

*In the name of God who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

What a shock it must have been to Moses! While he's going about his daily work shepherding sheep in the unfamiliar region of his father-in-law, just glad to be alive, relieved that he has escaped from Egypt, thankful that he has met a lovely woman to be his wife, and blessed that her family has welcomed him into their fellowship, he happens upon a theophany, a vision of God. Now, the story of Moses so far has given us little or no information about his religious affiliations or practices; perhaps he would have called himself "spiritual but not religious". What a shock it must have been for him to encounter God in this nightmarish way: a talking bush which is on fire but not being consumed by the flames, unexpected, unbelievable, and frightening! The narrative from the Book of Exodus certainly describes the curiosity he feels, and the content of the dialogue he has with God there in the Sinai wilderness, but imagine the unsettling shock of it all. Moses' dreamy, comfortable life being distorted into what looks at first glance to be a nightmare.

Fast forward some 1500 years to Caesarea Philippi, as Jesus and his disciples are passing through the region teaching, healing, and modeling God's intentions for the local people. As you may remember from last week's gospel reading, Jesus casually asks the disciples who people are saying that he is. Peter alone has the right answer: Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God sent to save everyone. And, Oh, does Jesus compliment Peter for that! He says that Peter has earned the keys to the kingdom, that he will be the rock on whom the church will be founded! Imagine how that must have pleased Peter, the warm glow he must have felt, the self-satisfaction he must have enjoyed! He may have drifted off into a daydream about his own significance, about how everyone would know his new name, how he had a knack for having the right answers all the time now. What an achievement, what a reputation, what a good life!

But then Jesus reveals a bit more about what God's own dream will require: Jesus *must* suffer at the hands of the authorities, *must* be killed, and *must* endure death for three days before rising again in a demonstration of the power of resurrection. That revelation shocks Peter out of his daydream, startles him back to reality, and he can't believe what he is hearing! God forbid! He says, and dares to contradict Jesus the Master, and insists that what he has been told *must not* happen. And, as we have read, Jesus responds harshly, comparing Peter's lack of clarity to satanic temptations, to the hypocrisies and delusions of worldly obsessions. He tells Peter to "get behind him", to return to his place as a follower and disciple and student and apprentice. To get back in line with the program, to recommit to the divine agenda, to confirm his original intention to follow Jesus away from those Galilean fishing boats to a new life. To take on God's dream as his own.

This admonition of Peter must have sent shock-waves through all of the disciples gathered there, and it should through us, too. As we are tempted to drift off into our own daydreams, I think God does have the authority and power to bring us up-short, that God can create opportunities for us to be shaken out of complacency and distraction. There are certainly heavenly things with which we should occupy our hearts and minds, and a good shaking is sometimes just what we need. Now, I wouldn't presume to proclaim that this pandemic is such an invention, but it has its moments, doesn't it? It has caused us to think about the safety of others, for example, about how our actions can impact the health of those with whom we come in contact. That certainly is a divine concept, part of the dream God wants us to realize. The virus, for all its deadly danger has provoked us to re-define normalcy, and when it isn't just making us cranky, it has revealed to many how we can serve each other by thinking and acting with clarity and deliberation. And it may well make us re-think how we treat one another, that we may not be tempted to

be a stumbling-block to the ways God would prefer that we interact.

Being a good teacher, Jesus doesn't let this moment of admonishment go by without taking the opportunity to instruct and inspire. He has had to harshly tell Peter to get back in line, but then Matthew tells us that Jesus teaches more about what it means to put divine things ahead of worldly temptations. His message is about self-denial. He cryptically uses the cross as a teaching prop. Now, if Matthew has his story straight, this must have really caught the disciples off-guard, for although he has spoken of his death, he hasn't mentioned the cross before. If Matthew has the narrative really in order, Jesus doesn't predict the type of death he will suffer until a couple chapters later in the story. The disciples might be thinking he would be stoned or speared, but they had no idea that he would suffer the brutality of crucifixion. But Jesus tells them that those who truly want to follow must take up and their crosses gallantly and faithfully. He doesn't, by the way, say that they need to go looking for crosses to bear, but that they should focus on the crosses they personally have been given to bear. Carrying those crosses while following in Jesus' own footsteps, being pilgrims along the same path, persistently overcoming the stumbling-blocks, is what he teaches as attending to divine things.

This first mention of the cross and death by crucifixion must have filled Peter and the disciples with horror. Is Jesus teaching that they, too, as his followers and mimics would need to face that brutal death as well? The cross would have had a foreboding sense of finality for them, of the end of life and everything. The marker of graves. The monument to loss. But Jesus has a different signal in mind. For Jesus, even probably dreading the suffering soon to come, the cross becomes the beginning, not the end. Carrying the cross, faithfully, compassionately, leads to new life, even in the midst of pain and suffering. The cross is not a symbol of stagnation, but of becoming. It is not just a symbol of triumph over death, it is a reminder of how life should be lived when we are thinking first of divine things. When we are enthusiastic about participating in God's dream. When our intentions are sacramentally aligned with God's. Moses was awestruck by the vision of the flaming talking bush, but he was even more afraid to be in relationship with God. And then God gave him the assignment to return to Egypt, confront the Pharaoh, and achieve the freedom of his people. It became his cross to bear, with God's help. And it changed the world.

And now, when we are shocked and shaken-up, when we are admonished for our short-sightedness, when we are provoked to ponder the possibilities of the cross, what course are we called to follow to change our world? Frankly, I think St. Paul has said it better than I could, so if you will permit me, I'd like to re-read some of what he wrote in the letter to the Romans: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Amen.