

Sermon Lent 3 Year C 2025 (All Saints); Exodus 3:1-15; Gospel Luke 13:1-9

Repentance/Awareness and the Burning Bush

“In the name of God the Creator, the Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Amen”

Our rector Jim and I had a conversation this past Wednesday about the difficulty of preaching during Lent. So much of the focus of Lent, and we see this in our readings today, is on judgment and repentance. Of course Lent is about other things too, like introspection and self-evaluation, looking in the mirror at your life; and asking yourself questions like “Where do I encounter God in my own life, or do I encounter God at all?,” and “How well do I love like the Christ Jesus asks me to love?,” and even tougher I think “Who am I?” After being baptized by John in the River Jordan Jesus went off alone into the wilderness, where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. If we take this challenge of Lent seriously, it can be a difficult time, because it asks that we reach deep down into ourselves—into our hearts—to find truth. It means being completely honest with ourselves, and honest with God, and that can be hard. After all, we start this season of Lent on Ash Wednesday when we are told “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” I don’t personally find that to be a very uplifting message. Lent can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if the ashes and penitence are at the start of it maybe something like Easter will be at the end of it.

No, I’m not too good at talking about judgment and repentance. I’d rather talk about things like hope, and love, and the beauty of creation. I don’t mean to downplay or ignore judgment and repentance, because of course they are part of scripture and our tradition. Our gospel today is about repentance. Jesus is confronted by people complaining about the untimely deaths of Galileans at the hands of Pilate, and of others who died when a tower fell on them and killed them. They ask him if their suffering means that they were being punished because of their sins. “No, I tell you,” Jesus says, “but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” He really goes right to the point doesn’t he? And

then he tells them the parable of “The Fruitless Fig Tree.” This parable underscores Jesus’ message that the day of reckoning—the day of judgment—is coming soon, and that the people must repent now or risk being left out of the coming Reign, the Kingdom, of God. The fig tree is a metaphor for the people of Israel, who despite God’s calling are not bearing fruit. The tree has been in the ground for three years, and when the owner finds it has done nothing but take up space in the ground, bearing no fruit, he commands the vine dresser, to “cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” The vine dresser, who is the Christ figure in the parable, pleads with the owner “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.” The owner, who represents God in the parable, relents, and the tree remains standing, at least for a while. The usual interpretation here is that God’s grace has at least temporarily suspended God’s judgment. The tree has been given another chance, a chance to repent and bear fruit. We too are given second chances, and it is during this Season of Lent that we are asked to evaluate ourselves and to “turn around” and head in a different direction, one that God wants us to take.

One thing Jim said to me in that conversation is that while judgment can be a difficult topic to preach about, preaching about repentance really doesn’t have to be so hard. He said that if you look at repentance as simply “becoming aware,” and allowing that newfound awareness to guide you into a new way, or perhaps simply a renewed way, of seeing things and of living. I like that definition. For so much of my life I’ve thought of the word “repent” in this context: “Repent you sinner, repent, or you will burn in Hell!” Jim’s—and now my—understanding of repentance is more about love, and it is certainly easier to preach about. Perhaps in our times of personal introspection this Lent we can see repentance this way, as a time for enhancing our awareness of God’s Presence in our lives.

So, today, rather than talking about the gospel we just read, I will talk about the Exodus reading, and specifically about the “burning bush” encounter Moses has with God. It is in this third chapter of Exodus that God speaks directly to Moses. Here is Moses, watching over the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro, when he comes to Mount Horeb. All of a sudden he sees this bush burning, blazing away, but it doesn’t burn up. Then he hears God’s voice calling him from the bush: “Moses, Moses” God calls, “Remove your sandals from your feet. You’re standing on holy ground.” Moses hides his face. God tells him that he is to lead his people out of bondage into freedom, out of slavery in Egypt into liberation in their new home. Moses at first resists. “Why me?” He says, “What makes you think I could ever go to Pharaoh and lead the children of Israel out of Egypt?” “I’ll be with you!” God says. Moses agrees, and then he asks God for his name so he can tell the people who it is that sent him. God replies “I AM WHO I AM. Tell the people of Israel ‘I AM sent me to you.’” God’s name, or rather lack of one, is something we could spend a lot of time talking about, but that’s a discussion for another day. Moses takes his people and spends the next forty years in the wilderness—in some ways a metaphor for Lent—a time of transformation, before they finally reach their new home, a home as we are told in scripture “a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” That burning bush through which God spoke to Moses is a place of divine presence and revelation. And the space is a holy space. “Come no closer,” God says to Moses. “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” It is a place of theophany, a place where God’s Presence is perceptible to man.

Where is it that we too, like Moses, find these places of theophany, places where we know we are in the Presence of God? Gerald Manley Hopkins wrote a poem called “God’s Grandeur,” in which we read “The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil crushed.” Hopkins goes on in the poem to lament

that due to money and economy humans have failed to heed and have been blinded to this presence—have been insensitive to the beauty of God’s presence in nature. But then at the end of the poem he transcends his discouragement as he continues “And for all this, nature is never spent; There lives the dearest freshness deep down things...World broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings.” The poet Elizabeth Browning put it this way: “Earth’s crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God; And only he who sees takes off his shoes...” And from our scripture, from Psalm 19: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.” Yes, the natural world is crammed with God’s presence, if only we will become aware of it. The entire world is a “burning bush.” Prophets and theologians and poets throughout the ages have written and talked about such places. Dr. Gerald May called such encounters with the divine “unitive experiences.” Celtic spirituality calls them “thin places,” where the veil that normally separates us from God becomes “thin” or “transparent,” and we are given a direct experience of the divine. And such direct encounters with God are not restricted to nature. They are also present in the eyes and the touch of a loved one, in the compassion and comfort given to and received by one who is suffering, in the beauty of creativity and the imagination, in the beauty of a sacrament, in silence.

Over the past few months Cynthia and I have facilitated a gathering on Tuesday evenings here in our chapel. We have used the Celtic theologian John Philip Newell’s latest book The Great Search, Turning to Earth and Soul in the Quest for Healing and Home. Newell is the founder of “Earth and Soul,” a Celtic initiative of study, spiritual practice, and compassionate action. Several years ago they developed a “House Gathering” agenda to be used by groups like ours. This is now an international community of such gatherings. The agenda includes times of prayer, silence, readings, music, and discussion about the book, which focuses on our relationships with other people, with the Earth, and all of creation. We have included contemplative practices and prayer forms in

our agenda. By contemplative practice I mean any form of prayer which enables a direct experience of God's presence. One of our at home practices was called the Core Faith Experience. The practice was to recollect such an experience using this root sentence: "When I think of a time in my life when I had a heightened awareness of God being present in that moment, I remember when..." We were all asked to reflect upon and write or journal about such a time. You might call it a "burning bush" experience. Several people shared those experiences. Some described encounters with other people—either friends or groups of complete strangers—when they felt a connection and compassion and hope for and love deeper than they had ever experienced before. One description was of an "out of this world place that just happened." Others described moments in nature where God's awesome and powerful presence was made known to them in a new way. All of these encounters reflected an awareness rarely if ever realized before. In one way or another all reflected the power and beauty and love of God which is always there, if only we are open to see it. Think of such encounters in your own lives, times when you just knew you were standing on holy ground. Perhaps we can think of repentance during this season of Lent this way—a time for becoming aware of that presence which is already there, and then turning toward and following where it leads us.

Rev. Bob Donnell 3/23/25