

A humble heart – it is all God asks of us.

Loving God, help us to hear Your words of love so that our hearts might be open to sharing that love with those we encounter each day. And assist us we pray – that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts are pleasing to You – our Healer, our Liberator, our Redeemer. AMEN.

Have you ever tried to start watching a movie in the middle of it? Or start watching a TV series in its third season?

Have you ever dropped in on the middle of a conversation between people and spent a lot of time trying to catch up . . . trying to figure out what people are talking about; laughing about; or even arguing about?

If you are like me and have attempted some of these things – the chances are pretty good that you got frustrated . . . so frustrated that you stopped your engagement by turning the TV off or moving to another group of people where the conversation was just starting.

You see – context is important. Knowing what is going on . . . knowing what has already happened . . . is essential for us to feel comfortable – to feel like we understand what is going on enough to commit ourselves to continue investing our time into the movie, the TV show, or the conversation.

The scripture passages that we have been using over the past three months have been the ones selected by using the Revised Common Lectionary. This is a scripture reading schedule that allows most Protestant dominations to be reflecting on the same passages each week. It is a way for faith communities to hear, read, and reflect on major sections of the Bible over a three-year cycle.

And while I'm sure that there are reasons why some passages are chosen and other passages are missed or 'skipped over' – at times I'm left shaking my head wondering about who might be making the selections. And this seems to be the case regarding many Old Testament readings.

Today's passage from Exodus begins with these words:

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian ... (Exodus 3:1)

Now if you remember last week – the passage ended with Moses being saved by Pharaoh's daughter. Moses was still an infant – just a helpless baby. And now this week, Moses is fully grown, married, and no longer in Egypt.

Of course, we could simply dismiss this huge gap in the story and move on as if it didn't matter.

Yet, I don't know about you . . . but I see this gap and I want to fill it with as much context as possible.

Why? Because I believe that what has led Moses into the wilderness of Midian might just have as much to say to us as the encounter with the burning bush. So, hopefully you won't be too frustrated as we take a short detour of context building to better understand where Moses has come from as he encounters the living God.

The detour begins with us needing to briefly examine the scripture passage left out of the lectionary readings in order to see what we have missed. The passage not included in the lectionary is Exodus 2:11-25 – and while we won't read the whole passage there are a few excerpts that I think we need to examine to better understand Moses.

That passage begins with these words:

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labour. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. (Exodus 2:11-12)

Now, some of you might be thinking – okay this is simply a transitional sentence moving us to a new scene – what’s the big deal? Well, for me this statement tells us a few important things about Moses.

First, by not saying anything about his childhood – I believe we can conclude that his childhood – after being rescued from the river – was probably one with no significant trauma. But what we need to remember is that Moses did not grow up with his people – he was the adopted son of the Princess – the daughter of Pharaoh.

So, he would have lived a very privileged life. He would have wanted for nothing. He would have been given every advantage in life. He would have been the poster child for ‘entitlement’.

Second, it seems only as an adult was his sheltered, protected life disturbed when he ventured out into the world the Israelites inhabited every day. He was ignorant of their struggles. He was shocked at how they lived.

Third, he was obviously used to getting his own way. For he decided to kill someone as if he had the right to be judge. He didn’t worry about the consequences – which potentially tells us that he thought he was above the law being the son of royalty.

In the end, Pharaoh sought to kill Moses – for Pharaoh knew Moses wasn’t truly an Egyptian – causing Moses to flee Egypt where he ended up in Midian.

On his escape from Egypt, Moses defended some women at a watering hole. They were trying to water their flock but were driven away by some other shepherds. Moses got water for their flock and ended up becoming part of the family – he married one of the daughters.

What these episodes tell us is that Moses might have thought of himself as an agent of justice – a protector of the powerless – but . . . he relayed on his physical stature and his own abilities. He was full of himself – he was arrogant; he was entitled; he was a flawed human being.

Why is this important? Because for Moses to be used by God – Moses needed to come to the place of knowing . . . of understanding that he couldn’t do it on his own.

For Moses to experience the burning bush – he needed to be humble enough to see beyond himself and beyond his own abilities. Hear again the encounter that was read for us earlier:

God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then [God] said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” [God] said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Exodus 3:4-6)

The Moses in Egypt was not humble. It was only as Moses – the son of privilege – became a humble shepherd that God could actually use him. For a heart of arrogance; a heart of pride – is of no use to God.

And the same is true for each of us. In today’s gospel, we heard these words:

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. (Matthew 16:24)

It is a message that is often proclaimed – where we are told to take up our cross and follow Jesus. But what is the cross Jesus is talking about?

Perhaps . . . just perhaps . . . it is the cross of pride, the cross of arrogance, the cross of self-reliance.

For when Peter allowed his sense of pride, his sense of being the favoured one, his sense of knowing better than Jesus – to give him the courage to rebuke Jesus . . . this caused Jesus to say something truly shocking. Peter thought he understood exactly what the Messiah should be doing . . . and suffering and dying wasn’t part of it. So we are told,

“... Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But [Jesus] turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” (Matthew 16:22-23)

It wasn't Peter's questions that got him into trouble. It was Peter's arrogance – Peter's insistence that he knew better than Jesus – that he knew God's plan.

We are allowed to ask questions. We are allowed to explore all options. In fact, God wants us to be fully engaged – God wants us to be all in. It is just that we need to be all in as humble followers . . . not as those trying to be God.

And why is it important to be humble? Well, it is the only way that we can truly serve God and others.

The church in Rome was told to:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peacefully with all. (Romans 12:14-18)

This is impossible – if we believe we are better than someone else; if we believe that we are entitled to the best things; if we believe that others are objects to be used in obtaining our wants and desires.

We are called to love – by hating evil, by persevering in prayer, by being generous, by extending hospitality.

We called to live – with zeal, with passion, with hope.

This call to love . . . the call to live fully . . . is only truly possible if we are humble.

But we need to remember that being humble does not mean we need to be meek or weak. Being humble does not mean that we allow ourselves to be walked over or taken advantage of. Being humble does not mean that we have no goals, no drive, no passion.

Being humble means that we don't "rub it in" . . . we don't live believing we earned it . . . we don't live believing it is only about us.

God asks only one thing from us – a humble heart. For a humble heart is open to being transformed by love . . . open to embracing the other . . . open to the idea that God wants all to thrive.

Jesus ended the call to become his followers with these words:

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? (Matthew 16:25-26)

For me – another word for “life” in these words is “self”. Jesus tells us that if we focus on “ourselves” we will lose but if we are focused on God and others than we will actually find “our true selves”.

In a completely countercultural take on things – God tells us that a humble heart focused on God and others will find the fullness of life we all long for and many of us spend a lifetime searching for without finding it.

My prayer for me. My prayer for each of you. Is that we would all be brave enough to live with humble hearts – allowing God to transform us so that we might help transform our world.

AMEN.