

Sermon
Proper 17, Year A
August 31, 2008
by The Rev. Norman Bray

In the flaming bush you promised deliverance to your people, O God, and in the cross of Jesus you embraced our suffering and our pain. In times of misery, show us the transforming power of your love that we may know the hope of your glory. Amen.

In our readings today we encounter a God who has compassion for the people's suffering, an apostle who preaches love as a way of life and a way of loving God, and Peter, who was last week's hero and now this week, the Satan. Last week, Moses was a bit player but this week he is at center stage, last week Peter is the Rock, the foundation of the church but this week he is the *skandalon*, the stumbling block. There is never a dull moment in these Scriptures.

The Old Testament reading finds Moses out in the wilderness tending sheep for his father-in-law. Moses is all grown up now, with a wife and responsibilities, and if you think about it, we know nothing about Moses that would qualify him for any special calling or any special relationship with God. He is a Hebrew, raised in an Egyptian household, who killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew. When Pharaoh heard about it he tried to have Moses killed but Moses escaped into the land of Midian and joined the household of Reuel, marries his daughter Zipporah, and has a son. Moses has a life but he says that he has no home; he is an alien residing in a strange land. So when he encounters the burning bush, he was surprised because none of his education had prepared him for that. But more surprising than the burning bush is the voice that calls to him out of that bush, the voice of God. God says "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings,⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land" Do you hear all of those verbs in that passage? This is an active God, a God who actively cares for God's people, and a God who declares that the time for action is at hand. Notice how God intends to accomplish this deliverance "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." Moses is going to do the work. It is God's plan but Moses will do all of the work on the ground and Moses is not convinced that God has all of the information needed to make that kind of a strategic decision. Moses says "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" What he is really saying to God is "Who do you think that I am?" Moses has already said that he is an alien in a strange land. He has no family or clan that gives him status, he has no property or herds or flocks, and he has no wealth. He has none of the trappings of a leader, of an emissary to Pharaoh. But he is the chosen of God and like all of the prophets that followed Moses; he is unable to resist that call.

I hope that you are familiar with the rest of that piece of the story because that is all that I am going to say about Moses today but I do want to direct your attention to a spot that troubles me; "and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the

Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.” This is a list of some of the peoples that Israel will have to fight with to gain possession of the Promised Land and the thing that troubles me is why are they going to be afflicted by God? Why would God deliver Israel out of Egypt who was the great oppressor just to take them far away to wage war on peoples that they have never encountered? The God who so loves of Israel that a deliverer is raised up for them is the same God who will bring war and death to the people of what we now call Palestine. This troubles me but I have a way to ameliorate the pain because through my studies I know that this story was not written until approximately 800 years after it happened. Who do you think were the people who were causing trouble for Israel at that time? Take a wild guess. Of course, it is the same list of peoples. What does this mean? Does it change or invalidate the story? Of course not! What it tells us is how Israel saw God, as the God who would inflict injury on others for the sake of God’s chosen People. What it says is “My God is better than your God” and it sets the stage for several millennia where good people said to themselves “If I am right, then God will be on my side and I can defeat my enemies.” It is fine to use force if we are morally in the right. Do you see what I am saying?

Now, let’s jump forward in time 1500 or 1600 years and listen as Jesus tries to tell the apostles what is going to happen to him. “From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” This is not Jesus’ fate or Jesus’ destiny that he is talking about, it is the unfolding of God’s plan, the great coming of the messiah that Israel had anticipated for hundreds of years was now. There is no doubt that this is God’s plan, listen to what the Gospel says about Jesus being raised from the dead. “On the third day be raised,” it is not Jesus that is the power behind the resurrection but God. This talk of death was too much for Peter, the Rock. He could not understand what could be good about death and that part about resurrection did not make any sense at all. Peter did not understand that only through the death AND resurrection of Jesus could the connection be broken between sin and death. Peter was thinking with an earthly brain and who could blame him, that is all that he had. In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus tells of his coming death and resurrection 4 times and the apostles never do understand what he is talking about. Peter wants to defend Jesus against the Jewish authorities, he wants to lead the troops into battle, and he wants to use force and power and might of arms to force the authorities to see it his way. Does that sound familiar? Can you see why Jesus reacted so strongly? Peter would make Jesus into the very thing that he came to defeat.

The only way for us to get away from our minds set on human things is to listen to the apostle Paul and learn how to love with a genuine love. That love is the love that is expressed in the radical giving of self, which requires a radical freedom from self. Think for a moment about your closest relationships, the more that we strain to love; the less able we are to live for ourselves. We learn to live for the other, relinquishing control, loving enough to endure the pain of allowing another to suffer and struggle. This is the love that Peter did not have, he could not allow his beloved to suffer, Peter wanted to “fix” it because that is what we do, we say, “here, let me take care of that for you,” when what is needed is patience and love. When we attempt to “fix” things we are really attempting to bend life to our own wills. We are saying that we know what is best for you, let us show you how it should be done. That is not

love. Love is recognizing people for who they are and encouraging them to be faithful to their call. That is what Jesus needed from Peter, and that is just what Peter needed.

Did you know that no other major religion has love as a major tenet? Only Christianity features love so prominently and I think that it is because we had such an example in Jesus that it was inescapable. Inescapable, of course we have never been able to do it, we get it wrong time and again, and we use our faith as a club instead of paying attention to what Jesus taught because what he taught was a paradox. The paradox of the Christian life is that by dying to sin, we live and by giving we receive. It is shown most clearly in the cross because it is by the cross that we become the loving, giving people that God intended us to be. It is through the cross that we learn the kind of love that we are to have for one another and it is only by taking up that cross in our own lives that we find the life that we have been promised.

Amen