

In Anticipation Of Easter

March 10, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

The Lectionary during Lent is designed to prepare us to celebrate the Paschal mystery in all of its liberating wonder. That's why the Gospel readings feature episodes in the life of Jesus, which foreshadow the Cross and the Resurrection. The Epistles, on the other hand, are either expositions on the meaning of the Cross, or generally tell of our participation in salvation through baptism.

The lessons from Hebrew Scripture set forth events from Israel's salvation history as *events in anticipation of the Easter happening*. The reading for today from Exodus is one such reading that anticipates the message of the New Testament. Not only did the crucifixion of Jesus occur at the time of the Jewish Passover, but his death and Resurrection brought about the fulfillment of the *ultimate exodus*, that is, God's liberation of all people from bondage, not simply to Pharaoh, but to all historical tyranny that ensues from the power of sin and death. The Easter

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event thus is celebrated as the sacrifice of *Christ Our Passover*, as we make clear at the end of the Prayer of Consecration.

But the call of Moses at the burning bush prefigures Jesus in another way, too. In I Corinthians, Paul declares, *for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength* (1:25). Even though Paul was alluding to Christ crucified as *a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles* (1:23), the same kind of *foolishness* and *weakness* could be applied to Moses and the Exodus event.

Consider the story. Nothing in the Book of Genesis prepares us for the dramatic meeting that will occur between God and Moses. Nowhere is there such a vivid and in-depth encounter between God and a human being as that which occurred at the *imperishable bush*.

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Nor is there any character less likely than Moses to be chosen. He's not a great talker, so he won't triumph by virtue of distinguished oratorical skills. He has no superlative educational background, so exceptional intellectual prowess will not make him succeed. In terms of work, he might very well be unemployed if it were not for nepotism. He was minding his father-in-law's flocks. In terms of high motivation, there doesn't seem to be much. He appears to be content to live in some far-flung corner of the wilderness shepherding in obscurity. Moses is out of sight, *but* God will find him, and *finger* him anyway.

With nothing in his background to suggest that Moses could successfully be a "one man army" against a world power such as Pharaoh and the Egyptians, why was *he* elected? Some might contend that since he had killed an Egyptian for beating a fellow Hebrew, an incident which revealed a capacity for self-sacrifice, a

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passionate sense of justice, and a courageous recklessness, he could be up to the job. But these qualities, in themselves, were no guarantees for leadership. They did not assure religious or political acuity. However, after he freed the children of Israel from merciless servitude, these qualities *did* qualify Moses to lead his people in the still more trying task of preparing them for service to God.

What Moses *does* seem to possess is the one thing necessary to be of service to God, and that is *receptivity*. Instead of seeing a “tree on fire” and going on his merry way, Moses turns aside to see why the bush doesn’t burn up. He is curious and fascinated. When God calls him by name out of the bush, Moses doesn’t run away, he simply replies, *Here I am* (v. 4) and that is enough.

The text does not give any clear indication that Moses experienced a conversation at the imperishable bush.

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What Moses *does* exhibit is an *openness* to what is going on and a *willingness* to proceed even though he doesn't fully understand. That is all the conversion he needs. That is the *mustard seed* faith that God needs from all of us to accomplish the Divine will.

But, more than blind faith is necessary. This God in the bush will provide more clarification....up to a point. The Presence declares identity with the ancestral deity of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and pronounces compassion for the oppressed people in Egypt, and then says that they will be freed and brought to a *good and broad land*. Then the bombshell drops: *So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt* (v. 10).

So much for openness and receptivity. I've read that there is a condition which psychologists call the *anxiety of separateness*, an uncomfortable state artists

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and scientists and entrepreneurs (and I would guess prophets) experience when they realize they are alone and are treading on new ground. They are venturing into a new unmapped territory. There is a stomach churning realization that they may be wrong or lost or absurd. If this is the case here, the one question Moses would want to have answered from God is that of trustworthiness. Is God reliable? If Moses is to convince the Israelites to follow him, let alone the Egyptians to let the people go, he must be able to give them the **NAME** of their God, since the name discloses the deity's character and authority. So, he asks God for a name (v.13).

God gives Moses a name as we heard at the close of the reading, but earlier God had said, ***I AM WHO I AM***, say to the Israelites, ***I AM sent you***. That is the answer Moses needs to hear. Not just that God *is*, but that God exists with him in the form of a ***promise***. God is Being with a purpose, being present, being

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effective, leading the way, liberating. *God will be there.* God will be with them in unfailing, steadfast love.

And, indeed God would keep the promise, when the Egyptians were bearing down on them at the Red Sea when the people were moaning about no food, when they carped about running out of water, when they cried out for their old Egyptian fleshpots, and when they wished they had never left Egypt in the first place. God would be faithful, even if they were not.

So, the call of Moses reminds us, if nothing else that what God can do for us in our weakness surpasses anything we can do through our own strength. Moses prefigures, on Horeb and, later, in the Exodus, the deepest reality disclosed on Calvary's tree. Love.

AMEN.