

Lent 3, Year C, March 24, 2019 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland , Nigel Taber-Hamilton
Exodus 3:1-15 Psalm 103: 1-11 1 Corinthians 10: 1-13 Luke 13: 1-9

This is Lent, so we're expecting to hear about repentance, about ways in which we currently live, and how those ways might be destructive of our relationship with God and each other. In these readings, failure is front-and-center: a failure of leadership. Failed leadership is an experience that we've all observed at some time or another. In the context of the community of faith today's readings offer us an interesting perspective on the nature of leadership for people of faith: it must not be self-interested, and self-centered. It must be rooted (rooted!) in the experience of and for the benefit of the community of faith, and in the context of relationship with each other and with God.

The problem and the solution seem to be the same in each of the readings. There's fundamental failure of each person to recognize the presence of God within their own context, their own life, in fact within themselves.

Moses the Murderer had fled Egypt and slavery, leaving his brother and sister Israelites behind under Pharaoh's harsh yoke. He's done what most folk of the time did - adopt the local gods of his relatives. We still do that! When we move to a new area - when Rachel and I were on the Diocese of Maine's walkabout we were told in no uncertain terms that the only names worth speaking were "Red Sox," "Celtics," Bruins," "Revolution," and "Deflateriots" (I mean "Patriots")!

Moses, however, has an encounter that disrupts his smugness about his situation. It comes with this bush in his path that's burning.

Once again, please don't think of this as a literal 'burning bush' - its meant as metaphor. As one Jewish rabbi has said about literalism and metaphor in scripture: "'A literalist interpretation of Scripture tells us that God is a rock that sent a bird to cause a virgin to give birth to a loaf of bread. And this is supposed to be an improvement on obtaining a chiseled code of conduct from a flaming shrubbery in a cloud. If a literal understanding is all that is required for faith, then I'm a yellow ducky." (Rabbi Ben Sylva)

Moses' encounter is on a number of levels: he's certainly having an encounter with his past, and the guilt that must have come from his killing of an Egyptian guard during his escape.

More importantly, though, this is an encounter with The Holy, a sacred moment, for him. And in that encounter he's reminded of a number of things: that he's been promoting the role of the creature over the creator, he's been making God in the likeness of human beings rather than the other way around, that he doesn't really know what he believes, so he chooses the gods of personal convenience over the God of personal encounter.

Its what happens when you respond to life as an individual rather than through the experience of community.

In this encounter Moses receives some pretty amazing insights, summed up in the name he hears God use: “I am the one who is there for you”. This is not an encounter with an idea - there is no profound theologizing on God’s part. This is about a personal God who can only truly be encountered in community – exactly, in fact, as God describes, reminding Moses of how he has failed his own community.

There are consequences for Moses for this failure on his part. Things will have to change – Moses will have to change – or this promised sacred relationship will collapse. The change is that Moses will have to return to his community and provide appropriate leadership for them.

Today’s epistle is likewise about leadership gone astray. Paul is challenging the leaders of the Corinthian church who’ve been operating under the mistaken assumption that “once saved always saved” no matter what behaviors they indulged in. Baptism, some of the leaders believed, was like the ultimate “get out of jail free” card. Paul is blunt. “Show some backbone!” is the message. He wants to remind them that one of the challenges of leadership is to live by example. That can be extremely testing, but, again, God will be there for them if they make the effort.

And then there’s Jesus’ parable about the fig tree. For us this very contemporary parable operates on a number of levels. The best way to understand it is by comparison to a contemporary oratory style. One of the regular features of the CNN app I have on my phone is something called “Late night Laughs” – it’s a brief, 90 second set of out-takes from the late night shows. There’s a pattern: whether it’s Trevor Noah on “The Daily Show,” Jimmy Fallon, on “The Tonight Show,” Stephen Colbert on “The Late Show,” or any of the other myriad of late night hosts, their monologues always seem to have to do with politics, and particularly whoever is the most recent occupant in the White House.

It’s always ‘open season’ on politicians because they’re always good for a laugh, whether they deserve it or not.

Of course, underlying the humor there can often be some pretty significant truths - political humor is sometimes the only way to raise particular issues with folk who, otherwise, might not listen.

Imagine if Jesus was a late night host – no really! I say that because that sort of humor shows up in the second half of today’s gospel. The first half isn’t funny at all - Jesus recounts some disasters that have obviously been the talk of his neighborhood - an act of brutal oppression by the Roman governor, Pilate, and one of those tragic accidents that so often left Jesus’ contemporaries wondering if the victims did something to deserve their fate.

“No”, Jesus said, God is not a God of punishment but a God of compassion and love.

Yet there are, he continues, some circumstances when judgement is appropriate, and those are, in particular, ones where the people involved should have known better.

In this case, Jesus is talking about the leadership of Israel. For pretty much all of Israel’s history –

with a few glowing exceptions – Israel’s leaders had failed their people. So when Jesus says that those leaders are like the barren fig tree that – if they continued to fail – should be weeded out – all of them. And “all of them” would have included the Roman administration. That’s a pretty ballsy political statement, and a very dangerous one, considering what the Romans did to political dissenters.

How DO you say difficult, dangerous things and get away with it? Late night humor! Or in Jesus’ case, farmyard humor. Rather than putting fresh soil around the roots of the fig trees, or giving them more water - which would be the logical first response – Jesus proposes something that, ever since, seems to get associated with politicians: manure make ‘em stand in manure and see if that gets them off their backsides doing something for the people! It reminds me of those rancid cartoons aimed at George III during the Revolution!

What should we expect from the leaders of our nation and of our church? Of this congregation? What qualities should we demand of them? Is there a willingness to take on the difficult tasks with a spirit of compassion and generosity, with a commitment to caring for the widow and orphan and of seeking release for the captives? Is there evidenced a commitment to an inclusivity that is more than just a word to be bandied around but a reality that is being lived? And is there, in them - and in us – a willingness to recognize those places where we have gone astray, and to seek the embrace of community as a way to restore ourselves and each other to the live of faith?

Once again, Lent is calling us to reflect, and to repent. AMEN.