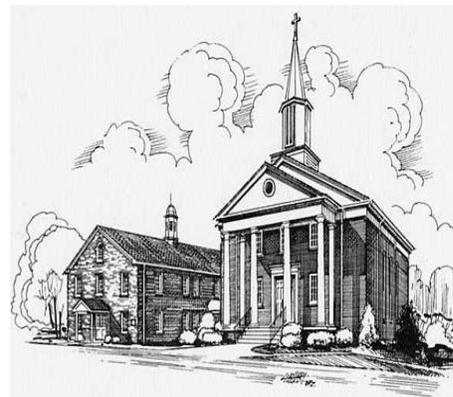


The Lessons Appointed for Use on
the

Third Sunday in Lent
Year C
RCL



Exodus 3:1-15

Psalm 63:1-8

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

The Collect

Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

INTRODUCTION OF THE COLLAGE

Luke 22:1-6 Now the Festival of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people. Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve. And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. They were delighted and agreed to give him money. He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present.

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 Israelites, 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 63:1-8

Deus, Deus meus

1 O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you,
as in a barren and dry land where there is no water.

2 Therefore I have gazed upon you in your holy place,
that I might behold your power and your glory.

3 For your loving-kindness is better than life itself;
my lips shall give you praise.

4 So will I bless you as long as I live
and lift up my hands in your Name.

5 My soul is content, as with marrow and fatness,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips,

6 When I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the night watches.

7 For you have been my helper,
and under the shadow of your wings I will rejoice.

8 My soul clings to you;
your right hand holds me fast.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.” We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a

single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on

this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

SERMON

Last week, we spoke about purpose, and the defining human need to have a reason for existence. What we didn't speak about is the bewildering number of purposes that the business of living presents to us. It's a choice. Not just any purpose will do, church. The most important battle of our time isn't between the good, decent people and those who would do us harm. The most important battle of our time is played out in our own souls as we struggle with the call of God and our own desires and purposes.

Henry Ford was one of America's great men. He did much good. Ford Motor Company had a reputation as one of the few major corporations actively hiring black workers, women, and handicapped men at a time when doing so was uncommon. In the meantime, he set about

building an immense fortune and a great company that has provided a living for countless thousands of people. So far, so good, but Ford had another, much darker, purpose. He was an antisemite. He hated Jews. Wikipedia notes:

In 1918, Ford's closest aide and private secretary, Ernest G. Liebold, purchased an obscure weekly newspaper for Ford, The Dearborn Independent. The Independent ran for eight years, from 1920 until 1927, with Liebold as editor. Every Ford franchise nationwide had to carry the paper and distribute it to its customers.

The American Jewish Historical Society described the ideas presented in the magazine as “anti-immigrant, anti-labor, anti-liquor, and antisemitic.” During this period, Ford reached around 700,000 readers through his newspaper.

More troubling still, in a letter written in 1924, Heinrich Himmler described Ford as “one of our most valuable, important, and

witty fighters.” Ford is the only American mentioned in Hitler’s autobiography, “Mein Kampf”.

Not just any purpose will do, church. I’ve mentioned before the great capacity humans have for constructing good reasons to do wrong things and then to feel celebratory over it. Our problem isn’t people who set out to do evil. Our problem is our tendency to believe that the evil we do is actually good. As a friend said this week:

Too often we settle for being less cruel, less hypocritical, less evil than the other guy and then call it righteousness. The church cannot settle for the lesser of evils; the church cannot settle for anything less than the gospel.¹

Let’s look into the advice Paul gave to his troublesome church at Corinth, a Gentile congregation. After summarizing the story of the Exodus, he wrote the most

¹ James Scott Storie

extraordinary thing about the children who wandered so long in the desert. He said:

Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

That's not the way we commonly think about the Exodus. We understand the Exodus as God's great act of salvation by which He led His people to the promised land. Paul, though, focused on the generation that was lost in the wilderness. Paul did that because his church was struggling to conform itself to the demands of their new faith. They needed, crucially, to understand God's requirement that we submit to His purposes, rather than to imagine that God approves of our purposes. Paul was at great pains to help them through this difficult time. Once he had their attention through that surprising statement, he gave them some powerful exam-

ples.

Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not become idolaters as some of them did²; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.” We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did³, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day⁴. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents⁵. And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer⁶. These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us

As we said last Sunday, God has a purpose for each of us. Our task is to recognize that purpose and submit ourselves to it, no matter the cost. Paul is using the experience of those who perished during the Exodus to il-

2 Exodus 32:4-6

3 Numbers 25:1-2

4 Numbers 25:9

5 Numbers 21:5-7

6 Exodus 12:23; 2 Samuel 24:16

illustrate how easily we go off the rails. Here we have the very definition of the phrase, “working at cross purposes”. Refusing to submit to God’s purpose and instead chasing after our own purposes always, ALWAYS leads to disaster.

By contrast, what does submission to God’s purposes look like? In our passage from the Old Testament, Moses was following his own purposes by schlepping along on the mountain looking after a flock of the dumbest animals on God’s green earth when he saw a burning bush. How long would you have to look at a brush fire to discern that the brush wasn’t being consumed, I wonder? How much attention would you have to invest in it to reach that conclusion? I’ll tell you: a bunch. Moses made the investment and approached, ignoring his flock for a time.

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.

Moses had a purpose – he was looking after a bunch of dumb sheep for his father-in-law. There is nothing wrong with that. It wasn't a case of Moses pursuing an evil purpose when he encountered God and changed his ways. He was doing what he understood his purpose to be, but it was not God's purpose for Moses. Moses reacted the way we almost always do. Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Henry Ford didn't buy an obscure newspaper to write about his hatred of Jews – he had his secretary do it so that he could comfortably

hide his own wrong-doing. Apparently, Henry Ford believed God to be pretty easy to fool. God is nothing of the sort. If there was a fool, it was Henry Ford. To see God – God as he is, rather than the domesticated version we so often hold in our minds – SHOULD be terrifying, for 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.’”

The Great I Am, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob who brought the children of Israel out of Egypt to the promised land is not the domesticated, accommodating butler who attends our prayers and blesses our purposes which many of us hold in our minds. The Great I Am is the all-powerful will of all creation, and you, one of His creatures, have been called to submit yourself to His will. We do not

pray “My will be done”. We pray, “Thy will be done.” It is by submission to the will of God that we make that prayer real. When we hide ourselves from God, we reduce that great prayer to meaningless words and write DOOM upon our own foreheads for your Father, who loves you, knows that the choice really is between His way and utter destruction.

During Lent we walk with Jesus in the wilderness. It is important to be intentionally aware of that, for our world has become a wilderness because of our insistence upon furthering our own purposes. Pope Francis recently put it in this way:

A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not the Gospel.

Urging the building of walls to separate “us” from “them” might be a popular thing to say if your purpose

was, for instance, to be elected to political office. It is not, however, reflective of the Gospel, as the Pope pointed out. You can be mad at me for saying that, but you cannot deny the Gospel.

Life presents us a myriad of purposes and undertakings. The good news, the Gospel, is that God has a purpose for you and so long as you cling to His purposes, you will be uplifted. It is the most difficult undertaking humans can aspire to, for clinging to His purposes means submitting your will to His, abandoning your own purposes becoming empty and a servant to all.

Paul wrote:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.⁷

AMEN

⁷ Philippians 2:5-8 NRSV

BENEDICTION

Inconsequential choice is an invention of the human mind. Your Father, who loves you, knows that the only real choices in life are between His way and utter disaster, yet we continue to convince ourselves that we can construct comfortable, life-sustaining alternatives, then we tend to blame God when it all goes off the rails. One of my young friends posted this on her Facebook wall:

You cannot pray for an A on a test and study for a B. You cannot pray for a faithful relationship and still live an unfaithful life. Moral of the story is you cannot pray for something and act less. Don't question my God and His abilities when your actions don't match your prayers.

And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus

Christ.⁸

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

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Sermon Copyright © 2016 J. Stewart Schneider

⁸ I Thessalonians 5:23