

Exodus 3:1-15  
Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45  
Romans 12:9-21  
MATTHEW 16:21-28

## Imagine the Situation

As today's reading from Exodus opens, Moses is a fugitive and an exile living many miles away from the two worlds he grew up in. After his spectacular rescue as a baby from the clutches of the murderous Pharaoh, he grew up as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. Moses was both "the Prince" and "the Pauper" *in one person*: a Hebrew whose relatives – including his immediate birth family – were suffering as slaves a few scant miles from the palace where he lived *incognito*.

As a young man, something snapped in him one day when he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, and he attacked and killed the Egyptian and buried his body. He soon learned that his impulsive effort to declare his *real* identity was not welcomed by his fellow Hebrews – "Who chose *you* to be leader over us?" he was asked – and also made him a wanted man in the eyes of the Egyptian authorities. Before his photo went up on Post Office walls all over the Egyptian Empire, Moses ran away from *both* of the "worlds" he had attempted to live in at the same time. He escaped to the wilds of the Sinai Peninsula, the mountainous desert which separates Egypt proper from Israel, which was so remote, thinly populated and of such little economic value in 1250 B.C. that the Empire hadn't bothered to conquer it.

There, Moses found a wife (at the local watering hole, literally) and a life: being a shepherd in the middle of nowhere, expecting to be kept company only by sheep, countless dazzling stars at night, and the relentless sun by day. He probably imagined he would never see his blood relatives again, and he would certainly have no use for his fluency in Egyptian or intimate knowledge of royal bureaucracy, lifestyle and procedures. He had dropped out. All the Big Problems would have to take care of themselves.

So he thought...until he stopped to see a curious, inexplicable phenomenon: a bush that was burning but not consumed, God's novel attention-getting device.

And in a moment this fugitive exile, this drop-out who was the *last* person any search committee would have picked to be the human Commander-in-Chief of the Hebrew people in their darkest hour, found himself personally addressed – confronted – by Almighty God.

Vainly he struggled – "You must have the wrong number" – "*I never get wrong numbers.*" His assurance from God that he could pull off this ridiculously audacious stunt of leading the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt to the doorstep of the Promised Land was God saying "I will be with you."

Which turned out to be enough to "get it done."

With this story, God immediately and forever becomes the God of **liberation**, siding with the poor and the oppressed – contrary to the assumptions pagan religions made – against the powerful. It is no surprise that it was *illegal* in most of the states of

the American south before the Civil War to teach slaves the story of the Exodus. But the word got out. God is the God of freedom, of liberation for all people, all of whom are made in God's image.

But first, God had to liberate Moses from his determination to run away both from danger and from his own identity, from his awareness only of his own shortcomings, from apathy, from fear, from fatalism. Only then could the most spectacular and decisive event in the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures unfold. And we know, thank God, that God is still interested in both personal and societal liberation. Nobody had to – or gets to – choose between them, or reject both. Whatever the Kingdom of God will be like, it won't involve Pharaoh's chariots winning.

Imagine the situation.

After a hike up from the Mediterranean coast to the Golan Heights near Caesarea Philippi, which would have tested a Marine Corps fitness instructor, Jesus says to his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

Good old St. Peter-the-impulsive is the first to raise his hand, and this time he "nails it." "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." But then – in today's half of this incident, Peter immediately shows that he *doesn't* get what Jesus' identity as Messiah and Son of God means: suffering and sacrifice, including torture and death. "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you," he blurts out.

Jesus then explicitly and vividly gives his disciples details – not just on his mission and identity, but on *theirs* as well. If there was any chance they thought they had simply signed up to ride in the lead car with Jesus during an endless ticker-tape parade down Broadway, they were disabused of that notion really quickly. Service and sacrifice was the package, not earthly power, wealth or glory. Any Christians today who view the faith as a "get rich quick" opportunity to be showered by God with wealth in return for faith must ignore this text, and a whole lot of other ones like it.

"For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" That's the question Jesus asked them – and us.

Perhaps Peter swallowed hard and thought about going back to a life of fishing on the Sea of Galilee. It's understandable if he thought about it, and – briefly - he did that after Jesus' resurrection, until Jesus made it clear that Peter's mission, and that of the rest of the apostles, was far less prosaic than that. "Setting their minds on divine things" meant not giving into temptations to seek worldly glory but to serve, while being "as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves," in Jesus' words as recorded by Matthew.

Their assurance from Jesus that they would be able to fulfill the Great Commission he would give them at the end of Matthew's Gospel – to make disciples of all nations and to teach them all that he had taught them – might sound familiar. "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age," Jesus said.

Imagine the situation.

You are in a country justifiably anxious about jobs, inflation, foreclosures, debt, energy costs and availability, natural disasters, major environmental issues, economic and political threats from certain foreign powers, terrorism, two long and painful wars,

growing disparities between rich and poor, unresolved issues of prejudice and discrimination, and a host of divisive social issues all cooking together in a highly contentious political season.

It may be tempting to scan monster.com for jobs herding sheep in the Sinai Peninsula to get away from it all, or to just go fishing indefinitely.

But the God who promised to be with Moses and the God who promised to be with Peter is also the same God who promises to be with **us**. Here. Today.

God is still the liberator. God can still liberate each and all of us from anything which might hold us back or cripple us as we consider following God's call to us.

God can still recruit and train each and all of us to make a difference in our own time in some way, large or small. Hey, look what God did with Moses and Peter!

We don't need to focus just on a few leaders doing grandiose things, but on us and what we can do – through the week as individuals, couples and families and together as a church. Mother Teresa said, “We can do no great things, just small things with great love.”

Want specific, attainable suggestions? Take today's reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans home, stick it on your refrigerator and see how many of these things you can try doing this week, this month, this year.

“Hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection.” Check. “Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.” Check. “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints...” Check. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Wow.

All these readings today are about commitment, about stewardship, about discipleship, about bringing our faith to our everyday lives and finding, to our surprise, that the bush still burns. *God is with us*, no matter how daunting the odds, *God is with us* even if earthly powers are indifferent or worse to the plight of those who are struggling, *God is with us* and calls us to “get with the program.”

The program is not about escaping *or* trying to do everything ourselves, not about ticker tape parades here and now *or* about owning Personal Seat Licenses on the chairs nearest to Jesus in the Kingdom of God. The program is to go as God's servants to a confused, misdirected and suffering world and to, in Jesus' name, bring his truth, his strength, and his love manifested through *us* to bear on whatever situation we encounter.

One day, we will learn from him how much what we did mattered. In the meantime, we go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.

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