

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Sunday Closest to August 31



Proper 17

Year A

RCL

Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c
Matthew 16:21-28

The Collect

The Collect

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the

God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Is-

raelites, out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.” But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the

God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.

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

- 1 Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name;
*
make known his deeds among the peoples.
- 2 Sing to him, sing praises to him, *
and speak of all his marvelous works.
- 3 Glory in his holy Name; *
let the hearts of those who seek the Lord re-
joice.
- 4 Search for the Lord and his strength; *
continually seek his face.
- 5 Remember the marvels he has done, *
his wonders and the judgments of his mouth,
- 6 O offspring of Abraham his servant, *
O children of Jacob his chosen.
- 23 Israel came into Egypt, *
and Jacob became a sojourner in the land of
Ham.
- 24 The Lord made his people exceedingly fruitful;

*

he made them stronger than their enemies;

25 Whose heart he turned, so that they hated his
people, *

and dealt unjustly with his servants.

26 He sent Moses his servant, *

and Aaron whom he had chosen.

45 Hallelujah!

Matthew 16:21-28

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who

want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

SERMON

The trajectory of Moses' life was absurd by any measure. His first three months of life were spent in an Anne Frank sort of existence, concealed by his mother because Pharaoh had decreed that all male Hebrew children were to be killed at birth. Mom hid him as long as she could, then, thinking shrewdly (as all mothers do) she put him in an ark, placed the ark in the bulrushes, and set her daughter to watch over it. When Moses' little ark was found, by Pharaoh's daughter of all people, she said, "This must be one of the Hebrew children." She knows, then, that her duty is to drown the baby, but she doesn't do that! What's a Hebrew child to her? She's Pharaoh's daughter! She's roy-

alty and this baby is anything but royalty. By any reasoning, we would expect her to follow her father's decree and wave the child to a watery grave. Absurdly, she doesn't, and, instead, adopts the child as her own. I wonder how that played out at home? Pharaoh comes home from a hard day oppressing the people and asks, "Hey! Who's this extra kid?"

Pharaoh's daughter coyly replies, "That's my son, Daddy."

"And how did THAT happen?" Pharaoh roared.

"It was a miracle, Daddy..."

It was hugely unlikely that this charade with a Hebrew boy could play out successfully until the child was grown. I would suggest that its very un-

reasonableness is meant to catch our attention because the story of Moses is one unreasonable thing after another.

As a member of Pharaoh's household Moses was living the good life. No worries, mate! But when he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew he turned his back on the good life, intervened and killed the Egyptian. Who does that? It's absurd. Then he must flee Egypt to escape punishment, and wound up shepherding sheep in the wilderness. From a member of Pharaoh's household to a shepherd trying to manage some of the dumbest creatures on God's green earth is quite a fall, indeed. Why would he do such an absurd thing? Tertullian, a third century church father, is often quoted as hav-

ing said, “*Credo quia absurdum*”¹, which can be translated “I believe because it is absurd”. Tertullian’s point is that absurd, unexpected events may be just the events to which we are to give heed, simply because they are so unlikely.

Credo quia absurdum! I’m paying attention because it is absurd and because I pay attention, I am able to recognize a miracle when it happens! God makes His presence known in absurd, surprising and hugely unlikely events, but it is our responsibility to pay attention, just as Moses did.

“I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.”

When something absurd happens, we’re to stop what we’re doing and pay attention to it. Of course,

¹ Tertullian. The actual phrase is "prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est", which can be translated: "It is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd".

sometimes random, meaningless, events happen and we'd be pretty foolish to imply meaning that wasn't there. That's why we are to do just what Moses did: turn aside and look at this great sight, and try to see why the bush is not burned up.

That's extraordinarily difficult for us since we live so much of our lives in the future (I have to be at work in 10 minutes, my dentist appointment is in half an hour and I can't find a parking place, etc.) that we seldom see the present which is happening all around us all the time, absurd and beautiful.

On one of the subway stops on New York's system, a man was playing violin. He played about 45 minutes, covering six pieces by Bach from memory. Most people walked right by. Some tossed a

buck or some change into his hat. Nobody but a three-year-old boy paused to listen for they were too wrapped up in themselves to notice what was happening. The man earned \$32 for his efforts. The violin was a Stradivarius worth \$3.5 million and the fiddle player was Joshua Bell. Nobody had time for a performance which some of them, no doubt, would later pay \$100 a ticket to hear. It's no surprise that God had to set fire to a bush to get Moses' attention! Sometimes, He must be even more dramatic, drowning a whole city! It's what happens after God arranges something sufficiently absurd to gain our attention that determines whether or not we walk with God.

When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to

see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

“Take off your shoes, Moses, for I want your full attention, right down to the pebbles beneath your feet. But come no closer, Moses, for I am God.”

That is the proper response to absurd events and we have had two such events this month – in Charlottesville two groups imagined that they were empowered to carry out God’s justice, resulting in the death of an innocent young woman. In Houston, strangers put their lives in peril to rescue thousands of strangers. Absurd co-incidence, don’t you think? We should pay attention.

Most of the people at Charlottesville came to ex-

press their heart-felt opposition to, or approval of, the removal of a statue of General Lee. They don't concern us at all. Our interest is in the other groups which had little to do with General Lee OR his statue. One group, flying the Swastika, was chanting "Jews will not replace us." The KKK was there in white robes displaying an obscene caricature of the cross of Christ. What any of that had to do with Robert E. Lee is anyone's guess. Also present were groups broadly calling themselves "Antifa", or anti-Fascists who equally had no readily discernible connection with Robert E. Lee. Both the Nazis and the anti-Nazis were armed and had come for the express purpose of prevailing over their enemies by force. This was not absurd. This was appalling.

This was human sinfulness on full display as each group ignored the command to Moses to come no closer, and sought to claim God's righteousness as its own. We saw, in real time, how ready we mortals are to find our rectitude in the sins of our brothers and sisters, how easily we forget that darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.²

Then it began to rain. And rain. And rain, until we had a 500 year calamity, an absurd amount of rain from a storm which, unlike most storms, sat over Texas pouring out grief and mourning upon the people. In contrast to what we saw at Charlottesville, what did we see as Houston, that great

² Dr. Martin Luther King

city, drowned? We saw The People's Armada and the Cajun Navy – paddling into the storm to rescue strangers. We saw people opening their homes to shelter those with no refuge. Suddenly, race, creed, color or politics were reduced to the insignificance they deserve in the face of human need. Differences in political preference or skin color, which had so recently fueled the violent outbursts that cost a young woman's life in Charlottesville now seemed insignificant, though the cost of showing love to those in need was huge. In the rush to rescue those in peril, two volunteers died and five others were swept away when their boat hit a power line. The storm water in the streets through which the volunteers and first responders waded to

evacuate nursing homes where helpless seniors sat in their wheelchairs in waist-deep sewage was contaminated with deadly heavy metals, fecal bacteria and who knows what else. We will not know the total cost in human misery for those who will be sickened because of the water for some time to come.

Perhaps it's absurd to think that the tragedy in Texas happened to give us an opportunity to repent the anger and violence at Charlottesville, yet the proximity of these two events, properly viewed, grants us a perspective we did not enjoy before. Praise God for His gift of perspective.

Amen

BENEDICTION

As you think on these two events this week, keep in mind Jesus' words:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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