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Aug

Acceptance

Lessons in Leadership

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

This worship focuses on overcoming our natural resistance to God's call, drawing parallels between reluctant biblical leaders and our own modern hesitations. The service provides a space to honestly acknowledge our reluctance to lead or serve, helping the congregation actively move from resistance to acceptance. Ultimately, it encourages us to lean on God and our faith community to boldly fulfill our shared mission together.

REFERENCES

Exodus 3:1-15

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

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

COLORS

Green

Preaching Notes

Focus text: Exodus 3:1-15, Matthew 16:21-28

I remember a long Saturday drive some years ago. I was heading back from a speaking engagement in Corydon, Indiana, to Fort Wayne, where I was serving at the time. First, boy, was that a long honkin' way! Mile after mile of Indiana Interstate. Whew. I went down the night before; otherwise, I would have had to get up and leave in the wee hours. If you don't know what the wee hours are—they are the hours you ought to be sleeping, not driving.

But secondly, wow. What a beautiful day. On the way down, I got to see one of those spectacular sunsets, where it looks as though God dipped a brush in the orangey-red colors of the divine palette and flung streaks of that bright color across the blue canvas of the sky. On the way back after speaking, the day was bright and clear, an invitation to look with wide-eyed wonder at the beauty, the intricacy of creation. The fields of wildflowers grew, not because someone planted them, but because that was just where they were supposed to grow. So they did. With wild abandon, they grew, not caring if anyone saw them; they burst forth in color because color was what was within them.

At one point on that long stretch of concrete and asphalt, a hawk winged its way across four lanes of traffic. It was probably looking for the little field creatures that scurry through the hedgerows alongside that busy highway. But it appeared as if he were passing judgment on the four-wheeled conveyances hurrying through this beautiful day, seemingly thinking only of the destination. He soared with a glint in those piercing eyes, as if he knew a secret that we had forgotten.

One wonders if Moses was enjoying the scenery as he wandered around on that mountain, following his father-in-law's sheep. Did he bother to look at the majestic mountain pressing upward into the cloud-strewn sky? Did he see the wind-carved sandstone sculptures on the rocks that surrounded him? Or was he more worried about what he might step in as he made his way up the mountain, not quite as spryly as the sheep he followed?

Well, at least that bush caught his eye. We can thank God for that. Literally. Who knew that on that mountain in the back of beyond, Moses would stumble across God? Not Moses, surely. He wasn't looking. He didn't want to be found, come to think of it. He was in his self-imposed witness protection program, hiding out from the authorities back home who had his name plastered across post offices from Cairo to Goshen.

He let his temper get the best of him. Call it righteous indignation if you want; call it an act of justice, protecting one of the downtrodden who was being oppressed. But Pharaoh's police force called it murder, and even the adopted grandson of the king himself couldn't get away with murder. So, he ran for his life. Across the desert, he ran with blood dripping from his hands (or at least, it felt like it). His dreams were filled with a nightly re-enactment of his crime of passion. They must have been, at least for a while. Maybe, as the years passed, the hot sun and dry dust eroded his memories enough to forget. Maybe he forgot what he did, where he came from, even who he was. I think that was his goal. This rescued Hebrew baby boy, who grew up in the palace of the greatest king in the known world, wanted to forget everything—except how to follow sheep up

a mountain. “That’s all I am,” he thought, “all I’m good for, following sheep through the dusty middle of nowhere. Where nothing happens. Where no one goes.”

Except for God. “Take off your shoes,” the bush said. The bush? Yeah, the bush. The burning but not consumed bush. Burning but not consumed? Maybe that’s what drew him. Maybe after all these years of burning and being consumed, he wanted to see how it was possible for something to burn and yet not be consumed. Maybe it was the promise, maybe it was the hope, that caused him to step aside long enough for his whole life to be turned upside down and inside out.

“I’ve come to help,” said the bush, or the angel in the bush, or the voice that wasn’t the angel or the bush but seemed to transcend both. “My heart is broken with the pain of my people, so I have come to help. To set them free.” Great, thought Moses, what’s a bush gonna do against the might of a nation like Egypt? “I’ve come to help,” says the voice, “I’m sending you.” “Say what?” stutters Moses, “I just follow sheep. I’m not a hero.” “I will be with you,” says the voice as the flames crackle in the silence, while Moses chews on this bit of news. “And who are you,” he ventures, wondering if that not-consumed thing applied just to the bush.

As he made his way back across the desert to the land he had abandoned (but this time with a mission, an impossible mission to be sure), did Moses roll that name over in his mind with every sandy step? “I am who I am,” said the voice. “I will be who I will be.” Tell them “I AM” sent you. I AM will be with you.”

He shook his head at the strangeness of the thought. And then he noticed a hawk flying low in front of him. It wheeled and circled, and at one point, it seemed to have a glint in its piercing eyes, as though it knew a secret he had almost forgotten (or just been told). His burden seemed lighter for a moment. He lifted his eyes to the hills and to the sky above, and it seemed his direction was mapped out with orangey-red clouds.

Acceptance. We don’t know whether that is what Moses came to as he trudged out of his desert sanctuary and headed back to the scene of his crime. But somewhere along the line, he claimed the call laid on him there in the glow of the burning bush. Somewhere in the courts of Pharaoh, he accepted what he was there to do. Somewhere in the face of the rejection and suspicion from his own people, somewhere with an army behind and an impassible sea before him, he accepted the burden and the joy of being where God wanted him to be. It can’t have been an easy process, this coming to acceptance. It rarely is. Just ask Peter.

Fresh off his Gold Star award for being the one with the insight and courage to name Jesus, this itinerant rabbi they had given up everything to follow – as the Messiah of God, he ran full bore into the brick wall of implications. What should have been a celebratory moment of high fives and backslaps, Jesus turns into a horror story of a desolate future. The keys to the kingdom were still burning a hole in his pocket, and Peter has to listen to Jesus talk about torture and suffering and execution and death. It's no wonder that he explodes at that. It would have been hard to take. This wasn't what a Messiah was to do. This wasn't the script that had been coming to life in the back of Peter's mind from the moment it occurred to him that Jesus really was the one. His script had victory at the forefront. It had power and authority; it had making things right and overthrowing the oppressors. It had relief for the suffering and reclaiming the right to exist, thriving in this homeland that had been given by God. Not torture and execution.

Matthew doesn't tell us everything that Peter said to Jesus when he pulled him aside to rebuke him. The Greek word that Matthew uses is *epitimao*, which does mean rebuke, or warn, or strongly admonish. We don't know what words Peter used to admonish, but I suspect it started with, "You are the Messiah. The Son of the living God!" But maybe with a little more pleading in his voice or a little more incredulity. He found it incredulous that although Jesus was the Messiah, he had such a fate waiting for him. "God, forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

"This must never happen to you." In that moment, Peter stood in the way of everything that Christ had come to do: to show sacrificial love, to show the vulnerability of true power, to live out the way of service and surrender. "This must never happen to you." No wonder he is named as an adversary to the cause of Christ.

Any thread of faith that centers power over service, nation over humanity, supremacy over equality, is satanic, is an adversary to the faith that Christ offers. One wonders when Peter came to acceptance about who this Christ really was. Maybe it was a roof, where a vision told him that the stranger, the other, was not unclean after all. Who knows?

Acceptance in this case does not mean acquiescence, but grabbing hold or climbing on board and saying, "This is the path I will follow; this is the vehicle upon which I will ride because this is the means to liberation and domination. This is the model for leadership in the church of Jesus the Christ."

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