

Sermon for 3 Lent, Year C
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Holy Nativity, Plano
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In our Old Testament lesson this morning, we pick up the story of Moses in the middle. You will remember that Moses was raised as an adopted son of the Egyptian court. But he never forgot that he was a Hebrew by birth. He knew his true family, as well as his adopted one. And the injustice and oppression experienced by his kinsmen created for him a youthful crisis of identity. Pretty soon something snapped. The young prince murdered an Egyptian who was mistreating one of his Hebrew brothers. But that didn't solve the problem. His youthful act of thoughtless heroism accomplished nothing. It only endangered his life, and he fled from Egypt.

And now the young Hebrew prince of Egypt has taken on a new identity. He is a shepherd among the Midianites. He has carved out a new life for himself. He has married and had children among the Midianites. And he has put his entire former life behind him. His connections to the Egyptian court and to the Hebrew slaves brought him nothing but failure. So for forty years he has been a simple shepherd, caring for his father-in-law's sheep. Washed up, you might say; a sad waste of great potential.

But God is not finished with Moses yet. When Moses tried to take the situation into his own hands, it did no good. And he has been living the consequences ever since. But all the while, God has been patiently preparing his plan. And now, in his own time and in his own way, God is ready to put that plan into motion. He speaks to Moses out of the burning bush. He sends him back to Egypt to deliver his people from oppression.

But there is another aspect of this passage that is at least as important as all the rest. God here reveals himself by name, YHWH. We don't consider names to be particularly meaningful, but in many cultures names are carefully guarded. A name communicates the actual essence of the bearer of it. A name is an identity and sometimes only shared with those who are fully trustworthy. The name YHWH is almost impossible to translate. But it is a form of the verb "to be". Here we have it rendered "I AM". It is a name that refuses to limit the bearer. "I am who I am." And yet it communicates something of God's nature. He is the source of all being. He is the one who *is* and who is present. He is the one who is faithful and fulfills his promises. He is the one who is completely real, and the one in whom all reality is. But he is not merely an ineffable force upholding the cosmos. He also makes himself known. He even tells us his name.

We all know the story, at least in outline. How Moses goes back to Egypt to carry out God's plan. How it takes the ten plagues to get Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. How Israel is spared from the plagues, culminating in the Passover. How they leave Egypt and God saves them again at the crossing of the water. How God led the people and provided supernatural food and drink in the desert. All of these are evidence of God's faithfulness to his people.

But that faithfulness is not reciprocated. In I Corinthians, St. Paul refers to the story and points out the faithlessness of Israel. The fathers in the desert all experienced the blessing of deliverance. They were baptized, he says, in the cloud of God's presence and in the crossing of the sea. They passed through the water and were brought into God's kingdom by divine grace in action. They all received the supernatural food and drink provided in the desert, just as we all receive the supernatural food and drink of the Eucharist. But for most of them it did no good. "Nevertheless," says St. Paul, "with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness."

And why were they overthrown? Because they desired evil. St. Paul warns us not to follow their example. They were idolatrous. They indulged in sexual immorality and fornication. They put the Lord to the test and grumbled against him in the desert. God has offered himself, his very essence, to his people. And he will keep his promises. But they have turned it all around and now consider that God *owes them* something. That's why they grumble and test God. They aren't just looking for a sign of his presence. They have that already, in abundance. But they are questioning God's character on the basis of their own demands.

There is no excuse for this sort of ungrateful attitude and behavior. We can't say "The devil made me do it." There is no temptation that isn't a normal human one. And God never traps us in our temptations. He will always provide a way of faithfulness, even if the outlook is bleak, even if that faithfulness takes us to the cross. But there is no excuse for turning the gift of faith into a debt that God owes us. He owes us nothing, but gives everything. We owe him everything, and he wants us to be his faithful friends.

In the parable of the fig tree, Jesus reminds us of our situation. We are not the owner of the vineyard. We are the tree. And the whole question is whether we produce fruit. There is no other reason to have a fig tree in your vineyard. How many years would *you* keep a tree that didn't produce? The mercy of God is that he gives us repeated chances to bear fruit. He even tends us and cares for us when we are not bearing, in the hopes that we will become healthy and produce fruit. The farmer digs around the tree and applies manure, even to a useless tree. But there will come a time when the tree has to come down. It cannot take up space and resources forever without fulfilling its purpose.

Jesus speaks to current catastrophes familiar to his hearers, people executed by the Roman governor or killed under a falling building. And the popular interpretation of these events was that the dead people must have done something to incur God's wrath. The implication is obviously that the people still alive had not done so. It gave them a certain amount of comfort to think that they held God's favor, simply because they hadn't been killed in the events in Galilee and Jerusalem. But Jesus will not allow them to take comfort in this lie. We are all sick fig trees, not bearing fruit properly. We are all diseased and disordered. "Repent," he says, or "you will all perish," just like those people who are already dead.

But the story of the fig tree ends in the middle. We can repent. We can stop assuming that we are OK and that we can accomplish our own redemption. We can stop thinking that God owes us anything. We can come to the end of ourselves, like Moses. Moses has lost all confidence in his own ability to redeem the Israelites. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" Indeed, who is he to do anything? Who am I to do anything? Who are any of us that we think we can do anything for God?

And that's the moment for which God is waiting so very patiently. "But I will be with you," he says to Moses. That is what he says to each of us when we reach the end of ourselves. "I *will be* with you. I, the one who was and is and will be; I, the one who is the source of all being; I, YHWH, the Lord, the I AM, the one who encompasses all reality; I will be with you. And now we will put *my* plan in motion. And we shall see just what the power of love and grace will accomplish in you and through you, to the glory of my name!"