

Sermon – Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 17A)

Scripture Texts: Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *God reveals Godself to us as a glorious mystery: as the God who is holy, and yet has bound Godself to us mortals – as one who suffers with us, as yet as the one who brings life out of death.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. Meeting God in the Desert
 - a. My trip to Mt. Siani
 - i. During a semester studying in Egypt during college, Heather and I got to visit quite a few incredible sites, from the tombs of the pharaohs along the Nile, to an oasis on the Libyan border, to Alexandria and the site of its famous library. One of the most incredible sites, however, was Mt. Siani.
 - ii. Located in the desert of the Siani peninsula, the mountain is the traditional site where Moses met God and eventually received the 10 commandments.
 - iii. Our group took a bus through the night, arriving in the small hours and hiking up the mountain in the dark and cold. However, it was all worth it when we got to watch the sunrise from the top of the mountain! It's hard not to have a sense of God's presence in that place!
 - b. St. Catherine's Monastery
 - i. Built between 548-565, it is the oldest continuously inhabited Christian monastery in the world. It has been home to centuries of prayer and study.
 - ii. Again, the sense of holiness is palpable! The monastery houses an ancient library and some of the oldest and most beautiful icons you could imagine.
 - iii. Perhaps it's biggest claim to fame, and the reason for it having been built, is an ancient bush, long claimed to be THE burning bush encountered by Moses. It even has a fire extinguisher next to it, just in case!
 - c. Desert Fathers and other mystics
 - i. The desert, especially the deserts of Egypt, has long been a place where people have encountered God.
 - ii. Indeed, the Desert Fathers and Mothers were early Christian mystics who went out into the wilderness to better focus on knowing God.
2. Moses and the burning bush
 - a. Our OT Text today features another encounter with God in the desert.
 - i. After having been saved from a murderous pharaoh by courageous and faithful women, Moses goes on to make a bit of a mess of his life, and ultimately flees Egypt to go live in the desert. Here he marries and tends the flocks of his father-in-law, like shepherds have done in the craggy mountains of Sinai for millennia.

- ii. One day, however, his attention is stolen away from the sheep, as he encounters an incredible sight – a bush that is burning but does not burn up. I love Moses’ reaction here: “I must turn aside and look at this great sight”! Moses turns aside from his daily life, from his sheep and his ordinary duties, to encounter this living paradox. And the situation only gets stranger and more incredible when God speaks to him out of the bush.
 - iii. Exodus 3 is widely recognized as a foundational self-revelation by God, with Moses daring to ask God’s name and God deigning to answer. Uncountable pages have been written trying to make sense of this encounter, and of this divine self-revelation. Who, and what, is revealed here?
- b. A Revelation of Holiness?
 - i. One of the most common answers to that question begins with God’s first instruction to Moses: “Come no closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” Perhaps this is a revelation of God as holy?
 - ii. Biblically, to be holy is to be “set apart”. For example, a cup is holy if it is singled out and reserved for special use on God’s behalf, rather than being used for ordinary purposes. Thus, for God to be holy emphasizes the uniqueness and specialness of God – that God is set apart and different than anything else we might encounter in creation.
 - iii. This idea of God as holy seems to fit somewhat with the name that God gives to Moses: “I AM WHO I AM”. In Hebrew, it is “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh, and while Ehyeh is clearly a first person version of the verb “to be”, the tense is actually unclear in the Hebrew. God could also be saying “I will be who I will be” or “I am who I will be” or “I will be who I am.” But, in any case, it is speaking to the self-sufficiency and uniqueness of who God is.
 - iv. Now, the idea that God is holy is fundamental throughout the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. But, there is a problem that too often creeps in if we make holiness the fundamental aspect of who God is. Notice Moses’ reaction to this holy God: He hides his face and is afraid! If we make holiness the fundamental aspect of who God is, it too often leads to fear, and to a sense that we must purify ourselves – or in some way earn the right to be in relationship with God. Perhaps we must go out to the desert, or engage in some form of ascetic behavior, in order to be worthy of God’s attention.
- c. God of relationship
 - i. Holiness is undoubtedly an aspect of who God is, but I am wary of making it primary, as so many readings of this text do. I am wary because I do not believe that we are meant to fear God. Indeed, in the revelation of God that we see in Jesus, there is no place for fear! Rather, in Jesus, God seeks us out regardless of whether we are “worthy”, and shows special care for those who are least capable of earning love.
 - ii. But I am not suggesting that we set OT against NT, as if there were tension between the revelations of God that we find in Exodus and in the Gospels. Rather, I think that the revelation of God that we see in Jesus might help us to recognize that there is something even more fundamental than holiness in this Exodus revelation.

- iii. First, remember that Moses is not out in the desert seeking God! Rather, God is reaching out to him. Even when Moses has run away and considers himself absolutely unworthy, God is reaching out to him.
- iv. Second, notice the deep concern that God shows for the people of Israel: God has observed, and heard, and known the plight of God's people – and has come to bring deliverance and relief.
- v. Finally, notice that the name God gives Moses is not limited to this cryptic statement of being (Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh). Rather, God goes on to specify God's self as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: "This is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations." Rather than simply being set apart, God binds Godself to a particular people.

3. Call to wonder

a. No easy answers or definitions

- i. Philosophers and theologians too often want to read definitions and systematic concepts about God out of the pages of Scripture, but this text resists that approach.
- ii. Our Jewish siblings remind us that God is mysterious, beyond our reckoning, and yet God is also determined to be known, and to be in relation with us.
- iii. Indeed, according to a Jewish midrash, that is the point of the divine name Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh: God cannot be simply defined, but must be known through experience, through relationship and watching what God does.

b. The God who suffers with us

- i. And that brings us back to Jesus, and to the striking revelation in today's Gospel. Immediately after Peter insightfully recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, God's promised king (as we read last week), Jesus begins to teach his disciples that he must face suffering and death.
- ii. Peter and the other disciples react violently against the idea of a suffering Messiah. After all, God is holy, set apart from such human weakness, right? But Jesus insists that God is to be revealed particularly in this suffering on behalf of the creation that God loves. As we saw in Exodus, God has bound Godself to humanity; suffering and death are the ultimate results of binding oneself to mortal humans.
- iii. And, again, lest you think I am pitting OT vs NT, we also get a beautiful hint of this suffering God in the story of the burning bush. If you look at the Hebrew, the word used to describe the bush is one that speaks of thorns. The bush through which God speaks is no manicured shrubbery. Rather, it is a thorn bush! Even in Exodus, we see that the revelation of God is not set apart from pain and hardship – and I love that some commentators suggest a link here between the burning thorn bush and the crown of thorns that Jesus will wear on the cross!
- iv. Thankfully, though, the revelation of God does not end with thorns and suffering and death. Rather, both of these readings point to a greater hope. In Exodus, God is revealed through a burning thorn bush – but the bush does not burn up, and it may even live on today in St. Catherine's Monastery. Moreover, what Exodus hints at through this strange and paradoxical image, Jesus puts plainly: even as he predicts his suffering and death, he also foretells his resurrection – and he promises his disciples that those who lose their life for his sake will find it again.

c. Our invitation into the mystery of God

- i. So, we are invited today into relationship with God. The good news is that we do not have to go out into the desert or purify ourselves to be worthy of God.
- ii. Rather, we are invited to know the God who is holy and set apart, but even more fundamentally the God who seeks us out and binds Godself to us. This is the God who loves us enough to suffer with us, and to bring new life out of that suffering.
- iii. This is a mystery. Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh is not to be understood simply and propositionally, but through relationship, through suffering and redemption, through mercy and love that seeks us out even when we are at our lowest points. May we have the courage, like Moses, to turn aside from our daily lives and to draw close to this great God.

Amen.