

Sunday, August 30, 2020
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 17 (Year A)

Exodus 3.1-15; Matthew 16.21-28

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Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/524886064522726/videos/245621323269561>

(Sermon begins at about 15:15)

“Called to Action”

Today’s Gospel reading is a pivot point in the life and ministry of Jesus. And in the life and ministry of those who follow him. Jesus reveals to his disciples for the first time what will ultimately happen to him. “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” (Mt 16.21). Upon hearing this, Peter freaks out and rebukes Jesus, because surely these things could not possibly happen to the Messiah. To which Jesus responds “Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (Mt 16.23).

Jesus’ words seem a little harsh. But, at the same time, appropriate. Telling Peter “Get behind me Satan” was not so much condemning him as correcting him. Even commissioning him. Commissioning him for action. In calling Peter Satan, Jesus was not implying that Peter was evil. His use of the term “stumbling block” really says it all. It is likely that Jesus was calling to mind a more ancient understanding of *satan* as a generic term for an adversary. As one who places a stumbling block before another. An image that, over time, would take on additional meaning and become a common name for the personification of evil. But not here. I think Jesus was merely pointing out that Peter, in raising objections stemming from his limited understanding of who Jesus was, was serving as an adversary, getting in the way of what Jesus had to do. “Get behind me Satan” would have really been a statement that Peter needed to not just get out of Jesus’ way, but that he needed to get behind Jesus. As in, support Jesus. As in, get behind him so he could follow wherever Jesus would lead. This makes more sense considering what comes next.

Jesus uses the uncomfortable altercation with Peter as a springboard for conveying marching orders to Peter and all the disciples. Jesus tells them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16.24-25). This is not the first time Jesus has talked about the need for those who follow him to take up their cross. He used this same phraseology when he first gathered the Twelve together, commissioned them as apostles, and then warned them about what it means to follow him (Mt 10.38). I preached on that passage a couple months ago, but it’s probably worth reiterating the point about taking up the cross, since it seems to be a running theme in Jesus’ education of his followers.

Despite popular conceptions, when Jesus talks about his followers taking up their cross, it has nothing to do with the little burdens or inconveniences that we encounter in our daily lives.

When Jesus asks us to take up our cross, he is implying something far greater. And while here he is revealing that he himself will die, there is no reason to believe that he is talking about the necessity for his followers to die in the service of the Gospel. While reference to the cross may have been an indication of the type of death he would die, we cannot be sure. We don't know what details Jesus knew about his impending death. Rather, here his reference to the cross is likely meant to invoke a very particular image that would have been well understood by those living under Roman oppression. The cross was a means of execution reserved for those who were perceived as a threat to the Roman Empire. Jesus is saying that those who follow him are to identify with those who threaten the Empire. With those who threaten the status quo. That truly living the Gospel is a threat to the status quo. That they—we—are to be those who threaten the status quo.

Jesus' statement that those who follow him must take up their cross is nothing short of a call to action. That those who follow Jesus can't just say they are his followers. They must demonstrate it through their actions. They must be willing to follow, despite not knowing where the journey will lead. That following Jesus is not about playing it safe. "Those who want to save their lives will lose it, [but] those who lose their life for [Jesus'] sake will find it." Following Jesus is about embracing an alternative way of life. Following Jesus is about embracing alternative practices that are consistent with God's purposes. Following Jesus is about embracing an alternative community that is the embodiment of God's kingdom. Following Jesus is about stepping out in faith, despite the uncertainty that lies ahead. It is about stepping out in faith that Jesus will lead us where we need to go. And that he will be with us throughout the journey, guiding us, supporting us, and sustaining us.

In actuality, what Jesus was asking—what he was telling his disciples—was nothing new. Stepping out into the unknown, following God into the unknown, has been part of what it means to be God's people from the beginning. Abraham and Sarah stepped out in faith to travel to a foreign land because God asked them to. A land that would become their Promised Land. Their descendants followed God into the unknown in Egypt. And in our Old Testament reading for today, we hear the beginning of a new journey of faith. Of God, speaking through a burning bush, calling Moses to lead his people out of Egypt and back to the Promised Land.

There are certainly parallels between the Old Testament and Gospel readings. Both are stories of calling and commissioning. But there is something in the calling of Moses that we often overlook. Something that is critical to who we are as those who follow God. As those who are made in the image and likeness of God. When Moses encounters God in the burning bush and asks his name, "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM'" (Ex 3.14a). Other translations include "I AM WHAT I AM" or "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE." A bit cryptic, to be sure. Yet also very revealing. As one commentary explains:

The revelation of the divine name is an early form of the Hebrew verb "to be" (*hwh, hawah*) and not a noun, as one would expect. The expression "I am" or "I will be who I am" places the focus of God's name on actions for Israel, and not on God's independent being or essence. The name YHWH, translated as "LORD" in the NRSV, is the third-person masculine singular form of the verb. It translates "he is" or "he will be." Speaking the name YHWH actually poses a question: He will be what? The answer to the question requires further

reading in the book of Exodus, where the future actions of God for Israel are recorded, providing the content of the divine verbal name: YHWH will be savior, healer, revealer, covenant maker, etc. The everlasting quality of the name signifies the faithfulness of God's actions toward Israel into the future.¹

In other words, what we have taken to be God's name is not really a name at all, but is more akin to a description of God's purpose. A purpose that unfolds over time. Who God really is, is revealed in action. Revealed in God's actions among humanity, and revealed in humanity's response to God's actions.

This divine commissioning of Moses invokes God's very being and purpose as the foundation for the work that Moses would embark upon. It would be through the Exodus, the forty years wandering in the wilderness, that God would more fully reveal himself to his people. It would be during this wilderness experience that the people would truly come to know who God is. That they would come to experience God in tangible ways.

The entire Old Testament is about how God makes himself known to his people through his actions, and how they respond. And there is one action, or series of actions, that makes God even more fully known. That is the incarnation: God coming to be with us in the flesh in the form of Jesus Christ. But the story does not end there. As our Gospel reading for today shows, Jesus commissions those who follow him—ALL who follow him—with the words, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." This is a call to action. This is our call to action. That just as God's actions reveal the essence of who he is; just as Jesus' actions reveal who he is as God incarnate, and thereby further reveals who God is; so too do our actions continue to reveal who God is. As those who follow Christ, as those who are made in the image and likeness of God, who we are is only revealed through action. And if we truly follow him, our actions serve to reveal not only who we are, but also something of who God is.

God's call to action is generally shrouded in uncertainty, in the unknown. As we see in Exodus with the calling of Moses, Moses had a lot of questions. But God assured him that he would be with him every step of the way. Moses' job was not to know the endgame. His job was to be faithful and obedient and to play his part when called upon to do so. He had faith and went along. As we see in Matthew with Peter's reaction to Jesus' revelation of how things are going to play out, and with the commissioning of the disciples and all who seek to follow Jesus, there are unknowns when it comes to following Jesus. None of the disciples knew where the path would lead them. Their job was to be faithful and obedient and to play their parts when called upon to do so. They had faith and went along.

Despite the uncertainty that comes with God's call to action, what Scripture does show, time and again, is the divine assurance of the faithfulness of God. That even in times of uncertainty, God is with his people. As those who are called into action on behalf of God's name, as those who are called to live into the purpose of God's name, we are called to step out in faith. We don't know where we are going. The only way we will find out is to go through it. All we know is that we have our part to play in revealing who God is to the world. And the promise is that

losing our lives for the sake of Christ—being willing to step into action to proclaim the Gospel—carries the promise that we will find an even more fulfilling life in him.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 90-91.