

For as the heavens reach beyond earth and time,
we swim in mercy as in an endless sea. (Ps103:11)

We began this morning with the story of Moses
standing on the edge of the Promised Land,
what was to become Israel, the homeland of his people.
Just imagine him, leaning out, eagerly –
finally, finally he is here after not just 40 years in the desert
but all that time of slavery in Egypt.
Years of servitude followed by years of wandering.
He earned that Promised Land. He earned it gosh darn it.
Putting up with the mumblings of his discontented fellow travelers
who whined about the food and the water and everything else.
He didn't even want to lead them but that's what God asked him to do.
And then with his toes literally at the border, God says,
"I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over there."
And he dies.
That's the reward he gets for all his
"mighty deeds and terrifying displays of power."
Did God take a kind of malicious pleasure in denying Moses his life's goal?
We don't know because of course the Bible, although inspired by God,
was written by humans and maybe, the timing of Moses' death
just as he reached the Promised Land was not a deliberate act of God at all.
Maybe it was so earthshattering to the people
that they had to ascribe a divine reason for it.
It must have been extremely unsettling
to have their leader die just as they arrived....

I want to come back to God in a minute
but the other reason to talk about Moses this morning is that he, of course,
presided over not one but 10 plagues,
plagues sent by God to convince Pharaoh to LET HIS PEOPLE GO.
And so God, through Moses, rained down frogs and flies and locusts on the people
and finally and most awfully sent the 10th plague,
the killing of all the first born children of the Egyptians.
So plagues are nothing new and they take all kinds of forms.
And if we want to get into the whole my plague is worse than yours game –
My opinion is that it would be a tossup
between skin covered in boils and COVID-19.

But we don't remember Moses primarily for his role in bringing the plagues to Egypt. We do remember him as a great leader and the bearer of the 10 commandments. The timing of the 10 commandments was propitious. The Hebrew people were on their way to that Promised Land and to come equipped with a Constitution of sorts, a guide for their life together, definitely improved their chances for success. And as the people gather at the end of their journey, Moses repeats the first commandment to them – “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one God, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deut 6:4). Just as God had proved Godself faithful to this dusty and tired group that was to become the nation of Israel, so they had a duty of their own to keep – to love the Lord God with their hearts and souls and minds.

We now arrive at today's Gospel reading where a lawyer, a Pharisee, asks Jesus what the single most important commandment is, and Jesus, never one to be hemmed in by any of our inadequate questions, gives him 2 commandments in return. The 2 commandments are equally important he says. You can't have one without the other. Now the fact that Jesus paired these 2 commandments, loving God and loving neighbor was nothing new. They had been combined in early Jewish documents. The really new thing Jesus did was to make them equally important, equally heavy. He took the weightiest commandment; you shall love the Lord your God and attached its weightiness to the second. So loving your neighbor gets a What Jesus did by yoking these 2 commandments is to say that the perhaps obedient kind of love that we reserve for God must be tempered by another kind of love, a compassion for each other. Love is much more than performing rituals and worshipping correctly. It is equally, more really, about how we treat each other. And what a year this has been to give us more than enough opportunities to wrestle with what is not just fair but loving treatment for all.

What lies at the heart of all of this is love, love upon which hang all the law and the prophets.

One might imagine a giant mobile with a big metal bar at the top
proclaiming LOVE and off of that, much less substantial,
hang the various laws and prophets.
Their substance and meaning come from love.
They are not intrinsically meaningful in themselves.

You know, love is what brought me back to the church and a life of faith.
Maybe that was true for you too.
I grew up in the Episcopal Church but aside from throwing M&Ms
at each other in my confirmation class,
I remember almost nothing of what I was taught.
I, like so many, left the church and really didn't reconsider my faith
until my late twenties.
At that point, I had just completed an engineering degree
and my mind was very tuned to science and facts and reason.
A coworker, lent me Thomas Merton's autobiography, *The 7 Storey Mountain*,
his account of growing up and coming to be a believer.
Merton's writings helped me to see that love is something.
It is real and it must come from somewhere.
And the only logical source of love is God.
"What is "grace?" Merton wrote.
"It is God's own life, shared by us. God's life is love.
Deus caritas est. (God is Love and Love is God)
By grace we are able to share in the infinitely selfless love of Him
Who is pure actuality..."
Seeing love in such a concrete and real way spoke to my very rational mind.
I couldn't deny that love existed
and its existence forced me to consider its source.
And that led me back to God.
If love is real, then the source of love, God is real.

One of the other Aha moments of my life was in my first year of seminary
when the professor summed up the Bible
as a history of God's revelation in the world.
Throughout history, God has and God continues to reveal God's self.
You might see the Bible as a series of events
in which God's love is increasingly revealed
and imagine it as a kind of arc of love.
From creation to the coming of Jesus to today,
God continues to reveal the depths and strength of God's love for us.

Just as MLK spoke about “the arc of the moral universe”
so there is an arc of love with a trajectory
that runs above and below and through all times and all places.
And that arc of love bends over the universe in a kind of cosmic embrace.

Between the virus and the election, it’s been really hard to be person of hope.
It’s my daily struggle and perhaps yours.
But although I can’t find a place of hope directly,
I realized that maybe I can get at hope indirectly, through love.
I know that love is real.
I know that love must have a source and that source is God.
And I know that love is the strongest thing there is.
So even though we are all awash in sickness, death, and political mudslinging,
know that above you there is an arc of love, an invisible rainbow,
that runs from one horizon to the other
that is real and strong and sure and that because of that arc of love,
we have every reason to be people of hope.

From the book of Habbakuk:
Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines,
Though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food,
Though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my savior.
The sovereign Lord is my strength. Amen.