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St. James', Mt. Airy  
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Pentecost 13/Proper 17A  
Exodus 3:1-15  
Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c  
Romans 12:9-21  
Matthew 16:21-28

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

Last week Moses was a baby being drawn from the river by the Pharaoh's daughter. This week we've jumped ahead not only to his adulthood, but right past the part where he kills an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew slave and his escape from the wrath of the Pharaoh into the land of Midian, where he married the daughter of a priest of Midian and started a family. By the time of our story today, Pharaoh had died and the condition of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt had worsened to the point where God heard their groaning and decided to take action.

I love that image - one of such a huge communal groan that it stood out over and above all the commonplace moaning and complaining – as well as all the heart wrenching wails of pain and loss that I imagine must buffet the heart of God every moment of every day.

But this groan was something more, and made God take notice in a special way.

And so today we arrive at the burning bush and God's call to Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

The story of Moses' call has long been one of my favorite stories. I love that Moses was afraid when he realized God was talking to him. I love that Moses wasn't expecting this call. I love that Moses wasn't ready – let alone willing to answer the call.

I love that he made excuses – in our passage today he doubts that he is worthy of such a calling, and complains that he won't know what to say; a bit further on in Exodus he doubts that he will be believed, and then tries to back out one more time by saying he's not a good public speaker.

I think I love this story because when I first began to explore my call to the priesthood I saw so much of my own story mirrored in it. Not the whole leading a people out of slavery and establishing a nation part, but the part in which I, like Moses, had a burning bush moment followed by a period of denial and unbelief that God would indeed call me out – locked in the insecurity of not thinking I was smart enough, special enough, or loved enough by God.

As many of you know, prior to attending Divinity School I was a teacher. And while I ended up growing to love teaching, my first few positions were pretty difficult and I was not happy. I began to think about going back to graduate school and getting a Masters degree in Public Policy Analysis.

And then one night as I was driving home from work, I idly asked myself, "If I could only do one thing for the rest of my life, what would it be?"

In the next instant I literally had an out of body experience – a vision. I saw myself standing behind the altar in a church and holding up the consecrated bread and wine.

When I blinked my eyes a split second later I had to laugh. First of all, in my little vision my hair was in a French braid – and it had been years since my hair was long enough to pull that off and I had no plans to grow it out again. Secondly, I was wearing gold lame vestments – could I be any tackier?

But regardless, I knew that like Moses I had stepped into holy ground and that my call, which in time I would see had been bubbling up since I was a child, was not something I could ignore.

And yet, like Moses, I began to come up with excuses. All the priests I knew were so exceptional and clever – nothing like “Jill of all trades, master of none” I considered myself to be. Who was I to think I could be called to lead in such a way? Was I really religious enough? I mean, I hadn’t been a regular church attender since I had wandered away during college. Besides which, I had never even read the whole Bible front to back. So why would God choose me?

Just like with Moses, God answered my every hesitation and excuse. It took a while for me to accept those answers, but in time – with the encouragement and support of those around me – I began to grow into a new vision. A vision of how my own gifts and talents, different from the priests I knew, could be used by God to help spread God’s love, compassion, and mercy. Just like Moses, I was able to live into my call because God was with me every step of the way supporting me, equipping me, and loving me.

As one of my favorite lectionary bloggers put it: There are moments when God calls us to particular and spectacular tasks. We cannot plan for these moments. We are not told when they are coming. But when they arrive we have the opportunity to serve God and be who God created us to be.

The burning bushes and the gold lame vestments are scary, and it can take us time to respond to them, but when we respond in love to God's invitation, then transformation will bloom in our lives and the lives of those around us.

I know some of you have had experiences akin to this. These burning bush experiences of God's call are not limited to clerical vocation. For some people the call is connected to their career and work. And for many it is their call to be active in various causes, ministries, or charities. These calls are the ones that can't be ignored and that call us into action. They are special calls, but they are neither unique nor exclusive.

Because God calls to us each in different ways, and at different times of our lives. Our lessons today, in fact, show us three distinct types of call: in Exodus, 'the burning bush' moment of call; in Romans, the 'way of being' moments of call; and in Matthew, 'the holy crap along the way' moments of call.

Different facets of this power of God to transform our lives, and yet they all invite us to be the people God hopes us to be. and lead us into action.

In the passage from Romans today we are called as individuals into action with a list of "dos and don'ts" that teach us how to live in community. An amazing list that calls us to live out our faith in Christ in specific ways, that distills for us our identity as Christians: love truly and fully; seek out goodness and turn your back on evil; be untiring in service to God; be hopeful and steadfast in the face of disappointment; be compassionate and humble; offer blessing to those who curse you; rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. These are instructions, our call, for how to live in community.

So, how do we respond to this call? It seems simple enough, but how often do we accept this call in our hearts and then fail to live the call in our lives? The emotions of love are easy. The behaviors of love are more difficult. We may not make grand, or even conscious, excuses, but nonetheless so often we shy away from the fullness of this call from God.

I think this is because to truly live in community with one another means that we make ourselves vulnerable. We have to be vulnerable to let others share our pain when we are hurting. We have to be vulnerable to allow others to join in our joy when we celebrate. We have to be vulnerable to speak the truth to each other in love when disagreements arise. We have to trust that God is in control and that the Spirit will lead us forward together. We have to believe that God will support us, equip us, and love us at all times and in all places.

God has called us to live in community, called us into action with one another and the world. It is a yearning call that reaches into each of our souls and prays us into a longing for something bigger than ourselves and invites us into a way of being in the world.

Our final type of call, the ‘holy crap moment of call along the way,’ is found in today’s passage from Matthew.

Finally alone with the disciples, Jesus began to **show** – notice how much more concrete that verb is than just **tell** – Jesus began to **show** them what was going to happen when they went to Jerusalem.

This was a wake-up call to his friends and it did not go down well with them. Hot-headed Peter played his role as spokes-person for the group once again and spoke out vehemently, resisting the call of Jesus to walk that road with him.

This was not only about what was going to happen to Jesus, but about what it meant for them as well. Take up your cross and follow me. Holy crap – what have I been called to do? I thought I already had my call!

But you see, discipleship is learned along the way. The disciples in this story had been disciples for some time. They already experienced the “burning bush call” when Jesus personally called each of them and then sent them out as preachers and healers. They had already heeded the call to live together in community. It was only then, in that part of the journey, that they were learning the true cost of discipleship.

This new call was not one they bargained for, and they were beginning to realize that they might just falter and fail before it all ended.

We, like the disciples so many centuries ago, are also called to take up our crosses and follow Jesus. We are called not to orient our lives to things of this world, but toward God. We too will often falter and fail. But like Peter, the stumbling block that becomes the foundational rock of the church – the one who would soon even deny Jesus three times – we too can re-claim this call to build our lives around the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We need only believe that God will be with us, supporting us, equipping us, and loving us, along every step of the journey.

I think the point of all of this is that God is indeed active in our lives, calling out to us and bidding us into truly being the people of God, beckoning us to live together as the body of Christ as a symbol of hope in this broken world, and inviting us into transformation through making God our center.

I pray that each of us will answer God's calls in our lives, making excuses and mistakes along the way, but ultimately trusting in the abiding love of God that carries us forward into new life.

~ AMEN ~