

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Exodus 3:1-4:29 (3:1-15); Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; Matthew 16:21-28; Romans 12:9-21.

Exodus 3:1-4:29 (3:1-15) contains within its confines three emphases, all of which need to be examined if one is to capture the full import of this story. Those three emphases are God's revelation of God's name, God's call to Israel through their liberation, and God's call to Moses. Let's look at all three emphases.

God's revelation of God's name. While Moses was a prince in Egypt, one day he saw an Egyptian mercilessly beating an Israelite. In reactive anger, Moses struck and killed the Egyptian. Recognizing that the penalty for such a crime was death, Moses escaped from Egypt and fled into the Sinai desert. There, near Mount Sinai, Moses met Jethro and his wandering tribe of Bedouin Kenites. Moses joined the Kenites, became a shepherd and married Jethro's daughter Zipporah. The young fugitive settled down to a life of peaceful obscurity, seeing the former Egyptian portion of his life as something totally outside his present existence of being a wandering shepherd as if that former life had never happened at all. Convinced that he would live the remainder of his life and eventually die as a shepherd, Moses lived out this role for the next 40 years. But then a totally unexpected event took place on the slopes of Mt. Sinai that would forever change the life and the impact of Moses!

While grazing Jethro's flock on the slopes of Mount Sinai, Moses' attention was drawn to an unusual sight. He saw a bush burning, but which was not being consumed by the flames. Moses walked to the bush to take a better look. But as he approached the bush, Moses heard a voice speak from that bush, "Moses, take off your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground!" Moses, both stunned and awed, did as he was told. Then the voice continued.

"I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land. . . . The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (Ex. 3:7-8a, 9-10)!

The reactions of Moses to these surprising words were likely many. There was, first, good news that would have spoken to the justice heart of Moses. God was about to act to free Israel from its Egyptian bondage. There was, second, profound shock that God was calling him to be sent as God's personal ambassador to Pharaoh to gain their liberation and to lead them out of Egypt; Moses had, as we will soon see, severe misgivings at this assignment. But overwhelming all the other emotions was a single great concern: why should the Israelites believe him? What evidence could he give that would convince the Israelite slaves that Moses had actually met with God, that God intended to set them free (no matter the might and resolve of Pharaoh), and that God had the power to free Israel from Egypt.

"If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them" (vs. 13)? The only way that Moses could demonstrate to the Israelites that he had indeed met with the god of their patriarchs and wasn't delusional or making up the story was for him to share information with them that he

would otherwise not be able to obtain. And the chief of such information would be the name of this god!

Up to this time, God had no name. All other gods had names (like the Egyptian Amon-Re, the Canaanite Ba'al or the Babylonian Marduk). But the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had no name; in fact, this god was simply called El (god) or Elohim ("the god-who-has-no-name"). These were generic terms, not names. So to know the name of the Israelite god because that god chose to disclose that name to Moses would be irrefutable proof that Moses' claim was true and that Israel should follow his lead in demanding of Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" Why was this so?

To the Israelites, as to all ancient peoples, a name was crucial. The name of a person symbolized the very nature – the essence of that person. A name was not an arbitrary self-identifying indicator assigned to that person as it is with us (a number could just as well do – which is believed by the Social Security Administration of the United States!). Rather, the name summarized the essence, the essential nature of a person. Thus, in the creation story, God gave the light a name ("day") – and *then* the day appeared. Adam named the animals – and thus became, with God, a creator of the essence of those animals. The names of the biblical people symbolized their essential mission in life. Adam meant "man" in Hebrew, Abraham meant "father of a multitude", David was "beloved of God" (and David was "the man after God's own heart") and Jesus meant "God saves"! The name of a person, place or object was necessary for the full existence of that person, place or object.

Therefore, Moses was being unbelievably bold in asking God's name. He was asking God to reveal God's basic essence to humankind. To return to the Israelites with God's name (and thus with God's essence) would be an overwhelming blessing to Israel, for it would indicate God's intentions for his people. But it would also give Moses the credentials he needed to be taken seriously by this slave community.

How would God answer this impertinent question? God takes Moses' request quite seriously. "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you'" (3:14). Or, to put it into Hebrew, "God said to Moses, 'Yahweh!'" (Incidentally, Jesus used this exact same formula to refer to himself multiple times in the Gospel accounts, making himself equal with God).

What did God mean by naming himself, "Yahweh"? What was God communicating to Israel about Moses' intended demand to Pharaoh by using this name?

The name "Yahweh" can't be translated into English. Translating it as "I am who I am" is to miss the entire dynamic of the name – though that is a literally accurate translation. The name is actually an early form of the Hebrew verb, "to be". The English translation implies a state of being. The actual Hebrew word, however, has more of a causal sense to it – that is, that God is always in a process of becoming – that is that God is always moving ahead, ahead of his people, to bring them into the next step that they need to take to become what God intends them to be. God is always becoming savior, liberator, healer, covenant maker, redeemer to God's people; God is always one step ahead of them in the future. So a better translation of that name would be

“I become what I become” or “I will cause to be what is caused to be” or “I will be what I will be”. You can’t pin God down!

By telling Moses his name, God identified himself and his essential nature as the God of revolution, of innovation, of change. Whereas all the other gods were gods of stasis, gods of order, gods maintaining the political, economic and religious Powers as they had always been and would always be, Yahweh was the god of change, the god constantly overturning the tables, the god whose task it was to cause trouble in Egypt and with Pharaoh as he called forth from bondage Yahweh’s people to build a new life for themselves in the wilderness. By using this name, God proclaimed that he was neither a god over a given region (thus confined to that country), nor a nature deity (shaped by the cycles of nature). Yahweh – *by the very fact that he was named Yahweh* – witnessed to the fact that he was sovereign over history and would shape it as he chose for the good of his people and of humanity. No king, no nation, no economic system, no religion was sacred to him. He was the creator and controller of history and of the world; no god (and least of all, no Pharaoh) would ever control him! Therefore if Yahweh’s representative declared to the most powerful tyrant in the world, “Let my people go”, then, by God, they would be set free!

God told Moses to return to the Israelite slaves with the message that the God who created the world was their God – the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Their God, Yahweh, is the God who controls history – and thus, the Egyptians! Their God, Yahweh, is the God who is always creating the future – and thus, this God can create a new people out of a fugitive bunch of slaves! By revealing his own name, God told Moses to return to the Israelite slaves with the news that the sovereign king of the entire universe was about to set them free. And who is Pharaoh to try to stop him?

At the burning bush, God revealed his essence – the essence of the creator who is constantly communicating with a changing world. God is the creator and ruler who refuses to stand detached from the world, but will go forward with Israel into the unknown future and claim it for his own. The Creator-God will, through his people, gradually reveal his nature and purpose to them as he continues to call them to be his people in and to the world.

In this magnificent encounter with Moses at the burning bush, God revealed his essence to another. Just as a man (Adam) had once stood naked before God, God now stands naked before a man (Moses). In giving his name to Moses, Yahweh – the God who seeks to reveal himself continually to humanity had taken the risk of rejection by the Israelites!

God’s call to Israel through their liberation. God’s attempt to redeem history was set in motion at that burning bush on Mount Sinai. God’s hope to restore humanity to God’s beloved “shalom community” started with the selection of a “miserable” people, the nation of Israel who were really no nation at all but only a motley group of slaves. Instead of choosing the high and the mighty, the brightest and the best to be God’s purveyors of God’s message of salvation, Yahweh chose the lowest of the low. God chose a people who had been rejected by the world, a people oppressed by the greatest political, economic and religious power of its time, a people who were slaves and therefore – in the eyes of the world – no people at all.

Why? Why did God choose to restore humanity in this way? Why did God choose the lowest to transform the highest? As Bennett Cerf put it, “How odd of God to choose the Jews!” Why the Jews? Why did God choose Israel? God most magnificently gives his answer in the inspired words of Deuteronomy.

“You are a people holy to Yahweh your God. Yahweh your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that Yahweh set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because Yahweh loved you and kept the oath that he had sworn to your ancestors, that Yahweh has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt” (Deut. 7:6-8).

From the very beginning of God’s action toward humanity as revealed through Israel, God moved out of love and grace. He purposely chose the poor and the weak to become his ambassadors, so that people might know it was “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says Yahweh of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). God did this, knowing that Israel could be worthy because “my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (II Cor. 12:9).

So God’s love and grace delivered the weak from the strong, the dispossessed from the secure, the powerless from the rulers. He delivered them that he might work a new creation through them. God saved Israel so that all humanity might be saved from the false gods of national pride or personal power. God rescued Israel so that all humanity might be rescued from a fatalistic philosophy which would turn all people into either slaves or dominating oppressors and exploiters, the “haves” and the “have nots”. God liberated Israel for the task of leading humankind into a new age of responsible and loving action. And God did all this by selecting one man, so that all humanity might know that the essence of God encompasses the very process of change and development, a progressive revelation of justice, equity and love.

God’s call to Moses. The larger story of Exodus 3 is God’s call to Israel to become God’s people and God’s willingness to be thoroughly vulnerable to Israel (by telling them God’s name) in order for them to take the initiating step of that call by being willing to confront Pharaoh to set themselves free. But contained within that larger story is also the more personal story of God’s call to Moses to directly and personally confront Pharaoh and to lead the Israelites to freedom. That story is a model of each of our calls as followers of Yahweh.

Frederick Buechner once wrote, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet”.¹ This is perhaps the single best definition of the biblical doctrine of vocation. The word “vocation”, is from the Latin *vocare* which means, “to call” and describes the work a person is called to do by God. Although Moses was, by occupation a shepherd and by office a prince of Egypt (although exiled), his vocation was to be the liberator of Israel. And he received that vocation when God unceremoniously said to him at the burning bush, “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (Exod. 3:10).

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1993), pp. 118-119.

Moses' call is a model of how God works in a person to call them to the mission God has for them. It begins with God's actual call to Moses. That call didn't just happen to Moses. Rather God had been at work for 80 years to prepare Moses for this hour. The agreement made between the princess of Egypt and Moses' mother began that preparation through Moses' staying long enough in his parents' home to acquire a profound pain at seeing the injustice done to his parents and to the slave families surrounding that home. It awakened in Moses an anger for the way he saw his brother and sister Israelites treated by their captors, and therefore a passion to see them liberated from such tyranny. Preparation for that call continued in Pharaoh's palace where, as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, Moses learned the political, military and economic realities of Egypt and their dominance and oppression of the Hebrew people.

Moses' anger and passion for his people's liberation burned red-hot when he saw an Egyptian overlord beating a helpless Hebrew slave, and Moses acted out that anger by killing the Egyptian. That call was preserved in Moses' escape to safety in the desert, his many years of exile among Jethro's family, his marriage and his siring of children, and his long years of solitude in the desert caring for sheep, thinking that his life would quietly conclude there. It was out of all this preparation, including desert solitude, that God was molding Moses to bring him to the place of a burning bush and the call, "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt".

It is particularly crucial to understand the part that anger played in Moses' call, for anger is the single, most important ingredient in enabling us to discover and to live into our call. When we think of anger, we most often think of the self- and other-destructive qualities of anger. But anger is actually that force that causes us to act to bring about significant transformation in ourselves and in our society.

The English word "anger" comes from the Norse word, *angor*, which is their word for "grief"! *Angor* is "good grief". Authentic anger is the process of grieving over the injustice our people are facing, and connecting that injustice with the pain we have experienced in our own lives. All of us have experienced injustice when we were dominated, oppressed or exploited in ways that diminished our sense of self-worth and self-respect. Those incidents may be overwhelming (such as Israel's oppression under Egyptian slavery) or may seem trivial to someone else (like being made to clean up someone else's mess at summer camp), but they are still injustices to us that make us feel diminished and less than human. Our response may be rage or tears or frustration or grief, but all of these are simply manifestations of anger.

Those who work professionally with anger differentiate between "hot anger" and "cold anger". Hot anger is the immediate response of anger one feels to an unjust situation – it is literally a flush of heat. If you respond to that flush of hot anger, your response will tend to be immediate, visceral and not thought through. Therefore it will likely be destructive – as was the case of Moses' response to the Egyptian beating the Israelite slave that eventuated in Moses' banishment from Egypt.

Cold anger, on the other hand, is anger that is allowed to ferment inside of us as we examine the injustice in a cognitive, reasoned way. In that greater reflection, we will decide if it is in our best interest to respond to that injustice, and if so, what would be the most productive and calculated

way of responding. When we say after we have responded out of hot anger, “I wish I would have said. . .” we are actually saying, “I wish I had allowed my anger to cool down so I could have spoken in a way that would have gotten the results I wanted”.

That was exactly what happened to Moses. He responded in hot anger to the Egyptian taskmaster that eventuated in his exile from Egypt. He responded in hot anger to the Midian shepherds who sought to take advantage of Jethro’s daughters, but that anger was mitigated by the daughters’ intercession for him. But once married to one of those daughters and settling down to a life caring for sheep on the backside of the desert, that anger of Moses became disciplined and moderated and it deepened until it could break out as a much more cold, calculated and reflective anger that could end up toppling a Pharaoh of Egypt. And that is what the story of Moses’ meeting with God at the burning bush is all about!

When Moses saw “the bush (that) was blazing, yet it was not consumed” (3:4), he knew he was looking at something more than a natural phenomenon. Moses saw himself in that bush, for his anger at such great injustice being done to his people had deepened and matured and become far more reflective over his years in exile, but “it was not consumed”. The anger would not go away. But when he began to reflect on that still-unresolved anger, God spoke to him from that anger and said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (3:5). It *was* holy ground. It had become holy ground. It had become the ground of Moses’ passion, Moses’ whole purpose for living, the center of Moses’ life. His cold anger had become the fertile land in which a flaming plant could flourish.

So God did two things. First, God identified himself with the anger that possessed Moses at the suffering and oppression he had not only observed but had come to experience himself at the hands of the Egyptians. God said, “I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob”. But God did not dwell with his self-identification. He immediately moved to the words, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land” (3:7-8).

God was not a God far removed from the sufferings of humanity but was one with their suffering. And Moses suddenly discovered that *God was as angry as was Moses!* Moses’ anger was not wrong or inappropriate or displaced! God was as angry as Moses was. So it had been God, all along that had nurtured this anger, this deep grief, in Moses. It was the stuff out of which the liberation of a nation was to come.

The result of such anger on God’s part as well as on Moses’ part was inevitable. ‘So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt’ (3:10)! God’s anger, nurtured in Moses, becomes the anger that will drive Moses to risk his life in going to Pharaoh to demand, “Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go’” (5:1)! *That* was why God had to reveal his name to Moses – the very core of God’s being – because God had burrowed into Moses’ soul and Moses needed to know that God as thoroughly as God knew him!

The point is that no call comes out of the sky. A call must come forth from *angor*! There may be years and years of preparation – sometimes exciting and precedent-shattering, sometimes dull and boring. But the process of our life is, in God’s hand, all for the purpose of contributing to our formation into the person God wants us to become so that we can accept God’s call when it comes – whether it is at 20 or 40 or even, like Moses, at 80 years of age when he considered his life all but over. And such formation can’t happen without passion. And passion can’t happen without *good grief*!

First, *any call by God to any of God’s people is always a call to serve God by ministering in a profound way to a deep hunger of the world.* The deep hunger with which Moses was called to deal was twofold. It was to confront the systemic and spiritually oppressive Powers of Egypt – their king (Egypt’s political power), their economic powers (building the treasure cities of Pithom and Rameses and building Egypt’s economy) and their religious system (which will be developed much more fully in next Sunday’s Old Testament lesson). Although Moses’ confrontation of Egypt was personalized in his confrontation of his boyhood playmate (the Pharaoh) in reality he was confronting more than his former brother. For Pharaoh symbolized all of Egypt’s political, economic and religious forces that made the nation apparently invincible and teeming with wealth.

But there was a second and even more profound “deep hunger of the world” that Moses was to address. That was the way that the exercise of such oppression, exploitation and dominance by Egypt’s political, military, economic and religious systems had utterly destroyed the Israelites’ capacity to resist. It was not only that these systems and the people who led these systems had dominated the Israelites in every aspect of their lives. It was that these systems had crushed the Israelites’ desire to live. They had oppressed the people to the level of spiritual exhaustion, so that the people had lost all resolve and will to better their situation. They had just given up! They were not simply economically poor and politically oppressed. They were spiritually beaten. Therefore, only physical liberation had the potential to set them spiritually free. The second great “deep hunger of the world” was the spiritual liberation of the Israelite people.

But where could such deep hunger be met? It could come only by the “deep gladness” that Moses had discovered, that faith in God that had been honed in his formation of his childhood and youth, the defeat of his earlier attempts to bring about liberation in his own strength, and in his years of solitude on the backside of the desert where, like Jesus, he could meet with God. And now, here he was meeting with God face-to-face, learning from God the divine name, and receiving from God the call that would occupy the rest of his life. Thus, every person’s call is a call to serve God by ministering to a deep hunger of the world, supported by the deep gladness in God that God has placed in each of those he calls.

Second, *God’s call always come as frighteningly good news!* It always comes as a sense of overextension and incompetence on one’s part to fulfill that call. Thus, Moses was both awed by the call and intimidated by it. He immediately began making excuses for why he was not the best person to fulfill this assignment from God. Yahweh had to finally get quite angry at Moses. Complaining that he had a speech impediment and therefore could not speak impressively to Pharaoh (of course, as his brother, Pharaoh would have already known that Moses stuttered). Convinced of his inadequacy, Moses abandons all argument and simply says to Yahweh, “O my

Lord, please send someone else.” It is not until Moses makes that request that the text tells us that God becomes angry with him. And God, sensing Moses’ absolute need for support, says to him, “You shall speak to Aaron and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do” (4:14-15). Moses did precisely what God instructed him to do, and Aaron was the spokesman to Pharaoh. But there was no question that Pharaoh knew that it was with Moses that he had to deal, not Aaron.

It is absolutely essential that any call comes as frighteningly good news – good news in its content (“Israel is about to be set free!”) but as thoroughly frightening in its implications. Any call, to be valid, must come as overextension, as seemingly impossible for the one so called to carry it out. In fact, its’ apparent impossibility is the authentic indication that this is indeed a call from God. And why? Because if the call seems possible for you to achieve, you won’t depend upon God to carry it out. And when it is carried out to its successful completion, no one will give honor to God because it seemed quite possible for you to accomplish it. The call must always seem beyond you for it to be authentic.

Third, although the call seems beyond you for it to be authentic, in reality ***God has adequately prepared, gifted and graced you to accomplish that task.*** In this story of Moses, this reality is beautifully attested in Exodus 4:10-12. Moses feels totally inadequate for the task, and says to Yahweh, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” Then Yahweh replied to Moses, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, Yahweh? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak”.

Moses was the ideal person for the job. He was the adopted brother of the Pharaoh, and they had known each other throughout their respective youth. Growing up in the Egyptian court, Moses understood both the appropriate processes and the dynamics of that court and, consequently, how to deal with the Pharaoh in ways that would get the most effective reaction (more on this in next Sunday’s lesson). Moses had the passion and compassion for the Israelite people to want their freedom more than anyone else (that became apparent in the plagues, at the Red Sea and during the wilderness wanderings). Moses had the administrative and military training to both lead and organize the Israelite people in their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness. As a shepherd, Moses knew the desert as a friend, not an enemy, and knew where to get water and sustenance for his people. Moses was exactly the person God needed for the job, and God had carefully prepared him over an 80-year internship. He was adequately prepared, gifted and graced for the task. Against all these advantages, of what consequence was a mere stutter?

Finally, ***every call comes with the means for support from one’s brothers and sisters in the faith.*** One can’t effectively carry out the call of God and minister to that deep hunger of the world to which one is called, except as supported by your brothers and sisters in faith. No one can carry out a call by himself or herself. It can only be effectively carried out in community. In this story of Moses’ call, that reality is most beautifully stated in this statement. “Yahweh said to Aaron, ‘Go into the wilderness to meet Moses.’ So he went, and he met him at the mountain of God and kissed him. Moses told Aaron all the words of Yahweh with which he had sent him, and all the signs with which he had charged him. Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites” (4:27-29).

We most often think of Moses coming alone into the Israelite slave camp from off the desert to try to convince them to follow him in making demands of Pharaoh. But that is not what this text tells us. It tells us that just as Moses had his meeting with Yahweh at the burning bush, so Aaron had his meeting with Yahweh back in the slave camp. And being obedient to Yahweh's distinct call to him, Aaron left camp and walked across the wilderness to Mount Sinai (which, incidentally, meant that Aaron was an escaped slave). There, at Mount Sinai, Aaron met Moses, kissed him and listened to Moses' story (intriguingly, there is no indication in the text that Moses ever listened to Aaron's story about the call from Yahweh that Aaron received). Then, the two men set out together to walk to Egypt, arrived in the slave encampment, and there met with the elders of Israel to convince them to corporately offer resistance to Egypt. Moses had his brother to accompany him over the desert and to stand by his side as he began the campaign to set Israel free. One can't carry out his call without his brother!

“Moses and Aaron assembled all the elders of the Israelites. Aaron spoke all the words that Yahweh had spoken to Moses, and performed the signs in the sight of the people. The people believed; and when they heard that Yahweh had given heed to the Israelites and that he had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshipped” (4:29-31). And the liberation of Israel had begun!

Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c is the first of two psalms (Psalms 105 and 106) that celebrate and rehearse the sacred history of Israel. So rather than concentrate on God as creator, it is building the argument of trust in God on his trustworthy nature, as proven through the history of Israel. It begins,

“O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the peoples. Sing to him; sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually. Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered” (105:1-5).

Thus begins a recital of the mighty acts of God as such acts both impact Israel and bring about its salvation. The psalmist begins with God's choice of Abraham and the covenant made with Abraham which God carried out through the patriarch's descendants in Canaan (vss. 5-15), Joseph and his rescue of both Egypt and Israel from certain starvation (vss. 16-25), Moses and Aaron and their confrontation with Pharaoh (vss. 26-36, the subject of the Old Testament lesson for this Sunday's lectionary), the wilderness wanderings and God's protection of them in such harsh conditions (vss. 37-42) and then, finally, their entrance into the land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants (vss. 43-45).

The Psalm then closes with the cry, “Praise the Lord!” God has been so good to Israel in the way he has worked in their history. And so God will be good to any people whom God has chosen and called to covenant with Him!

Matthew 16:21-28 begins the final section of the Gospel of Matthew, a section whose objective is to answer the question, “What is it in God’s intentions for the world that Jesus has come to do?” What is Jesus’ mission, and – consequently – what is to be our mission? The first theme of the Gospel of Matthew reached its zenith in the previous passage – Matthew 16:13-20 – as it conclusively answers the question, “Who is Jesus of Nazareth?” Now, in Matthew 16:21-28, the focus of the Gospel story shifts to answer the new question, “What has Jesus come to do?”

In his confession, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (16:16), Simon Peter has used three titles for Jesus. He is the Messiah, the long anticipated king of the House of David. He is the Son of Man, the future world judge predicted by the prophets. And he is the Son of God, the living incarnation and presence of God upon the earth right here, right now! He is the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, God’s past, present and future in the real world! This is the confession Peter has just made. But what does that mean, lived out in that real world?

“From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he 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”” (vss. 21-23).

No sooner does the door of insight swing open than it slams shut again. Jesus, thrilled with Peter’s breakthrough of faith, and bringing with him in that breakthrough the entire disciple band, takes the next step. He shares with the disciples their next major hurdle – that, as Messiah, Jesus must be the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. And that will mean that he has to be executed by the political, economic and religious powers of both Rome and of Israel!

This requires for the disciples as large a paradigm shift as it took for them to proclaim that it was Jesus who was the Messiah. These Jewish disciples, like all Jews, had been taught all their lives that Messiah was to be a conquering hero. Hatred of Roman dominance was so great by Jesus’ time that the word “messiah” had come to mean almost exclusively a political/military revolutionary who would overthrow and defeat the hated Romans, and create and maintain an independent Israelite state. The word had become almost totally devoid of its original spiritual dimension of the Messiah being God’s “anointed one” filled with God’s Spirit and working for the full restoration (spiritual, social, economic as well as political) of Israel into God’s shalom community. And that included ignoring the Old Testament insights of the suffering, persecution and even death of the messiah captured in Isaiah’s image of messiah as suffering servant. In essence, because the Jewish people were so obsessed with the elimination of Rome from their midst, they chose to embrace those scriptures about messiah that celebrated messiah’s political and military defeat of the enemy while ignoring those scriptures that suggested any suffering on the part of the messiah.

Jesus’ words spoken here are particularly powerful. The NRSV translates the Greek word, *dei*, as “must”. But it has more the sense of “absolutely necessary” or “it is the will of God”. Thus, Jesus is saying here that the matter is beyond debate or even discussion. Rather, it is God’s divine design for him to “go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders

and chief priests and scribes, and be killed”. How the disciples feel about it or how much of a disconnect it is from what they have formerly believed is irrelevant. This is what is going to happen! And it is not open to debate! Messiah and Suffering Servant are one and the same. Whereas first century Jewish theology separated the two in order to preserve the military and political integrity of messiah, Jesus, in his statement here, is combining the image of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant with the Hebrew concept of Messiah. And he is further declaring that it is God’s will that Messiah be tortured and executed. Of course, he further says “and on the third day be raised”, but it is almost as if the disciples don’t even hear those words. They are so stunned by what he has said about his coming death that they can’t hear the hope that is presented at the end.

What Jesus has done has been to dash to the ground all the hopes of the disciples. When Peter confessed Jesus as Messiah and Jesus accepted that confession, the hearts of the disciples must have taken a dramatic leap! It would be Jesus who would be the Jewish revolutionary leader who would overthrow hated Rome and the oppressive political, economic and religious elite of Israel. And it would be the disciples who would replace those former leaders. How their hearts must have sung with joy! The revolution had finally begun.

And now, Jesus tells them this? Their reaction to such words was inevitable. And that reaction came in the person of the one who, only moments earlier, had broken through all the old paradigms and had confessed Jesus as the Messiah. Peter replied, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

In order to understand the ferocity of Jesus’ rebuke, one must appreciate the force of Peter’s words. His statement, “God forbid it, Lord”, was not simply saying, “No way” or “Unthinkable”! He was saying, “God will not permit this to happen, Lord. This is not God’s plan for you. You are not taking into account God’s mercy and propitious action!” Peter is both directly contradicting Jesus and is stating that Jesus simply doesn’t understand God’s will in making him the Messiah. In other words, Jesus doesn’t know what he’s talking about!

This explains Jesus’ fierce rejoinder, “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”. Peter’s response to Jesus’ words about his own execution are not the words of comfort that Peter intends them to be, but words from hell. If Jesus allows himself to be seduced by such words, then he will have succumbed to Satan’s greatest temptation of him. Such words, and the caring intentions behind them, are a stumbling block to him. There is no place for weakness here. The divine order requires the suffering servant to die in order to act out God’s redemptive power. Therefore the one uttering such words must be forcefully rebuked, even though he be the one who only moments before saw God’s intentions with the greatest clarity!

Jesus then goes on to teach for the first time the new paradigm of suffering servanthood, of death and sacrifice, as the key to bringing about world transformation. It will not be victory in battle nor in the political arena. Victory will not come for a relational culture by using the means of political or military conquest or of execution. The shalom community will not be created by accepting the operational strategies of the domination system (that is, overthrowing Rome or conquering the priesthood). Domination means can’t be used to bring about relational ends.

Therefore, the Messiah can't conquer by using the force of armies or wealth. He will conquer only by using the force of love, acted out by a Man hanging on a cross! Only relational means, only shalom means, can bring in a relational world. Only shalom can create shalom. Only Godly strategies can bring in a Godly kingdom. And that applies as much to the actions of those who follow Jesus as it does to Jesus himself.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done” (vss. 24-27).

Thus, Jesus now begins the teaching of the new paradigm. Now that the disciples – “you of little faith” – have learned and received the first radical paradigm shift – that Jesus is the Messiah – Jesus now begins conditioning them for the next paradigm shift they must embrace if they are to cooperate in the building of the kingdom – that it will come about, not by using the means of domination but by using God's means – and that, in turn, may mean the way of the cross for every one of those who follow Jesus!

Romans 12:9-21 continues Paul's emphasis begun in Romans 12:1-8 on the practical application of his theology in the actions of the Roman Christian community. The appropriate response of Christians to Paul's doctrine of grace is “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (12:1). Our task is to work for Christ and His Kingdom by giving our lives to the acting out of the Shalom Community in the world. This is truly authentic worship. And God has adequately called and gifted us to carry out that mission.

What Paul was concerned about communicating clearly to the Roman Christians in those eight opening verses of Romans 12 was that it was not about them (a very hard perspective to have for people who lived at the center of the Empire)! It is about Christ! It is not about whom you are or the gifts you might have or the strategic place you might hold in the church. That is all as nothing. It is about God, God's formation of the church, God's vision of the Shalom Community for all humanity, God's call to Christ to initiate that kingdom through his life, death and resurrection, and God's creation of the church to work for that shalom in the political, economic and religious arenas of the society into which God has placed it. It is all about God! So step away from the center you never did occupy and accept your rightful place at the foot of the cross, there to worship and to be used by God as God determines, so that the Cross might be lifted high and all the world drawn to the One who is making all things new! It is from this perspective that one can now work honestly with today's Epistle lesson.

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

“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 peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.” No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (12:9-21)!

Live out what you’re talking about! Let your actions give legitimacy and credibility to your words. Don’t tell me about your faith. Demonstrate your faith by the very ways you treat people, both those within the community of faith and those outside it.

In one sense, this passage is a “grocery-list” of the way Christians are to act. In another sense, however, it is covering certain themes of Christian behavior. The primary characteristic of Christian behavior is that it is to issue out of a foundation of love (vs. 9). The Greek word used here for “love” is *agape*, which is selfless love that is characteristic of God. Here, Paul is saying that such love should be characteristic of the children of God, as well. That love is not to be calculating or hypocritical, but instead is to be “genuine”, lived out in “what is good”, “hating that which is evil” (vss. 9-10).

Paul then goes on to describe this love more explicitly by naming characteristics of *agape* love and the actions that come out of such virtue. They are: live in love by genuinely caring for each other, remain ardent in the faith by serving the Lord, live in hope by rejoicing, in tribulation by being patient, in prayer by being constant, in use of money by contributing to the needs of other Christians, in responding to human need by extending hospitality to strangers (vss. 10-13).

Paul then goes on to deal with how Christians are to respond to opposition and persecution either by people or by the political, economic or religious systems of Rome. In Paul’s instructions to bless those who persecute you, to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep, to not be haughty and to not repay evil for evil, he is essentially arguing that believers are to live in solidarity with their society, and particularly with those who are poor, lowly and are among the expendables of their society (vss. 14-18). It is crucial, Paul argues, that when Christians are acting in opposition to the politically, economically and religiously powerful, that we not allow ourselves to sink to the level of these systems or their leaders. We are not called to seek to control, oppress or exploit out of a lust for power or greed. Therefore, don’t sink to their tactics but instead consistently take the high road, and that, in turn will shame them (“by acting Christ-like, you will heap burning coals on their heads”) (vss. 19-20). As the 5th century monk, Pelagius once put it, “The enemy has overcome you when he makes you act like himself”. Therefore, Paul is advising the Christians to live out their faith by acting like Jesus Christ before his tormentors, holding them to accountability, exposing their oppressive actions and intents, and yet never sinking to their destructive actions or insults. He then sums up all his advice in a single sentence. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (vs. 21). This is how to work for the transformation of your society without being seduced or captured by its priorities or ethics.

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