

I Have Heard My People Cry

Romans 12: 9-21

Exodus 3:1-15

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Romans 12: 9-21

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.

Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He 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.

Then the Lord said, "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, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 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."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." But Moses said to God, "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?" 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.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

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My feet were so uncomfortable as I stood in the hallway waiting for my turn to go into the room. I was sure that I was standing on pointy pebbles and sand rather than in my own shoes. After a few minutes of this discomfort it was time to walk into the other room. My feet went from uncomfortable to painful as the feeling of pebbles and sand was now mixed with the sensation of pins and needles. Walking was so awkward and clumsy even for this tiny distance.

Once I was in the dimly lit room I very quickly forgot completely about the pain in my feet because I was so overwhelmed by what else was happening there. I was given sunglasses, gloves and headphones to put on. The sunglasses were smeared with Vaseline to impair my vision, the heavy duty work gloves made it impossible for fine motor control and the headphones blared staccato static, yet I was given verbal instructions to complete a series of tasks. Somehow, in spite of the obstacle course that I was now wearing, I was expected to hear, understand, remember and follow the multiple directions to put on a shirt and button the buttons, then to walk to another area of the room to put a belt on a pair of pants, and lastly to move to the table and pick up some coins. I couldn't understand the tasks so I guessed what to do. Folded the shirt the best I could and then the pants. Never could find the belt. Then put the coins somewhat in a row. Never mind putting cereal into the bowl since I didn't remember hearing that for my to-do list.

Needless to say I failed miserably! I was so confused and overwhelmed by what I couldn't hear, see, remember or do although I mostly knew the expectations. If this eternity had lasted longer than 8 minutes I think I would have sat down and cried.

The signal that the time was up was that the door opened to the hallway so I could walk right out to light, to normalcy, and take off all the gear for the dementia simulator. Off came the gloves, headphones and sunglasses, and then I realized again just how much my feet were hurting before I could remove the special shoe inserts that were a part of this process. In the ordeal of trying and failing the tasks I had been so overwhelmed I forgot how much my feet hurt.

Once I was again standing in our hospice office and wearing my own comfortable shoes, I also knew that I was standing on holy ground.

I had been working with people with Alzheimer's disease, with dementia, for more than a decade at that point. I visited and counseled them, prayed with and for them, offered support groups for their families and caregivers, attended and taught workshops. I knew the disease process, the plaques and the tangles and the behaviors and the memory loss and the sundowning and the long slow journey. I had held hands of the dying and the grieving, hugged the stressed caregiver, calmed the anxious person. But it was not until I stood on the holy ground of their world, literally attempted, struggled and failed to walk in their shoes, did I see the burning bush and know that I was on holy ground.

Holy ground, burning bushes, "are those circumstances or events that interrupt life and grab our attention. They are not part of our plans. They take us by surprise. They stop us in our tracks and cause us to turn aside. We take a second look. Sometimes we are brought up short, speechless, at a loss for words."ⁱ

I was certainly brought up short and speechless. All that I had learned, taught, experienced with and through others, had been in the abstract. It all belonged to other people. With Vaseline glasses, static headphones, chunky gloves and painful feet in a pretend world I finally touched the reality of Alzheimer's, of dementia, of living with a memory loss disease. My failed tasks, my overwhelmed senses, my confused and lost awareness, were a bush that was blazing but not consumed.

“We all have experienced what could be called a “burning bush” moment. These moments occur when we sense that God is seeking our attention, speaking to us, and calling us to participate in what God is doing in our midst. Burning bush moments change our lives and the lives of those around us. They draw us into a deep engagement with the living God, who is always active in our lives and in the lives of those who suffer,”ⁱⁱ the people who God has heard cry.

God breaks into our usual, normal, everyday experiences and boldly grabs our attention, our curiosity. The holy is in the ordinary, the ordinary is in the holy. God calls us by name, and waits for our response, “Here I am, Lord.”

Moses was a shepherd tending to the flock of his father-in-law, when through the holy ground of the burning bush, God called him to be the shepherd who would guide God’s people from the misery and sufferings of Egyptian taskmasters and lead them to a land flowing with milk and honey, with freedom and life.

“Here I am, Lord.” Moses was quickly ready to look with awe at the burning bush, to remove his sandals on the holy ground, but to accept God’s call to shepherd those who were crying to God in their oppression was a whole other matter. Reticent and reluctant, Moses asked who he was that Pharaoh—the king of Egypt, one of the most important people in the world—would listen to this lowly, nobody shepherd? Moses can have sympathy, he can have empathy, for the Israelites, but he cannot do anything about it.

God did not accept Moses’ doubts and insecurities. God saw what and how Moses could do long before he could himself. Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain. The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you”

Moses’ experience of the burning bush and holy ground is a story of call and response. Something is being called for in the name of God. Something was being asked of Moses in the name of God. Something is being asked of us in the name of God. In the ever burning flames of the bush God responds to the cries of the people, calling us to hold fast to what is good, to love one another with mutual affection, to not lag in zeal, to be ardent in spirit, and to overcome evil with good when we say and truly, completely, live into, ‘ here I am, Lord.’

God is saying, “I have observed the misery of my people, I have heard their cry. Indeed, I know their sufferings.” This is Godly sorrow, the broken heart of God. God’s tears are shared with you, and are a call to you, in a burning bush when you suddenly and surprisingly find yourself on holy ground.

Frederick Buechner wisely observed that, “Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go to next”ⁱⁱⁱ

God did not accept Moses’ doubts and insecurities, nor does God accept ours. God saw what and how Moses could do long before he could himself. God knows, God sees, what we can do long before we can know our see for ourselves.

What began as a pretend reality of holy ground deepened everything I knew, experienced and understood about those who live with Alzheimer’s/dementia and their caregivers, including their tears and broken hearts, in ways that I would not have imagined or expected.

Bushes are still burning. Holy ground is wherever God is. I AM calls us. Amen.

ⁱ <https://interruptingthesilence.com/2019/03/25/the-burning-bush-what-if-a-sermon-on-luke-131-9/> (Michael Marsh)

ⁱⁱ *Divine Friendship: Reflections for Lent* —Trevor Hudson, Anthony Egan, SJ, and Russell Pollitt, SJ

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2017/9/4/tears>