

EXODUS 3:1-15

PSALM 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c

ROMANS 12:9-21

MATTHEW 16:21-28

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty Second Sunday in Ordinary
Time

September 3, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Burning Bushes! Carrying Crosses!

What a sight it must have been! What an awesome, glorious sight to behold, Moses coming face to face with a fire up on the mountainside. Surely, he needed to find a way to put out the flames before they spread and destroyed God’s holy mountain, the mount called Horeb, better known as Mt. Sinai. We have all seen what wildfires can do, the utter destruction and devastation. And yet Moses quickly realized that there was a whole lot of strange, a whole lot of weird, going on with these well-behaved, well-contained flames that refused to consume the bush. A bush that blazed but did not burn! Yes, blazing bushes! Sounds like a great movie title! Some scholars argue that the former silver spoon trust baby turned shepherd and soon to be Pharoah-tormenting and anointed law giver—what a resume—was viewing from a great distance nothing more than a tree that produces the brightest, orange, most intense leaves. Was what he was seeing what he was seeing? Or was it a mirage, just like many landlocked watery oases! Yes, from a distance, the tree looked like it was burning, its glow so bright it could stretch the imaginative mind, causing curious thoughts to run wild. But is it not in the ordinary that we often discover the sacred, that we find the holy, experience the awe and wonder of transcendence, the mystery

that lies behind every object in the universe, all created by the wind, the Ruah, of God? Allow your imagination to roam wild this morning in much the same way that Moses no doubt did on a certain day while climbing a mountain known as the home of God, a place somewhere secluded, God's special hermitage, on the side of a mountain, the sacred space where the Divine was said to hang out, was rumored to tabernacle, to pitch a tent and dwell in a cloak of clouded mystery, yes, beholding the greatest secrecy known and unknown to humanity. Until! In this theophany from the Hebrew Bible, this manifestation of God, we too can be transported to places unknown, to destinations desired from our limited perspectives, from the confines of our mortal, temporal, capacities as human beings. When we read these ancient texts, they still have the amazing ability to offer aha moments, to reveal what the Irish call "thin places," lush green landscapes where heaven and earth collide, where past, present, and future converge. As we see over and over and over again in scripture, these profound words we proclaim to be holy, God is frequently revealed on a mountaintop, "transfigurative" moments that take us to the high places, lofty venues we wish we could ascend on a regular basis and remain when we go. **Oh, "to scale the utmost height and catch a gleam of glory bright says the old Gospel Song! Oh, to traverse these upwardly mobile steps!**

But life always calls us back to the realities of our least common denominators, crashing us back to earth with the strongest of gravitational pull, taking us deep into the valleys, as the biblical writer and we ourselves are prone to say, even brushing with the shadows of death, all the things, the crises, that haunt us when we experience the crosses that come our way. Yes, burning bushes! Carrying crosses! No cross burnings here! We will leave that nonsense to the KKK who are infamous for such disgusting pyrotechnics. And speaking of crosses, those rudely connected beams of history offer us the other side of the coin today, the opposite side of our mountaintop highs, reminding us of the dichotomies, the polarities of life, like a magnet drawing us to

the dark side, yes, like a moth to the flame, flame being the operative word here, the reminder that for all our ups there are downs. It is the same God who is revealed in the subtlety and the bravado of our seesaw journeys through this life, the Holy One coming as a complete package, the deal including all the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual sides that the holiness equation can contain within us. We get all of it or we get none of it! In today's Witness from the Gospels in Matthew we find the second half of the implications of following Jesus, the backside, the downside, of what it means to sign on the dotted line and stand with the one who stood for social justice while standing with any and everyone whose lives were always lived in the valleys of despair. You know the litany of the vulnerably compromised by heart! Today we indeed read the highs and the lows, the good and the bad, that come with our humanity, no exceptions, no exemptions, all expectations, no ifs, ands, or buts. The opposites attracting in these two lections framing our worship are the paradigm through which we live, the opaque lens, the shifting prism, what Paul called a dark glass or a glass darkly if you prefer the Authorized King James Version, through which we only in part vaguely see, allowing us a glimpse on occasion, buoyed by our experience, all building the bridge on which we teeter each and every day. And yet without these markers, these moments, all of them holy as part and parcel of the universe as God designed it, without these steppingstones, we would be lost without direction. For every action there is a reaction. For every experience there is a response and only the one privy to such existential nudging deciding the way forward, the road that will be taken, often a fork forcing our decision-making abilities. The potential impact never to be minimized or trivialized in any way.

Moses had been at the top of his game, saved in the quiet bullrushes by a quick-thinking and sacrificially loving mother and reared among the Egyptians as the favored son of Pharaoh. They always wondered why he looked so different, a little pale in comparison to what we might

think. He grew up with every advantage, the best schools, no need to even worry about climbing the social ladder because he was already living on the top rung, basking as if on an island, a false mountaintop in a world of eat, drink, and be merry ease. Well, as many stories are, the story is long and winding, Moses eventually found out, we always are, you can only fake it until you make it, and it is hard to fake it when you are not even aware, yes, you fake it until you fall. Your façade unceremoniously removed, and your real stuff exposed, blowing in the wind. Banished from Egypt with little or much fanfare, a grieving old Pharaoh now long deceived, still loving a once loyal son who now was not his own, Moses suddenly finds himself a nomadic herder, following in the footsteps of his real ancestors, a chip off Abraham's block. How did he get here? And yet, because of this unanticipated, this unexpected sojourn in wilderness exile, he finds family, home, gets married and discovers that this simple life was far superior to the false pretenses that drove the Pharaoh's household. How odd it all seemed. Less was more! A country's curse now a blessing! Statuesque Gods made of mortar and stone now replaced with living, breathing, transcendent mystery, more real than ever imagined, far more mysterious than manageable to the mind. Moses' life had become the mountaintop it had never been, never seemed or was meant to be. Sometimes second choice is not second best! Hard lessons learned, the school of hard knocks wins again.

And now Moses stood face to face with the God whose name evokes, exudes, mystery and wonder, Yahweh, a name never spoken under any circumstances, never uttered, not even in hushed and covered tones, the quietest, subtle, whispers. The big reveal to Moses that day was the granting of the name above every name, the great "I am who, or that, I am," or "I am being who, or that, I am being," a name that says absolutely nothing and absolutely everything. Moses had dared asked God for a name because it was customary that every god had a name in Egypt. Very important to know! Moses grew up talking with

his fake daddy Pharoah and now he was conversing with the holy parent of the ages, and my what a conversation it was, frightening, fascinating, and fantastic, a stupendously euphoric moment like none that Egypt's royal pomp and circumstance could ever offer. Perhaps it is true that it is only when we are laid bare, stripped naked and unashamed, transparent in every feeble and every confident way we can be, all our masks removed, all our defenses, our protective mechanisms, the facades that get us through the day, only when we are left with our authentic self, genuine to the core, are we ready to not only experience whatever transcendence might be in this life, but begin the process of getting clarity about who we really are, what we shall become, and what we are to do on the way. Moses got the full package! Even with this divine security blanket propping him up, he still needed a stick, a staff would do, and needed to know that he had backing, that he was not alone. No matter our presumed exteriors, we are always vulnerable, compromised to some degree, dependent, yes, interdependent, trying desperately to trust in the God who always calls us beyond ourselves, demanding of us more than we ever think possible. "Let this cup pass from me, but not my will but yours!" Good luck with that one!

In today's Witness from the Hebrew Bible in Exodus, stretching a metaphor to its capacity this morning, we read about Moses' cross long before there was one, perhaps destiny's call born right there in the vortex of life's bullrushes. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther, Rosa Parks, Harriett Tubman, hopefully in our own way, you and me, and of course, Jesus, the rabbi, the man from Nazareth, a reformer whose courage led to his arrest and trial, trial being the operative word in both a literal and figurative way, symbolism off the chain, Jesus summarily executed for convenience by crucifixion as a common criminal. Yes, Moses found his cross just like we all discover ours, unique as they all are, yes, suited to fit like a glove! Only when we discover our true, our genuine, authentic, self,

can we become all that we are meant to be, designed to be, called to be. Only then can we evolve and grow into our unique selves. Others may help along the way, but it is our journey alone, demanding a lot of solitary reflective introspection and discernment. No one else can do the hard work for us. We will always be restless, never content, never happy, until we find our cross. Unawares the whole time, Moses' entire life was a learning curve, steeling him for this moment and the moments to come, all that time assuming his hopelessly unfulfilled mortal destiny, all the trappings as heir apparent, chosen by birthright to be the next Pharaoh, obelisks named in his honor everywhere you looked, glaring and glistening on every corner, the golden child living in the lap of luxury, sometimes and somewhat uncomfortable in the saddle for reasons that were not clear at the time, a constant nagging in his gut, watching his people suffer, sensing that strange kinship feeling, as they slaved under the whip and weight as part of the collateral damage of the horrors of indenture. We are told that all things happen in due time, and indeed they do! The Gospel writers, composing out of their painful and joyful experiences during the embryonic growth pangs of the early Church, the cross loomed large for them as a teachable object. They understood fully what it meant to take up a cross that was uniquely their own. Yes, it is the same call to all of us, the same but different. Christianity without crosses, Christendom without crucifixions, metaphorical as they all now may be and usually are, is but an illusion. No, the cross as a cruel instrument of suffering is no longer necessary. There is no need to endure the agony of hypothetical pain for the sheer purpose of a pointless guilt-ridden, guilt-induced, exercise, but rather the cross is about sacrifice, doing the kinds of selfless liberating things in this life that are as needed now among those on the fringes as it was for Moses in the freeing of his people, as it was for Jesus in the empowerment of the powerless in his day, as it has been for everyone since who has stood in the gap, demanding social justice for the dispossessed, the disenfranchised, the marginalized, who come in a

wide variety of human forms, all shapes and sizes, all of us part of the rainbow, a spectacular spectrum of unlimited colors, all humanity loved and graced as the divine images, the incarnations, of God.

Among the many things we find passionately appealing in the United Church of Christ and in many of its subsidiaries in churches life ours is the emphasis, the priority, placed on people, all people, “no matter who they are or where they are on life’s journey.” As a denomination and an affiliated congregation, we take seriously the call to an egalitarian way, to equal justice for all under the law and under a basic human expectation as a divine demand, yes, the call to social justice, a watchword that unfortunately is a byword for much of our country, a selfishly motivated pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps, a manipulative and guilt-inducing tired Protestant work ethic, mentality that has seeped into the conscience of the nation’s collective groundwater. Whatever we are called to be and to do, no matter how seemingly small or insignificant, we are called to be something, called to do something, every little bit moving the marble, making a difference in our lives, in the lives of those around us, in our global village, and yes, in the universe. We are all called to be advocates and activists! Crosses are small, crosses are big, crosses come in many shapes and sizes, yes, ugly and pretty, simple and ornate, some even opulent, but crosses are crosses and the real ones cannot be seen but are everywhere, just waiting to be picked up and carried. Listen to the subtlety in Jesus’ words about this whole cross-carrying idea, this absurd initiative. He declares, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me.” Yada, yada, yada! Blah, blah, blah! The key phrase in these comments was not so much the taking up our cross part, though that is an essential, very necessary, part of the process. No, the key phrase that preceded that one is the part about Jesus’ call to his disciples, his loyal followers then and now, saying no to themselves! Threin is the gospel in a nutshell, the essence of how we shall then live. For when we say no to ourselves, we

automatically put God and others first, ahead of our wants and whims, and carrying our crosses becomes as second nature as walking and chewing gum. May it be said about us! May it be so!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and gives us mountaintops and valleys, allowing us glimpses of holy presence, at least on occasion when we are lucky! Amen and amen.