

What We Hold

A Sermon by Rev. Dawn Allen-Herron, with

The People of St. Mary's, Anchorage

Sunday, October 10, 2021

Scriptures: Exodus 3:1-10, 4:1-4; Mark 10:17-31

Early this week, Karl Wilhelmi and I were discussing songs for today's service, and he pointed out something that should not have been a surprise:

“There just aren't a lot of songs about this Gospel reading.”

Well, yeah.

There weren't a lot about last week's reading (Poke Your Eye Out Sunday), either. You'll remember that Michael helped us to think about how Jesus used hyperbole in his teaching,

and yet the teachings remain true.

There is surely something Real and True in today's Gospel reading.

Unfortunately, when we hear a question about Eternal Life,

We often think mostly of Eternal (and so, heaven), and less about LIFE.

But surely eternal life includes the NOW....so let us consider

Abundant, Universal Flourishing Life and Delight for all of creation.

And let us acknowledge that there's no way to get completely off the hook here.

It really *is* difficult to enter that life.

And particularly difficult for those who have everything that they need, and more.

Rather than trying to thread the needle of this very difficult teaching,

I invite us, instead, to put another story alongside it. Kate read for us this morning one episode in the very long story of Moses.

Let's remember, together, the longer story--

Moses was leading a flock in the wilderness when he encountered a bush aflame,

And out of it, God called.

I have observed the misery of my people, and I'm calling YOU to bring my people out of Egypt, to a land of life and liberty.

Moses has a few objections. *Are you sure that you have the right person? I stutter....* God seems sure.

In Egypt, they want me dead! And what if they don't listen? How can I know that this is REAL?

And God asks Moses, *What's in your hand?* A staff.

Throw it down. It became a snake. *Pick it up.* It became a staff again.

What Moses couldn't see then was the staff is *transformed* in this encounter. Moses couldn't see it, but we know the rest of the story. The staff is referred to as the Staff of God after this.

- When the people needed water in the desert, Moses struck a rock with this staff, and water flows
- When Pharaoh wondered if Moses came with any authority, this staff provided evidence

- When the fleeing Israelites came to the Red Sea, Moses will lift this staff and the waters will part,
 - And the people cross the waters to freedom and life.

I wonder what Moses thought, when God asked him to throw down his staff. (I imagine that he was unimpressed.) A staff is a GOOD thing for those tending flocks to have. It provides direction, protection, and is a practical tool. Essential, even.

And God wants it thrown down.

Some days, we imagine that the spiritual task is simply to find the BAD things that are in our lives, and to extricate ourselves from them. But here, God asks for a good, natural part of Moses' life.

And I wonder what it was like to be asked to pick up the snake. That, I can imagine. Terrifying, yes? And certainly, any path to transformation seems to involve fear.

What strikes me about this story, this year, is how much we know of this.

We, too, have seen the misery of Beloved people of God,

Up close and personal,

And very near to us.

And we have been asked to give up some comfort, some convenience, and some very good things. Things that have always seemed essential.

- Gathering, for one.
- And singing together,

- sharing meals
- travelling to see grandchildren
- going to school

You know the list. GOOD things; things that we need for mental and spiritual health, and certainly for abundant life.

As it turns out, when we tell The Story over and over and over,

When we feast on Scripture together, Sunday after Sunday,

We are changed by it.

The effect of telling and re-telling God's Story is that we come to LIVE it.

And we have.

We have let go of things.

It didn't take a bush aflame for us to let go of cherished things for the sake of the other, for the sake of Eternal Life.

We have been angry, afraid, overwhelmed, and terrified,

AND we have heard the voice of God urging us toward Life for everyone.

We don't know what might have been, exactly, but we can guess.

It's a pretty simple bet that there are people gathered here on Zoom today,

That would not be alive right now

Had we behaved differently.

And not just folk here, of course, but others, too.

Let us take a moment to celebrate this.

Let us consider what has become possible:

- a grandparent witnessing a college graduation
- a child learning to tie their shoe from a parent who survived a pandemic
- a research scientist, making one more step toward curing Alzheimers
- a cynic being transformed by their first sight of the Grand Canyon
- an art lover, living to see the Louvre
- a parent, ready to give up, overcome by the beauty of alpenglow, and finding the strength that they need
- a small child, transformed by the beauty of a tiny, lovely, mushroom

We are told that Moses and the people, upon crossing the Sea, *danced*.

I imagine that Moses held the staff, as usual, and remembered throwing it down.

Remembered how afraid he had been. How hard it was.

And I imagine that he would do it over and over again, for that moment.

The question that God asks Moses

Is asked in every generation.

What do you hold in your hand today?

What do WE hold in our hands, as a community?

This is NOT the question of a greedy ogre kind of god,

Demanding everything,

BUT it is the question of a Loving, Liberating, Life-Giving God

Who invites us, always,

into the joy of participating in the transformation of our world.

We hold all sorts of good things

Money, yes....

Security, for us and our children

Privilege that we've held so long that we think it's our arm...

Can it be that some of these are things that God is inviting us to throw down?

Can we--and our world--find freedom in what WE hold,

Given up,

Recovered and transformed?