

3rd Sunday of Lent, Cycle C
Exodus 3:1-8A, 13-15
Psalm 103: 1-2, 3-4, 6-7, 8, 11
1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12
Luke 13:1-9
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Our First Reading for this 3rd Sunday of Lent is the account in Exodus, chapter three, of Moses' encounter with the burning bush. I'm going to talk about the passage in some detail, so you might like to open the text and follow along. As the chapter begins, Moses has led the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro across the desert. Jethro is identified as the *priest* of Midian. Living with a priest will have given Moses a religious frame of reference. Religious rites and sacrifices would have been part of his everyday experience, so the idea of encountering a god in the desert would not have seemed utterly strange to him.

Notice it is not a flock but *the* flock of Jethro. This tells us a good deal about Moses already. Jethro is a pastoralist, so his flock constitutes virtually the entirety of his wealth. Despite the fact that his son-in-law is a foreigner, Jethro has trusted him to take his precious flock not only into the desert, but *across* it. There could be no stronger testimony to Moses' trustworthiness and competence.

While leading the flock, Moses comes upon Horeb, the mountain of God. "Mountain of God" is probably a title given to Horeb retrospectively because of the events that will be described in the passage. "There an angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in fire flaming out of a bush." The reference to an angel here is a conventional courtesy, employed because

it was thought presumptuous to refer to God directly, but there is no doubt that it is really the Lord himself who is present in the flames.

Moses notices that while the bush is burning, it not being consumed. Jewish commentators have found the bush to be symbolic of the Jewish people, who have suffered terribly throughout their long history, but who have always endured. When he sees the bush, Moses decides, "I must go over to look at this remarkable sight, and see why the bush is not burned." It is significant that Moses has to "go over" to the bush. Clearly, it appears at some distance from himself and he has to go out of his way to investigate. His decision to do so testifies to Moses' innate curiosity. Another man might have thought, "Bushes, burning or otherwise, are none of my business. My responsibility is to look after these sheep." Such a man might have ignored the bush and kept walking. This might cause us to reflect that even the most powerful manifestations of the Divine in our lives will only matter if we notice them and choose to engage with them. Further, it is significant that God evidently wants to leave us with a choice in the matter. True, a bush that is burning without being consumed is unusual, but it is not overwhelming. If the Lord had chosen to, he could have manifested himself to Moses in some titanic manner that would have compelled attention. The burning bush could also be evidence that the Lord "knows his man." God knows just the sort of thing that will engage Moses' interest. God knows each of us as well. When he approaches the bush, God's personal knowledge of Moses is confirmed when he calls out to him by *name*, and waits for Moses to reply, "Here I am." Again, Moses is allowed the *choice* of responding or not. The option he chooses requires courage. So might it be in our lives of faith.

Now God says, “Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground.” This is less a demand for deference by God than an act of divine graciousness. The Lord is kindly telling Moses, who still has no idea who he is talking to, the proper way to behave. If you were attending a diplomatic reception, and were about to chat with a woman who, unbeknownst to you, was a queen, you’d appreciate being clued in beforehand. The Lord continues, “I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.” A better translation here would be the singular, “father.” “I am the God of your father.” At this time, every extended family worshipped its own God. To say to Moses, “I am the God of your father” was to make a specific claim. The rest of the Lord’s statement is new information, revealing something remarkable about God. Moses is being told that the gods of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and of his own father are in fact one God – this God. Only now does Moses, who has been extraordinarily bold to this point, hide his face. He does so because he knows the family tradition that one must not look at their God.

The Lord tells Moses that he has witnessed the affliction of his people in Egypt and that he knows well what they are suffering. In Hebrew, the word “knows” implies not only intellectual knowledge, but also empathy and understanding. God is expressing appreciation of the magnitude of the people’s suffering and engagement with it. Therefore, God says, I have come down to rescue them, “and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” First, notice that while God will call upon Moses to act on his behalf, it is ultimately *God* who will be leading the people out of captivity. Second, the description of the Promised Land as spacious and flowing with milk is

obviously intended for a pastoral people. “Flowing” would more accurately be translated as “oozing” and implies that the udders of the animals would be filled to bursting with milk so that it would literally be oozing out of them. A description intended for farmers would doubtless be different. For them, God might have described topsoil a foot deep and black as night and rains that never failed.

As soon as God instructs Moses to tell the people of their impending deliverance, Moses asks God what name for God he should give them. This is because tradition dictated that any new pronouncement from a god should be accompanied and validated by a new divine name. God replies, “I am who am.” Whole libraries of books have been written about these words, and we haven’t time to linger over them here. It is enough for now to say that I AM is a name for God that the people would have difficulty understanding. So, God graciously gives Moses another name to share with the people that they can more easily grasp – that they can literally *relate to*. “Say to the Israelites: the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” As we have seen, that all these gods are in fact *one* God will be news to the Israelites, and so will constitute for them a new Divine name. God declares, “This is my name forever; thus am I to be remembered through all generations.” Thus it is made clear that the name, and the relationship that God has embraced will endure forever.

And so ends our passage. It is unusual for us to dedicate an entire reflection to just one of the readings for a particular Sunday. Perhaps having done so here will serve to remind us of the infinite riches of Scripture, and of how prayerful reflection on God’s Word can enhance our celebration of the holy season of Lent.