

Matthew 16:21-28 Burning Bush
Exodus 3:1-15
August 30, 2026

Every now and again the lectionary readings are so powerful, or important, or beautiful, that choosing between them becomes difficult. It remains hard to choose even after the choice is made. Sometimes I include two or three. Today is such a Sunday.

The two that have been read plus the one that I will read in a few minutes move from experience, to ideas about life and how to approach it, to practical suggestions for everyday living.

From the Old Testament we read from Exodus about the experience of Moses in the wilderness on the mountain tending the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro, when suddenly up on the hilltop he catches a glimpse of a bush of some kind in flames, yet not consumed. He went to check it out.

While he is there he finds out that the bush has a voice, which tells him to remove his shoes because the ground on which he is standing is holy.

Then the voice tells him to go to Egypt from which he had fled, a murder charge of all things, in order to liberate his people from bondage. One could make the case that events such as these, are the important aspects of religious consciousness. It involves the mystical experience of the divine.

Moses sees the bush go up in flames; Jesus sees the dove come down out of the sky. They hear a voice calling.

They may not be the religions themselves, but they lie at the root of the spiritual energy out of which the great religions rise. One thing is for sure, people do not create their own sacred experiences, they experience them. The experiences come when and where they come, often in the middle of ordinary life.

Sometimes people turn away from them like nothing has happened. Other times they turn to them. sometimes in understanding, sometimes in misunderstanding. They struggle with doubt about them and with the meaning of them. But they don't create them or in any way control them.

The theological term for these experiences is revelation. That is, in them God is made known. The bush in flames, but not consumed; the Exodus itself, the cross of Jesus, the empty tomb, were not chosen by people. They belong to God and come as gifts.

Even the most powerful people are powerless here. In this case, this event witnessed only by Moses, that reveals God's nature to us, that God cares for his people, and seeks their rescue. Moses can not make this happen. Pharaoh can not stop it.

When we skip ahead to the New Testament reading from the Gospel of Matthew, we find Jesus with his disciples also in the sway of revelatory events. The

great miracle of feeding was not long in their rear view mirrors, neither was the meeting on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus came to them walking on the water. And it happens in the immediate aftermath of Peter's Confession, when he proclaimed Jesus as the Christ, God's anointed, and only son.

In the shadow of these events we read that Jesus began to try to prepare them for the coming days. He describes in sharp terms that were hard to understand, what is about to happen.

We find Jesus trying to explain his predicament. "He *must* go to Jerusalem and *suffer* many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the law." Then he tells them that he *must* be killed, and on the third day . . . raised. And what is the nature of discipleship?

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their *cross* and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

God desires us found and whole.

At this point I am sure that they (the leaders) thought they were in control of the situation. This supposed control was hardly the case.

The divine event and the human event are the same, yet they operate on two different levels. In their minds, by killing Jesus, they believe they are putting

down an insurrection, preserving the peace, preventing a catastrophe. At the same time, unbeknownst to them, they were also accomplishing a Redemption of the world and its people. They had no idea that the divine result for good would be the outcome of their ever so human plans.

Here, a more expansive view of life is made known; one in which suffering, injustice, sin, all the characteristics of the earthly domain we try to control or avoid, are taken seriously. They are part of God's plan of redemptive plan, of something bigger.

The world says assert yourself, Jesus says deny yourself. Books, libraries, could and have been written.

Jesus could tell them about such a perspective, of course, but before the fact, they could not understand. But it turned into the gospel message that has been proclaimed ever since, and there have always been some who have accepted the grace it reveals.

The burning bush is the experiential side of an encounter with God. The moment of encounter with the crucified and raised Jesus is for us, for millions of people, like the moment was for Moses when he took off his muddy sandals in the presence of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob his forefathers, shining through the flames of the bush on fire yet not consumed,

The instructions from Jesus after Peter's Confession offers an approach to life, which include obedience to God and speaks of service and sacrifice to the Lord, as the substance to a meaningful life. The world tells us to take, Jesus tells us to give. the world offers a self-centered approach, God offers a Christ-centered one.

We have been working our way through Paul's letter to the Romans as well as Matthew's gospel, where Paul has tried to explain the meaning of it all, and has captivated the faithful along the way these last 2,000 years. His custom is to end his letters with practical suggestions. We move from experience, to ideas, to suggestions for everyday life, all in one Sunday:

Romans 12:9-21 - I thought I would let the reading do the preaching, and speak the final thoughts of the day.

"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right

in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written:

"It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

For it has been revealed to us that God hears our cries, desires that we be liberated; that our souls be gained, that we find ourselves whole; and that we might live according to God's purposes, because God's grace has been given to us.

For this we give thanks to you, O God.

Amen.

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