

Exodus 3:15

A Way Out

Matthew 16:21-28

September 3, 2023

Sometimes people find themselves in a situation that needs to end, and they need to find a way out. This can happen in both individual and community life. It happens when circumstances become so extreme as to be unsustainable. The biblical word for that, “way out,” is, “exodus.”

The second book in the bible takes its name from a noteworthy time in the pre-history of Israel, when the people found themselves languishing in Egypt, their neighbor and the most powerful nation in their part of the world.

The tricky thing about these kinds of situations is that often there *is* no discernible way out. As time goes by there comes to be a collision of sorts between the desperation of the person or the people and the absence of any solution to the dilemma; no way out. Both religious faith, and religions themselves, are born in, “no way out,” times.

That is where things stood in the time of Moses about 3,200 years ago. By this time, Moses himself, who had fled Egypt after having committed a murder, had settled to the northeast in a place called Midian, married and gone to work tending his father-in-law’s sheep. It was there that the solution began to work its way in, it seems, from out of nowhere.

The story is familiar. While out with the sheep, Moses looked up on a mountain and noticed a burning bush not consumed by the flames, so he went up to investigate. While there, he experienced an epiphany. A voice spoke to him out of the bush, telling him that he was on holy ground, informing him that he himself was to play a significant role in Israel’s way out, and instructing him to *go back to Egypt*.

There are several possible sermons in this story. There is the bush itself, on fire but not consumed. One could preach a sermon about the way our lives flame up from time-to-time, and nothing can extinguish the flame. One might make a sermon about life as a series of burning-bush experiences, fires that stay lit, empowering and enlivening, but not consuming.

And the voice from within the bush calls Moses by name, it is personal. I suppose one could make a sermon about the personal nature of God and the human relation to God. It knows who Moses is. The first message is that he should not approach, for the ground is holy, a surprising element to the story because if any place was forsaken by God, it would have been that high mountain rocky place in Midian.

In the polarity of the sacred and the profane, that place looked profane, not necessarily in the sense of evil, but ordinary, deserted, when in fact it was holy, sacred, filled up with God’s presence. It turns out that there is no place on earth that *can’t* become holy by the sacred presence, even our own places, the places that are familiar to us, too familiar and ordinary to be

sacred; even our own lives, which often seem like the last place holiness could abide.

When you think about it, some of those places become the most meaningful and important places we know. One could preach a message about the way holiness conjures itself up out of the ordinary experiences of our lives.

Then there is a remarkable commission. God tells Moses that he has heard the cries of his people in Egypt, and for whatever reason has not only, at long last, decided to do something about it, but has decided that the thing to do is to send Moses, of all people, to be the voice, the instrument of Exodus. One could make a sermon of how God calls unlikely people to do unlikely things.

Moses, like many of us, puts up a resistance, claims he doesn't know God's name, and there are other complaints, and God meets every objection, mostly by promising to be with Moses wherever he goes. And offering that enigma of a name, "I am who I am," or, "I will be who I will be." The name itself is a sermon. The flaming bush, the sacred and the profane, Moses and his objections, the holy name of God; what is a preacher to do?

What makes the story of the Exodus even more interesting is that it became apart of Israel's foundational story. It was the establishment of the people of faith, and it was/is told to each generation,

and has been for these last three millennia or so. It interprets life.

There was perhaps no more important time for it to be told than several hundred years later after the Babylonians had come and reversed the Exodus by carrying the Judeans back into servitude.

To make things worse, after the Babylonians would come the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans, and from there the Middle Ages leading to the Spanish, French, German, and British. It seems that historical situations end, and though we give them different names, they seem all the same, like the Ford Taurus and the Mercury Sable, the same car with a different label on it. There is always a most powerful nation.

But the message for the day rises above all this history, and all these sermon topics, and speaks to us of the situations that every group of humans beings share, regardless of their names, times, and places. We share this beautiful planet and know untold blessings; but we know them fragmentarily, that is, broken up by times of boredom, pre-occupations with the demands of daily life, and sometimes anxiety and doubt, and sometimes unsustainable hardship. There is never a time when either individuals or communities can escape the vulnerabilities of life.

What is even more frustrating is that in addition to living under these circumstances, people find ways to contribute to the troubling side of life. In theological terms, we call this phenomenon Sin; and it is to us

inescapable. People are everlastingly creative at resistance.

For all of the immediate situations that nations and individuals find themselves in, which cry out for some kind of resolution, the larger context reveals that life is one great big *situation*. And there is no way out. No Exodus!

We all live in this beautiful yet troubled world with its beautiful yet *difficult* history; we all sin; we all die. These things must be accepted. Please, in the course of living, do not fail to immerse yourself in these questions; do not rationalize or deny them, ignore them..

The gospel message is that right here in the midst of it all, there is a bush on fire, there is sacred ground because the space is filled with the Holy Presence that is revealed in Jesus, who is the Christ; who lived among us, became a part of, “The Situation,” and died a sacrifice for the redemption of our lives, making for us, a way out.

Pay attention. Investigate. Bow down before the majesty of it. Be warned that it’s discovery, and it will be discovered, to each in unique ways, may make fearsome demands, like, “go back to Egypt.”

Do not fear them, for they *are* life, not in the basest, lowest common denominator, profane way, but in the highest most holy sense. In responding faithfully, even though we find ourselves in the same situation under

the same conditions is found not only the Exodus, the way out, but right here in this beautiful world with all its troubling realities, the fulness of life.

To be caught up in the Holy presence of the Lord is the *highest experience of life that is possible for us*. And it points to the eternal life from which we came, into which we are gathered up.

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