

Sunday closest to August 31**Year A****Proper 17****RCL**

Exodus 3:1-15

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

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

You hardly imagined

standing here,

everything you ever loved

suddenly returned to you,

looking you in the eye

and calling your name.

Jan Richardson begins in her poem, "the Magdalene's Blessing". As we hear bits of Moses' story in the lectionary this month, I wonder, could Moses have ever thought his life would bring him to this moment? Shepherding a flock for his father-in-law. Leading them beyond the wilderness. Sensing something speaking right to his heart. And turning aside to see the most unbelievable sight- to see a fiery bush- and to hear- to hear the voice of God.

Most of us know about Moses' story. We know it through Sunday school, or our time spent in Biblical study, or in the many and varied ways Moses is portrayed in film. Every time I hear this passage, I must confess, I hear the voice of God in Cecil B. Demille's film "the Ten Commandments", "Moses, put off thy shoes, from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. And Charlton Heston removes his shoes and falls to the ground. "Lord, lord, why do you not hear the cries of your children in the bonds of Egypt." But I digress, because the truth of the matter is, God did hear the cries of God's children, and sometimes the film adaption, although ripe for theological conversation, just doesn't hold a candle to the real story.

The story that is passed down to us in scripture is that God had observed the Israelites' misery. God had heard their cry from their desert wasteland of oppression and slavery. God knew their sufferings. And God, even though at times it felt this way in the narrative, did not remain silent.

We heard last week about the remarkable faith, resilience and resistance of the Midwives Shiprah, and Puah. Two women, who were named as those that showed how God redeems God's people through the least likely of people. Two women, that began this narrative of salvation, a narrative that Moses would be

invited into as he grew. Women that saved Hebrew babies in a direct violation of orders from Pharaoh. As we know, one of those babies that survived Pharaoh's evil actions of murdering Hebrew male babies, was Moses. Through no fault of his own, Moses never fit in anywhere. He's never been at home. Not with the Egyptians, who adopted him out of the Nile and named him. Not with the Hebrew people, whom he tried to protect by murdering an Egyptian. And not even, when he was on the lam, in exile from Egypt in Midian.

And while the reading tells us that Mount Horeb means the Mountain of God, it actually means something much more devastating. Horeb means, "to lay in waste, to dry up, to be in ruins". Horeb means a wasteland.

Our neighbors in Texas find themselves in a physical wasteland of water- instead of nurturing life, water through Harvey brought destruction of properties, livelihoods, and tragic and terrible deaths. Through war games, we find ourselves with the threat of armed conflict with North Korea. And we also find ourselves bogged down in a spiritual wasteland. A wasteland where white supremacists have come out from under their hoods, carrying torches, and chanting obscenely hateful chants. A spiritual wasteland where racism is being given the front cover and those that push back against it are being equated to the very racists they

oppose. A place where extremism is emboldened. A spiritual wasteland where hate is ruling our country and love, and care and compassion, seem to not be enough to fight it.

But we see in Moses' story, the wasteland never wins. Because in the wasteland, Moses heard God in the burning bush. On Mount Horeb, the Israelites, bone dry after many miles of journeying in the desert, had their thirst quenched when Moses struck a rock, releasing water. The Israelites received the Ten Commandments there, and yes, even later the prophet Elijah hears God in the still, small voice at that very same place.

God always, always, always finds a way to break through- even if it's in totally unimaginable and improbable ways- like speaking through a fiery bush which held the divine. And I don't know about you, but this is the moment where I find hope. Hope that God continues to reach out to us, to show us that he's heard our cries from the depths of our despair, to work through imperfect people, and to bring us relief and freedom from the bonds of what oppress us.

How long has the burning bush truly been burning? Jewish tradition states that it had been burning for as long as memory serves...but no one had noticed. No one had looked aside. Until Moses came along and turned aside. The final

lines in Richardson's poem, tells us, "This is your life calling to you from a place you could never have dreamed but now that you have glimpsed its edge you cannot imagine choosing any other way. All you need to remember is how the voice sounded when you stood in the place of death and heard the living call your name."

So, how do we turn aside, how do we notice the living God in those moments of death? When we're in crisis mode, how do we not go inward to safety? How do we not become so angry, so calloused and hard from the world, that instead of action, we move toward inaction? God saw and took notice of the Hebrew people. God sees and takes notice of us. In the place of death in our world, there is life. There is life because God is ever present. From the wasteland springs the water of life. Remember that God hears our cries. Remember that God hears and responds. And we in turn, with God's help, must hear and respond, with courage, with hope, with love. The world depends on it.