

Pentecost Proper 17A
Peace, Seattle
September 3, 2017
Exodus 3:1-15, Matthew 16:21-28

SUFFERING WITH

The statistics piling up in the wake of Hurricane Harvey are, we're told, "unprecedented."

- Rain measured in feet rather than inches.
- Rain of such relentless intensity no words can describe its full effect.
- Never has such a torrent inundated one region for so long; nor floodwaters been so pervasive and severe on such a scale.
- Unprecedented.

And Harvey's not alone. Another storm system—Lydia—has left its mark on the Baja Peninsula while Hurricane Irma has us eyeing the Atlantic wondering where she will tread.

And at the very same time, halfway around the world, the most devastating floods in years have left hundreds of communities in India, Nepal and Bangladesh destroyed or submerged, and millions displaced.

So much suffering! Our hearts go out to all the victims. And our pocketbooks ought to follow—and will, I'm sure.

Will our response to these disasters as a church and as a nation be as unprecedented as the events themselves? I hope so. As St. Paul says, as members of the same body of Christ, we show our care for one another; "if one member suffers, all suffer together with" them. (1 Cor. 12:26)

Our prayers for those enduring these storms and floods is that alongside these trials and tribulations, they would experience the compassionate care of friends, neighbors, strangers, servants; and—in, with and under them—the comfort, courage, and healing embrace of the crucified and risen One.

There's a link, I think, between this conversation and the story from Exodus this morning, and that's where I want to turn with you now.

When we met Moses last week, he was a baby, bound up and floating among the reeds of the Nile. God had a plan for him, and ironically, as we observed last week, that plan included being raised within the very household of the Pharaoh who sought his extinction.

In the next story Exodus records, Moses has grown up.

While he's out one day among the Hebrew people—his people, the narrator wants us to know—he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave. And aroused to anger he kills the Egyptian.

Well, word quickly gets out about the incident, and Moses, fearing for his life, flees Egypt as a fugitive.

Finding his way to the land of Midian, Moses soon finds himself welcomed into a new family and taking on a new identity—that of shepherd.

A long time passed as Moses settled down and adapted himself to his new life.

Midian had become Moses' home and maybe he was OK with that. Maybe keeping his father-in-law's flocks was just fine with him, you know? Cruise control. Maintenance ministry.

The middle season of ordinary time.¹

How long did he rest in that rhythm—punch the clock? The story doesn't say.

All we know is, one day his outlook changed. One day he stepped away from his usual path and began looking for a new place to lead his flock; a place BEYOND the wilderness he'd known.

Moses leads his flock into uncharted territory, and suddenly he's not in ordinary time anymore.

For out of the corner of his eye Moses sees something—a flash of light, a flame. And what he sees causes him to detour. It draws him: this bush that burns yet is not consumed. And for the first time in a long time, he finds himself curious.

Standing now before that vision, his world shifts, a Voice calls, and he is summoned to a new life and new vocation; one that's been waiting for him from the very beginning.

Sisters and Brothers, when was the last time you left Midian? When was the last time you stepped off the trail; decided you'd had enough of ordinary time?

Midian is not our home. Maintenance is not our task; but going to the mountain of God. And if that sounds scary, it is. It had Moses shaking in his boots...and so should we.

God reminded Moses who he was—that he was part of a people!

The LORD had not forgotten them, nor had God forgotten him.

I HAVE HEARD THE CRY OF MY PEOPLE AND I AM SENDING YOU TO PHARAOH TO BRING THEM OUT OF EGYPT.

And that's when the hedging begins...

MOSES: Who am I that I should go?

GOD: DON'T WORRY—I WILL BE WITH YOU.

MOSES: But who are you that would send me?

GOD: I AM WHO I AM.

MOSES: But what if they don't believe me?

GOD: I'LL SEE THAT THEY DO.

MOSES: But I'm no good in front of crowds!

GOD: WHO IS IT WHO GAVE HUMANS SPEECH ANYWAY?

MOSES: O Dear God! Can't you please find someone else?!

We all have our way of putting God on hold, of turning the volume up, of walking the other way. But walking away has its costs, too.

“The farther I run away from the place where God dwells,” writes Henri Nouwen, “the less I am able to hear the voice that calls me the Beloved, and the less I hear that voice, the more entangled I become in the manipulations and power games of the world.”²

The truth is, sisters and brothers, God has already called you...

- Called you to be part of a people...
- Called you to wade in the waters and cross through the sea in the company of all those who, like Moses, have learned to take God's promises seriously.

¹ I'm indebted to [Dr. Anna Carter Florence](#) for some of the images and insights she shared on this text at a preaching workshop at Luther Seminary in October 2016.

² Henri J. M. Nouwen. *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*.

God has called you and me to open your eyes to the suffering of the world; to hear the cries of the people, of creation, and to walk toward them rather than away.

We hear Jesus tell would-be disciples today, the WAY we're invited to make our own is a WAY which doesn't avoid suffering—as Peter proposed—but embraces it. Not because of any masochistic tendencies but because this WAY of Jesus, this WAY of loving God and neighbor, necessarily leads us to those places where worldly pain and Divine compassion intersect.

When I worked among Karuk people in Northwestern California I learned that, to assume the mantel of healer, a person gifted with healing potential acquires a “pain” within her physical body.

An essential part of her training involves learning to locate this “pain” within herself, to feel it, to know its limits, to probe its power, and finally, to control it.

Only when she has the ability to deal with her own pain is she able to identify, diagnose, and release the pain and sickness of other people. Coming to terms with her personal pain is a key to her ability to bring healing to others.

Until Moses saw that flame and heard that Voice, I wonder if he didn't assume that his own suffering and the suffering of those he'd left behind, could never be an asset but only a deficit—something that must be left far behind.

God showed him otherwise.

“The Gospel,” writes Richard Rohr, “accepts that life is tragic, but it graciously adds that we can survive and will even grow from this tragedy...” Scripture “refuses to deny the dark side of things, but forgives failure and integrates falling to achieve wholeness...”

“Jesus was fully at home with a tragic sense of life. He lived, died, and rose inside it. [His] ability to find a higher order inside constant disorder is the very heart of his message—and why true Gospel, as rare as it might be, still heals and renews all that it touches.”³

The TRUE GOSPEL, says Jesus, leads us not AROUND suffering, but THROUGH it.

Our renewal, our healing, our mission to all the suffering world, begins in the waters of baptism and continues here at this Table.

As you come forward today, listen...listen for what Christ is telling you. Then, receive it, and claim it as your own—for you are his own.

Amen.

³ Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation for September 1, 2017. <https://cac.org/cosmic-forgiveness-2017-09-01/>