

Take off your shoes, take up your cross

Exodus 3: 1-15; Matthew 16: 21-28

It is a joy to be bringing you this message. This message once again wrestling with some difficult scriptures. I don't know about you, but these days when I say I want to hear good news especially the good news of God I really mean that I want to hear the soothing and calming proclamations of scripture. I want to hear come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. I want to hear peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. The world seems apocalyptic enough already; global pandemic, racial violence, hurricanes bearing down on my hometown on the Texas Gulf Coast. I really don't want to hear about God calling completely unprepared people to unwanted task at unexpected costs. I don't mind hearing take off your shoes this is holy ground if that holy ground is the promised green pastures or still waters of the 23rd Psalm. I really don't want to be reminded of the oppression under Pharaoh and I don't feel up to talking about suffering and loss, denying ourselves and taking up crosses, about losing our lives to save them. I long for a little more comfort a little more balm. You see my instincts are for comfort and safety, but that turning away from suffering, that's a move that we cannot make in response to this week's reading. It's a dodge that Moses tries to make to get out of heading back to Egypt, it's a pivot Peter makes and then soon regrets. Somehow even during these painful frightening days we find ourselves in there is good news amidst the seemingly bad. Can we find it?

Let's look at today's scripture. Today we encounter two stories in the scriptures that may not seem to have much in common. We have the classic story of Moses and the burning bush. It's assumed that is shaped in our religious imaginations by a Charlton Heston portrayal of Moses or by generations of Sunday school teachers with their felt back characters telling wide eyed children of a bush that blazes, but is never consumed and then we have Jesus telling the disciples about the true nature of messiahship and his cross rebuttal of Peter, and then Jesus telling us the cost of discipleship of what it means to follow him.

With Moses while he was literally minding his own business, rather he was minding his father-in-law's business, that is his father-in-law's sheep, when Moses encounters God in that blazing but not consumed bush. For many of us who grew up in Sunday school we've heard this story so many times that I wonder if it's lost its power. I wonder if we no longer can recognize the awesome, terrifying, surprising, power of a bush that burns but is not consumed. Or if we can recognize the awesome, terrifying, surprising task that is put before Moses. And this encounter with Moses and God in the bush it's not a friendly little check in, 'Hey how are you doing?' It's

not God and Moses hanging out around a campfire. God is here with an agenda. God you see is very concerned about the suffering of God's people in Egypt. And God wants Moses to return to Egypt where Moses is a wanted man for having killed an Egyptian overseer who had mistreated a Hebrew slave. God wants Moses to return to Egypt to tell Pharaoh to let God's people go. Well Moses doesn't want to go back to Egypt and protests and says, 'Oh who am I? No one's going to listen to me, I don't speak well.' And I'm sure Moses really appreciated God's concern for the suffering of the Hebrew people after all Moses knows what it means to protect and defend others; that's why he's wanted in Egypt. Moses understands God's desire for the liberation of God's people, just maybe not why this compassionate, justice loving God intends for Moses to be the one to return to Egypt, for Moses to go to Pharaoh and demand Pharaoh let the Hebrew people go. Why it must be Moses to lead the people from bondage to freedom? Moses' instinct is for comfort and for safety but that instinct it's brushed aside by the presence of a living God, a God whose call is to serve.

Now with Jesus and Peter, as Matthew describes it, Jesus has just praised Peter for recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. And Jesus has blessed Peter saying, 'Upon this rock I will build my church.' And now Jesus begins to show his disciples that a messiah must undergo great suffering, be killed, and raised up. Now as Debbie Thomas writes, 'we're standing on this side of the resurrection story and so it's difficult for us to imagine the effect of these words would have had on Jesus disciples.' We have a different image of the cross. I mean we cross ourselves all the time without even thinking about it. We wear crucifixes as jewelry, but for those who were living in the story, that cross was a symbol of oppression under the Roman Empire. It was a symbol of violence and execution. And for those who are living in that story, the disciples, they had not yet come to the resurrection part of that story, so these words were truly, truly shocking. You see for the disciples they've been following Jesus for years and they had cultivated a great hope that Jesus would be the one to lead them in that military revolution to overthrow the Roman oppressors. They had seen Jesus miracles, they had witnessed his charisma, heard him proclaim the arrival of a new reign of God. Jesus was there longed for future, their cherished dream, their chance at liberation, so all this talk of going to Jerusalem to suffer and to die, well that's just that's just ludicrous. And as we heard in the story Peter says, 'No, we protest.' Peter's instinct is for comfort and for safety for himself and for Jesus and Jesus rebukes him. Perhaps this is the most shocking harsh rebuke at all of scripture, 'Get behind me Satan,' Jesus says, 'for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' The rock that the church is to be built on, it's become a stumbling block for Jesus. Well then Jesus turns to the crowds and gives them this shocking proclamation. 'If any want to be my followers let them deny themselves then take up their cross and follow me. For any who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it.'

Uneasy passages. I don't know about you, but I can relate to the unease of Moses at this call to something difficult. In Moses case this call to the work for the liberation of God's people in the face of a Pharaoh who wants you dead. I can relate to Peter in his unease with this difficult,

difficult teaching. My instinct is also for comfort and for safety and I just shudder at the implications of these texts. A call to work for the liberation of God's people in the face of great danger, a command to deny myself and take up my cross. You know I'd prefer it if the holy ground were called to were a little safer. I'd prefer it if the holy living were called to were a little less costly. There are temptations in interpreting these texts either to minimize the commands by increasing our sacrifices, giving up social media for Lent, denying ourselves certain treats we really like or saying we'll pray more, volunteer more, study more, give more. serve in the ways in which we define. There's nothing wrong with these things per se but they are not I think what God is saying to Moses when describing the cries and misery of the people in bondage in Egypt, they are not what Jesus means when he invites his disciples to lose their life for the sake of the gospel and not what Jesus rebukes in the strongest possible terms when Peter tries to avoid the cross. Now there is another temptation to maximize in the opposite direction to practice the kind of self denial that strips life of all joy, pleasure, delight, celebration, that reduces the world to a grim mission field, the kind of devotion that mistakes austerity for piety, the kind of sacrifice that encourages many to stay in abusive relationships and to perpetuate their abuse as "their cross to bear". I don't believe this is what these text calls for either; a God who hears the cries of people suffering in oppressive circumstances doesn't want our suffering and I can't imagine a Jesus who played with children and turned water into wine as advocating that sort of denial. So what does it mean to respond to God's call for liberation of God's people? What does it mean to deny myself so the good news of Jesus may thrive here and now? How can I in 2020 Canada save my life by losing it for Jesus sake? How do I take up my cross when in our time and place that the cross is just jewelry and the crucifixion more a metaphor for suffering than an actual threat of death? We ask these questions now in the context of a global pandemic, showing no signs of letting up anytime soon. We ask these questions in the context of police brutality, racial injustice, white supremacy and gross economic inequality? We ask these questions in the context of climate change, global warming, droughts, heatwaves, two hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico at the same time for the first time ever.

Our instinct is for comfort and for safety and the uncomfortable truth is that we live within such crippling fear of suffering and death that we've wasted huge amounts of energy; mental, spiritual, physical each day trying to stave off suffering and death. Our culture encourages us to do this with industries making millions, billions by inviting us to deny our mortality through weight loss, fashion, beauty, exercise, leisure, sex, entertainment, sports cars. We live in a society that glorifies violence in the media but cheapens death on the streets. It's a global economy that pillages the planet instead of stewarding it. Our notion of personal liberty encourages the reveling in individual rights instead of shouldering our civic responsibilities. How many of our frightened spirits in this time prioritize our own self protection over all else? What if this call of God is a call for us to stop clutching at this life so desperately, to step out of the vicious cycles of denial, terror, acquisition and violence that seek to cheat death, but in fact rob us of the abundant life God promises; the land of milk and honey God spoke of to Moses and which Jesus came to give us? What would it look like for you and for me in this time and place, to lay down our fears

so that others might live, to set aside willingly our own interests and our own liberties so that we can prioritize what Jesus calls the great commandments?

And these are a summary of the ten commandments God later gave to Moses on that same mountain where Moses encountered God in the burning bush. These commandments to love God and to love neighbor as ourselves. To accept the call to free the Hebrew people is to go to the place of suffering. To take up a cross, is to stand in the centre of the world's pain. It's not to glance in the general direction of the world's pain and then slink away, but to remain there, to dwell there, to identify ourselves with those who are hurting, crying, screaming, dying. To insist that our comfort and safety aren't worth anything unless the least and loss can share in it as well. Taking off our shoes means recognizing God in the voice that calls us to bring hope to the suffering. Taking up our cross means recognizing Christ crucified in every suffering body and soul that we encounter, it means pouring our energies and our lives into alleviating pain, it means accepting against every lie of our culture that you and I will die, it means following up that courageous acceptance with the most important question we as people of faith can ask, 'Given our inevitable deaths how shall we spend this brief, God breathed life?' Let me ask that again, 'Given our inevitable deaths how shall we spend this brief, God breathed life?' Shall we hold on to our lives in fear or shall we give it away in hope? Shall we protect ourselves with numbness and apathy or shall we experience the abundant life offered to those who ache, weep and bleed alongside the suffering in our world? Shall we like Peter instinctively did, push suffering away and in doing so pushed Jesus away too or shall we like Peter eventually did accompany Jesus down the road of solidarity, the only road that actually leads to abundant life? Shall we like Moses initially did try to question and doubt and wiggle our way out of going toward their pain and hurting or shall we as Moses eventually did except God's call to return to the place of suffering and to liberate and to participate in God's salvation? I believe that God in the bush is so insistent despite Moses's reluctance because God knows that what's at stake is yes, the suffering of God's people, but also Moses' very soul. Moses doesn't have to go toward the suffering of the Hebrew people he can play it safe, but at what cost? I believe that Jesus rebukes Peter so heavily and harshly because he knows Peter can be the rock on which the church is built and he knows that the temptation Peter holds out is so alluring, so deceptive and so hideous. It's the temptation of, 'You don't have to do this hard thing, you don't have to take this faith so seriously, you don't have to give up your own rights, privileges, comforts and safety and no we don't.' There is a spectator version of faith out there and plenty of people decide to live it. I know that I often make that choice and undoubtedly, you've done the same, but let's not pretend for even one moment that it's the faith God calls us to. Let's not fool ourselves into assuming that this Christianity from the sidelines will grant us immunity, joy, or blessing or even the comfort and safety we desire. It will not. We are called to the holy ground where people suffer and cry out to bring hope and liberation and we are called to holy living to take up our cross and to follow Jesus are we bold enough to do so?