



**Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Elizabeth Blunt Transcript**

“The First Words in an Epic, Lifelong Conversation”

Today we read about Moses encountering God in the burning bush and God’s invitation “to be the human agent in His project of rescue,” preaches Mother Beth. The God of old “is also asking in this moment to be known in what feels like a new way; as a God who is immediately present and active.”

Christians have seen Jesus prefigured in this self-sustaining fire, and Mother Beth offers this morning that, like Moses in Exodus, we are called by Jesus to the same lifelong project: “to act as agents of hope and to intercede courageously with God on behalf of the world.”

The readings are Exodus 3: 1-15, Psalm 63: 1-8, 1 Corinthians 10: 1-13, and Luke 13: 1-9.

Sermon Transcript:

May I speak to you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please, be seated.

Good morning everybody. Good morning. I would like to focus mainly today on our reading from the book of Exodus. This is one of my favorite pieces of Scripture in one of the most important books of the Bible, there's some big stuff that happens in Exodus. Yes, we have Israel being led out of slavery in Egypt, we have Moses receiving the law at Mount Sinai. And in the bigger picture, Exodus is really where Israel coalesces through triumph and trial and disaster into a distinct people beloved of God. This is where Israel learns how they should walk in the world as a people chosen and saved, but also as a people profoundly acquainted with suffering. Much of the Exodus journey, both physical and spiritual, takes place out in the wilderness. It's an especially fitting topic for us to take up here at the midpoint of our Lenten pilgrimage. You may recall that Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the book immediately before Exodus, hangs on a cliff hanger. All of Jacob's children, the promise descendants of Abraham and Sarah are safe and settled and they're fruitful and multiplying. But they're in Egypt living on land, gifted them by a Pharaoh who loved their brother Joseph. We know what's coming when we turn the page. A new Pharaoh generations later, who does not know Joseph and who sees the thriving Hebrew people as a threat. Moses then was born into this new era of slavery and oppression. And he was in some ways both Egyptian and Hebrew. He was as an infant, saved by a tacit alliance among women. Nursed through childhood by his own mother, but then adopted and raised in the royal household by Pharaoh's daughter. She gave him his name, which means to draw out, that's a memory of where he came from. He was drawn out of the river in that basket. And it's also a prophecy of what he's going to do. Today, we encounter Moses as an adult. He is now a shepherd attending the flock of his father-in-law in yet another cultural context.

As a young man, Moses straight up, murdered an Egyptian that he found beating one of his Hebrew country men. And then he had to flee some 200 miles straight east across the Sinai Desert all the way to

the Gulf of Aqaba. And upon arrival there, in what was the land of Midian, he immediately got into another scuffle, he chased away a bunch of shepherds who wouldn't give local women access to their well. Those women happen to be the daughters of Jethro, the great priest there. And one of them Zipporah, became his wife. So Moses had lived a lot of lives before he encountered God in the wilderness for the first time. On that day, he had driven his flocks far to the West. He's almost halfway between Midian and Egypt at this point. Horeb may be another name for Mount Sinai. It might be the name of the range in which Sinai was found. Regardless, the foreshadowing here is not subtle. Moses is standing under the foot of God's mountain. He's surrounded by his flock. He is about to have an encounter with the divine. I loved the fact that this whole episode really starts on, and really hinges on Moses' curiosity. He sees something he can't explain. He recognizes a sign and makes the decision to investigate. The site that arrests Moses is a fire, a fire that does not consume the bush where it's blazing. Fire is basically the visual effect of combustion. A chemical reaction that requires three things; oxygen, heat, and fuel, whether that fuel be solid, liquid, or gas. We humans would say that a fire that does not consume is a scientific impossibility. Moses' curiosity then opens him to discovery. And God speaks into that openness. The first words and what was going to be an epic, life-long conversation. This is the call of Moses.

God is asking him to be the human agent in his project of rescue. God has seen the agony of the people and will act. But the center of their discussion out there in the wilderness is not so much the project as it is identity. God's invitation requires Moses to re-imagine his concept of self and his concept of God. The garden Moses meets in the burning bush is in some way as the God of old, the God who chooses to be known through relationship and particularly, relationships with the families of the covenant. But God is also asking in this moment to be known in what feels like a new way. As a God who is immediately present and active, right there. God has come down to intercede. This is a God in dialogue, answering questions and diffusing doubts. Even though he's terrified, Moses' first response to God is typically authentic. This is the Moses we're going to get throughout the story. He is dismayed and he doesn't try to hide it. Who, he says, am I? Who am I, that I should go try to do this impossible thing? I who was raised far from you God, and far from my people and the temples and palaces of Egypt, I who have lived everywhere and belonged nowhere. And of course, Exodus has been answering those questions right along. We would say Moses is exactly the right person for the job, not in spite of his diverse fluencies, but because of them. Moses is a man who knows Egypt and knows Israel. And now, knows the cultures of the desert where he's going to be forced to wander for a long time. Most importantly, Moses has proved himself to be a man of passionate moral conviction. Somebody incapable of walking away from abuse and injustice, even when they're substantial risk involved. Moses is already who he needs to be, but he can't see it. He needs help to imagine himself as not just the sum of his parts, but as something whole.

When Moses asks, who am I, God doesn't say any of that. God's simply says, I will be with you. Is the name God gives Moses to carry to the people. Close to that four consonant name we're more familiar with, which is another cognitive of the same verb to be, but leaning here toward the future tense. Less I am what I am, and more I will be what I will be. As far as we know, this is the first time in history God has revealed the divine name. So Moses isn't being given a secret password that his countrymen will recognize and open the door. He's being given a message, a promise for him, for Israel and really for the world. I am the perpetual fire that requires no fuel. I am the one who creates and sustains who was and is, and is to come. I will be with you. This is my name for all generations. Christians from the beginning have seen Jesus prefigured in that self-sustaining fire. We know him as the literal embodiment, the perpetual fulfillment of God with us. In Judea 2,000 years ago, here at our table and

among this community today and all through his ministry, Jesus calls those who follow him to the same ongoing project of reimagining God and reimagining self in service of the kingdom. That's really what's at the heart of our frustrating little gospel nugget this morning. This one can be confusing because it's so terse and because it hinges on ancient assumptions that aren't as widely held today. In short, Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem teaching when strangers arrive with upsetting news, we certainly know what that's like. Pilate has had Galilean dissidence killed on temple grounds. So the blood of the faithful people of Israel has been mixed with the blood of sacrifices. At the time, many people believe that terrible tragedies were God's punishment for unseen sins, which must have been where Jesus's audience went because he corrects that notion vigorously. This lesson ends up being a lot like remove the log from your own eye before dealing with the splinter in your neighbors. While judging others, Jesus tells them, they've failed to truly see themselves. They've neglected their own need for repentance.

And at the same time, they failed to truly see God, a God who has chosen for all generations to default to mercy. A point Jesus then underscores with his parable about a fruitless fig tree that the landowner allows to keep its place in the garden. Now, allocating time and attention and resources to the project of reimagining self and God, as we're called to do in this season of Lent, can feel like navel-gazing when the world is on fire, the fire that does consume everything in its path. I was listening to NPR the other morning, they were interviewing a Ukrainian journalist who'd managed to make his way to London. And the last question the interviewer asked was this. What's the one thing you'd ask our American listeners to do to help? There was no hesitation. The man immediately said, pray for us, pray for peace. There was a little silence, and I have expected a follow-up question like, yeah, but what can we do? Where can we send money and what politicians can we write to, those are important things by the way, but that didn't happen. The request was just allowed to linger there over the air. And I got the sense that prayer was no longer such a useless sounding task. One of the interesting things about today's gospel parable of the tree and the gardener and the landowner is that the rules aren't as clearly assigned as they sometimes seem to be in Jesus's teachings, we're probably the fig tree. We probably need more time and nourishment as we try to find our own ways to bear fruit. Jesus is probably the gardener intervening for us. But it's possible that we are also meant to inhabit the space of the gardener. That we have a responsibility to act as agents of hope. Like Moses, to intercede courageously with God on behalf of the world, to pray, and to also roll up our sleeves and dig and fertilize and tend and advocate with what time we have. I hope in what's left of Lent, that despite the noise and the chaos and the fearful sites all around us, you will find a little space to be distracted by something God has to show you. I hope that you will honor your curiosity and know that whatever time you spend in genuine communion with God changes not just you, but the world and that you'll be reassured that any room you leave for hope and any light you give love is a real and powerful resistance to evil.

Amen.