord rather than him as a *coming judge*. However, it is not for us to tell God who he is; he will tell us who he is, and he does not change. As Hebrews says, God “is the same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb 13:8).

Common Theme. Pondering the readings this week, there are two themes that stood out; they seem diametrically opposed and somehow often go hand in hand: love and vengeance. It was in love that God told Moses he would redeem Israel but at the same time bring vengeance on Egyptian gods. Paul will instruct us in the Epistle to the Romans to love and let God vindicate his people. Jesus will call us to follow his way to the cross; there he will demonstrate the most wondrous love, but a judgment will come with the return of the Son of Man.

Exodus 3:1-15. Initially, Moses does not strike us as the quintessential hero figure. Following his miraculous rescue from the Nile as an infant, Moses is raised in Pharaoh's household most likely surrounded by the wealthy elite. Despite this privileged upbringing, Moses displays some unfortunate character flaws, which don't portray him as very heroic. He has anger management issues, resorts to violence and murder, chooses not to face justice, and instead flees Egypt to the land of Midian.

Our passage this week picks up the narrative after Moses has married, settled down, and spent 40 years raising a family. Obviously, returning to Egypt is not high on his priority list. At this point, Jewish exegesis asks the question: *When is Moses ready to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?* Apparently, Moses has not become independently wealthy in Midian. Exodus 3 begins by telling us that Moses is shepherding his father-in-law's flocks – not his own.

Midian is a descendant of Abraham through his second wife, Keturah. It is possible that Midian had held on to the monotheistic faith of Abraham and thus Jethro's family – who also bears the name Reuel (Exod 2:18), meaning *Shepherd of God* – is actually God-fearing. The family resides close to the mountain of Horeb – known as the mountain of God הַר הָאֱלֹהִים and later Mount Sinai. Horeb is the more common designation for Mount Sinai in the Bible with some scholars, including a Jewish tradition, suggesting one side of the mountain was known as Horeb and the other as Sinai.

Back to the question: *when is Moses ready to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?* There is an interesting midrash connected to the incident with Moses and the Burning Bush.¹

¹ What is a midrash? Midrash is a method of Jewish exegesis to help answer difficult questions raised by the text or to fill in gaps not described in the biblical narrative that are perhaps only hinted at. The word Midrash comes from the verb *to seek*,

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This midrash recounts the story of an important incident that occurred while Moses was watching the flocks one day in Midian. One sheep wanders away from the rest of the flock.² Instead of abandoning the foolish sheep to its self-inflicted state to be torn apart by wild animals, Moses goes off in search of the lost one. He climbs over rocks and through briars, scuffing his arms and legs in the process.

In the end, he finds the lost sheep lying exhausted under a rock. As he bends down to carry the sheep back on his shoulders, suddenly the bush nearby catches fire, and God speaks to his hero. God could see the compassion in the heart of Moses for the one lost, foolish sheep and he knew that his hero was ready to lead the People of Israel. Moses is finally ready. Moses demonstrates the quality of compassion for the weak and the lost. Compassion is a key quality that God is looking for in his heroes.

Intrigued at the sight of foliage burning with fire but not being consumed by that fire, Moses draws closer to investigate. God calls to Moses from out of the flames, although it is not always clear who is actually conversing with Moses.³ An angel appears, but it is the Lord who speaks. When God first speaks to Moses, he calls him by name.

Moses may have fled the palace of Egypt and become an obscure forgotten shepherd, but God had not forgotten Moses. God reveals himself by declaring his connection to the Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Then, the Lord informs Moses of his plans for the people of Israel. The Lord says he will rescue his people and bring them into the Promised Land. How will God do this; how will the redemption be enacted? God says he will send Moses!

God has always – since creation – involved man in his activities on earth. In Genesis, God creates the garden and asks Adam to tend it; God creates heaven and earth and then shares dominion with man. In Exodus, we see that the Lord will redeem his people through a partnership with Moses.

Surprisingly, Moses does not seem to know God's specific name! Perhaps he had not been told the stories of his heritage during his upbringing, and so he asks for God's name. Interestingly, instead of simply saying יהוה, God chooses to reveal himself as אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, which is often translated as *I Am who I Am*.

study, or *inquire* and the actual word *midrash* occurs twice in the Hebrew Bible. (Example: In 2 Chronicles 13 verse 22, we read “in the midrash of the prophet Ido.”)

² You actually see this midrash played out in the Dreamwork's animated movie *The Prince of Egypt*.

³ Mysteriously, the Hebrew text inter-changes the words Lord (יהוה) and the angel of the Lord (מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה) without explanation.

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The verb *to be* is in future tense so it can also be read as *I will be what I will be*, indicating that the Lord is not a static being. He is moving; he is involved and he is not aloof from his creation. God is a God who can and will act! In verse 15, God declares that this is his name forever and we are not to misidentify him as a god who cannot act or is not involved.

Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45b. - There is no direct attribution of authorship for this psalm in the Book of Psalms. However, the first 15 verses are direct quotes from a psalm that David penned for Asaph to give praise to God in 1 Chronicles 16:7-22. Whoever the final author of Psalm 105 was he used a lot of Davidic material.

The worshipper is directed to praise the Lord by speaking, telling, or proclaiming the deeds of God. Verse five reminds us that God has done wonders and spoken judgments. God has both acted and spoken – not just spoken! If we are to be like God, then we should make sure we are also doers of the word and not only proclaimers of it!

Verses 23 to 26 recall the Egyptian history of Israel; in which, Egypt is depicted as the land of Ham and God sends his servants Moses and Aaron – neglects to mention Miriam here – to perform God's signs among them. God chooses to do miracles and wonders and thus reveal himself to Israel through Moses and Aaron.

The last verse of this psalm gives the reason for recalling the great deeds of the Lord – to affect our own actions! That we might keep his precepts and observe his commands. The same idea remains in the Christian Church, in that we gather together as a community of believers to recall and remember what Jesus has done. *We do this to remember him*, and then we allow that memory to propel us to *go in peace to love and serve the Lord*.

Romans 12:9-21. *Love* is an often misunderstood word. It is the muse of much poetry, the subject of exhaustive volumes of books through the ages, and seems to be something the modern world thinks you can fall into and out of rather quickly.

The word *love* first appears in the Bible in Genesis 22:2 when Abraham is instructed to take his only son *whom he loves* and sacrifice him to God. From a Hebraic perspective, when words are first used in the biblical text the context in which they appear will forever give that word a nuance or an imprint of meaning. *Love* appears in the context of sacrifice and thus love is not something you get but rather something you give.

Here in Romans, Paul describes love not as an emotion but as an action. Love is not simply something you feel but something you do. We begin by hearing that love must be sincere and genuine – not subject to fickle emotions or the sugar high from too much chocolate. Paul's explanation of the practice of love

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in a loving community is not removed from Paul's Jewish background. Important Jewish values – like diligence in prayer and the injunction to practice hospitality – are included by Paul to the Gentiles of Rome. He quotes directly from the Jewish non-canonical book Sirach which says, "Do not avoid those who weep but mourn with those who mourn" (Sir 7:34).

Paul urges us to live in harmony with one another and live at peace with those around us. This is not always possible, unfortunately. While we are instructed to love our enemies, the reality is they are still enemies. How then should we behave? How do we put love into practice with those who oppose us – perhaps even violently? Paul suggests that our mindset should be not towards vengeance but to face evil with good. Paul quotes Moses, saying that vengeance against evil does come in the end – just not from our hands but from the hand of the Lord.

Matthew 16:21-28. From the high point of Peter's proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah, we see Jesus now set his face towards Jerusalem – towards the cross and the final showdown with the enemy. Jesus turned the focus of his teaching to reflect the Second Temple period concept of redemptive suffering and applied those themes to himself and his mission.

Messiah is a Jewish concept and the Jewish people of the first century were expectant of the redeemer. In the Jewish exegetical tradition of the Second Temple period, the messianic age was going to be ushered in through the actions and attributes of multiple characters. Elijah was obviously one such character who would herald the Messiah. The biblical text does appear ambiguous sometimes as to the exact nature of the redeemer. Would the Messiah be a conquering king or the suffering servant described in Isaiah?

One tradition that arose to make sense of this ambiguity was the advent of a *two messiah theory*, in which there would be a *messiah ben Joseph* – who took the role of the suffering martyr – and a *messiah ben David* – who would take the role of a powerful king. While the concept of redemptive suffering was in discussion, in the first century there was not an orthodox position on the matter. It was probably a shock to the disciples for Jesus to start talking like a suffering redeemer when so far things had been going quite well.

Jesus was popular with the crowds; he was fighting the demons wherever he found them; there was no sickness or disease he couldn't heal; and no one could challenge him theologically. Why suddenly the switch to redemptive martyrdom? Peter challenges Jesus that, "This shall never happen to you!" (Matt 16:22). Apart from the obvious *foot-in-mouth* problem, Peter is also doing something that no disciple should ever do: tell his master what to do! Rabbis tell their students what to do not the other way around. We should all humbly ponder this thought when we come to prayer and start giving Jesus a list of things we expect him to do for us.

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The rebuke that Jesus gives is strong but appropriate. It would have been great to continue the awesome ministry that Jesus was doing – all the healings, the great teaching, coupled with the signs and miracles. However, Jesus tells his disciples – and us – that to truly be a disciple is not only to follow him in the good times but also to take up the cross. In the first century under Roman occupation, the metaphor of *taking up your cross* meant that you were going to your death because the only time you would actually pick a cross up was to go to your own crucifixion. To follow Jesus means also to follow in his redemptive suffering – this may include our own personal suffering and death.

Following Jesus does not come without rewards, however. Ultimately the Son of Man will return with his angels for judgement. There will be rewards and blessings according to the actions we have done. We see this also in the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 25 where the sheep and goats are separated based on behaviour and in Revelation 20:13 where the deeds of each person are judged. Our love for the Lord should be something that we put into practice, not just something we believe theologically. Following Jesus is an activity that we engage in and not a passive belief of the mind.

The last verse – 28 – is where Jesus declares “some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom;” this is problematic in that there are multiple views as to what it really means. Some commentators say this refers to the transfiguration, some claim this refers to the resurrection, or to the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. Still, others see the coming kingdom as referring to Gentile inclusion into the church. It's not at all clear from the text what was on the mind of Jesus when he stated this. But that shouldn't distract us from the call to follow Jesus in his redemptive suffering and put love into action.

ACNA Readings

Jeremiah 15:15-21. In this prophetic prayer, Jeremiah calls on God for justice and to avenge the prophet for having suffered for the sake of the Lord. Jeremiah had embraced God's call on his life. He had seriously internalized the Word of God using the metaphor of having *eaten* the very words of the Lord. And he had removed himself from the company of wicked people. Yet, trouble followed him because of his prophetic ministry.

In his suffering, the prophet looks to the Lord for answers. I'm sure we can all relate to Jeremiah here. What is actually only a *time of trial* can seem to us like eternal perpetual suffering. Nothing seems to ever go right, everything is always wrong, and even though we know God and his word to be true, there does not seem to be hope on the horizon. It's a genuine challenge!

God replies by encouraging Jeremiah not to give up and says that there will be a time of restoration. The Lord promises that he will deliver Jeremiah and that the wicked will not succeed in their machinations. During the struggle and the suffering, the Lord urges the prophet not to side with the wicked but to

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remain resolute in the principles of God. It's a temptation for all of us during difficult times to try to alleviate some of the burden by perhaps not speaking the truth as boldly or clearly as we ought or by remaining silent before sin and allowing our silence to be a closet affirmation of evil. The Lord wants Jeremiah – and us – to remain strong in faith and conviction. Suffering has a meaning, though we might not always see that meaning. Evil will be judged as the Lord has said and God will deliver us from the hands of the wicked.

Psalm 26. This is a prayer of David for vindication; although the exact context is unclear when this might have been crafted. It's not easy to remain walking faithfully when things go seriously wrong. Difficult circumstances can really test our trust in the Lord. David declares boldly that he has continued to walk with integrity and trust without wavering. He has removed himself – like Jeremiah in today's reading – from the presence of evil people and kept good company.

Sometimes we assume that we can influence the ungodly and deliberately maintain strong bonds of friendships with people we probably shouldn't. Unfortunately, it's rarely the case of us being effective and more often the other way around, in which wicked influence moderates our own behaviour.

David says that he enjoys God's presence and being close to the place where God's glory dwells. The heart of David – though a sinner like us – was to delight himself in the presence of God. This should be a desire of ours, too. That desire will not stop the wicked from being evil, but that is not the point. In this psalm, the point is quite personal.

David states that he will continue to walk with integrity. According to Jewish exegesis, David ends up breaking every single commandment in the Bible. He is, thus, the model of true repentance and true desire to be with God. The blessing is that no one is beyond redemption. The last verse of this psalm shows us that David – who knows the truth of personal redemption – will praise and bless the Lord in public. His faith and trust in God will not remain something hidden or unseen but will be proclaimed in public forums. May we all have that courage!

Romans 12:1-8. Paul calls us to not be influenced by the world but actually to influence our communities as living sacrifices. Sacrifices have been a topic of contention in many Christian circles. Too often the focus is on the concept of blood atonement to appease an angry deity – which was largely the function they served in pagan cults. This is far removed from biblical sacrifices. Leviticus writes clearly that sacrifices were for unintentional sins. Intentional sins were always dealt with through repentance and restitution where applicable.

The word *sacrifice* is קָרְבָּן *korban* and has at its roots the word קָרַב *karov* – which means *to be close or draw near to*. Biblical sacrifices were a way of being close to each other and drawing near to God. The purpose of drawing near to the Lord was to fellowship together and to learn the will of the Lord. Paul

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reminds the community in Rome that they are the recipients of many gifts and blessings. The response to such grace and blessings that Paul would like to see in the community is each member putting their varied gifts into practice. Those who can teach should indeed teach. Those who can encourage should encourage the community in the Lord. Should someone have the blessing of prophecy, then they should serve with that gift. Quite plainly, as living sacrifices, we are to live and act on the gifts that we have been given and not simply admit – or deny – that we might have them and do nothing.

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