



Roanoke, Virginia

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“I Am With You”

Exodus 3:1-15, Matthew 16:21-28

Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link

Exodus 3:1-15 (NRSV)

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. ² 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. ³ Then Moses said, ‘I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.’ ⁴ 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.’ ⁵ Then he said, ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’ ⁶ 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.

⁷ 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, ⁸ 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. ⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’ ¹¹ But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ ¹² 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.’



¹³ 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?' ¹⁴ 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."' ¹⁵ 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 for ever,
and this my title for all generations.

Matthew 16:21-28 (NRSV)

²¹ 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. ²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' ²³ 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.'

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ 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?

²⁷ '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. ²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

Sermon:

What if God spoke to you? I mean that as a real question, of course, not a hypothetical one. What if God really spoke to you? Would it be an answer to prayer? Would it cause you to dial up your therapist? Your pastor? Would you hide? Would you be relieved?

What if God spoke to you?

Given the state of our world, I wonder what God would really say. What do you think God would ask of you?

Moses was not a perfect man. Far from it. He had a temper. We saw it back in Egypt, when he took the life of an Egyptian task master who was mercilessly beating a Hebrew slave. We will see it again and again when he loses his patience with the Hebrews in the desert, when he shatters the Ten Commandments in a rage.

Moses was not a perfect man, but he tried to be a faithful man. Faithfully, day after day, he kept the sheep. Day after day, he trudged with the flock through the wilderness and up the mountain. There would have been many days of silent shrubs before the "aflame-but-not-burned-



up” one. He led the flock day after day through rough terrain and unexpected threats. And in the middle of that daily dutifulness, the Lord appeared.

In our Exodus story, God calls Moses by name, informs Moses he is standing on holy ground, and tells Moses, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Now Moses understands with whom he is speaking and rightfully hides his face. God goes on to say, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry.” God will not leave them to their fate. And then comes the charge to Moses: I am going to send you, Moses, to set my people free.

Moses rightly balks at the task set before him, when God makes Moses a promise: “I will be with you.” In fact, God says, “I AM WHO I AM.... This is my name for ever, and this is my title for all generations.” “I AM.” Present tense. Emmanuel, God with us, I AM WHO I AM.

Moses didn’t quite know what God was saying in this moment. It would take decades of wilderness wandering before he came to understand that God was with God’s people in Egypt, in the desert, in the water from the rock, in the manna and the quail—God was with them in the struggles, with them in the daily minutiae of living.

Many generations later, in Matthew 28, Jesus reminds his followers, “Lo, I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20).

In the Old and New Testaments, we are reminded again and again that our God is a present tense God.

Some years ago, a baby monitor video went viral. The footage showed an exhausted baby and an exhausted father face to face on either side of the little girl’s crib. She was standing against the rail wailing at the top of her little lungs. No matter what her daddy tried (shushing, singing, patting her back), nothing worked. Until he decided to climb into the crib with her. He literally swung his tired body over the rail, one leg at a time, and laid himself down right beside her. His tiny, weary little girl laid her head on his stomach, peaceful at last.

Our God is not a God who set the world in motion and then leaves us all to our own devices. No, our God is a God who climbs in with us. Some version of the phrase “I am with you” or “I will be with you” is found dozens of times in scripture. We find it in God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis, through the years of exile, the days of judges, kings and prophets, and into the days of the disciples.

In Jesus, the disciples were beginning to see that God was with them—quite literally, in the flesh. Peter was the first to name it aloud. Earlier in Matthew 16, he is the first to declare to Jesus “you are the Son of the living God.” In our Gospel passage for today, just a few verses after Peter’s revelation, Jesus has begun to tell and 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” (v. 21).

When Israelites thought of the promised Messiah, they thought of a descendant of David who, like David, would be a military commander and who would return the nation to its former glory. The idea that the Messiah would suffer, let alone be crucified, was unimaginable.

Peter couldn't take it. The idea that Jesus would suffer and that his triumph would not be through military might but through vulnerability is simply too much for Peter, too hard to take in, too impossible to entertain.

Again, I sympathize with Peter. I get it. Sometimes, I want a strong warrior God to swoop in and save us from our problems. Yes, please! (I can't begin to count the number of times I've joked about Jesus' return this summer. I mean, what's next, killer volcanoes?!) I can understand why the image of Jesus' vulnerability, suffering, and death are hard for Peter to accept. But when I pause and consider it, I realize that it is in our own vulnerability, suffering, and death that we most need God and exactly where Jesus promises to meet us in the cross.

Jesus tells his disciples, “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” (vv. 24-25).

This has been a confusing text from the moment the gospel writer put pen to papyrus. And there are at least a few ways to interpret these two verses.

- Some Christians embrace them as they are written, feeling themselves called to make decisions that reflect their Christian commitment, even to the point of sacrifice and death (think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who had the chance to remain in America during WWII, but chose to return to Germany and be a part of the Nazi resistance, losing his life in a concentration camp).
- Some Christians are aware of their own limitations and doubt their ability to embrace the cross at all.
- Some experience this as a request to denigrate themselves,
- others suffer under oppressors who tell them it's their responsibility to “bear their cross.”

In these last two understandings, Jesus' words are a burden, whether imposed by interpretation of Christ's words or the imposition of others.

But there's at least one other way to understand Jesus' words, which is to simply recognize that sometimes suffering just happens and Christ is present with us in it. Lutheran pastor David Lose raises the question that while we assume Jesus' suffering and death were all part of God's plan, what if God's plan was to send Jesus to bear a word of redemption, grace, and love and the



cross is what happened as a result? That is, Jesus' violent death was not the only means by which God could conceive of redeeming humanity, but rather that God in Jesus came among us bearing a vital message of love and acceptance even though Jesus knew humanity's response would be to reject the message and kill the messenger. In other words, Jesus didn't choose the cross, but trusted God to work even through the cross.

In the same way, the cross isn't something we choose, but rather it is something that finds us. Sometimes, what's redemptive in our suffering is obvious—the sacrifices we make for our family members and friends, foregoing individual “rights” during a pandemic for the sake of community health—and sometimes it's hard to tell if there is anything redemptive at all in the suffering we see and experience. Yet, Jesus identifies with all our suffering, took it all on himself in his suffering, and promises to meet us in ours.

Kate Bowler is a professor of Christian history at Duke Divinity School. In 2015, at the age of 35, she was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer. Her 2018 memoir *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved* shares her experience as a wife, mother, and young woman living her dream life when she received this crippling diagnosis. I am glad to share that Kate has far exceeded any timelines her doctors gave her, but she still lives as a patient, and likely will for the rest of her life. In a Christianity Today article from Feb 2018, she expresses her sense of the tangible presence of God:

At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God, I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees, bringing notes and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered with words of encouragement. They came in like priests and mirrored back to me the face of Jesus.

God never promises us that bad things won't happen to us. But God does promise us that no matter what is asked, no matter what we face, we never go it alone.

As I marinated over these texts this week, I thought about you, Second Presbyterian Church. I thought about where you might be suffering in this strange desert season. In the past week alone, I have heard you say:

- There's a new grandchild I long to meet, but distance and pandemic make it impossible for now.
- I can have a full-time job, I can be a good partner, and I can homeschool a kid, but I cannot manage all three.
- I've lost a spouse or partner or parent or friend, but the usual markers of grieving and remembrance aren't possible right now, and it hurts.
- The loneliness is more acute now—somedays are better than others, but the hard days are really hard.



- I can't bear to watch the news anymore, it only makes me feel depressed—a leader hasn't lived up the moral standards he demands in others, a black man's life and his family are forever changed because of the actions of yet another white man, political parties preach fear and doom, and natural disasters ignite more fires in the West and dangerous winds and waters in the South.

I know many of you are hurting, aching for the old rhythms of life we all took for granted. You are not alone. Wherever you are tired or hurting or fearful or insecure or anxious or distressed, Jesus is with you. He hears your lament, he sees your hardship, and he is in it with you. You can count on his presence and power to see you through. We literally cannot save our own lives, and our attempts to do so take a toll on ourselves and others. So take a deep breath. Be still for a moment. And listen.

Here is what I think God is trying to say to us in Exodus and in Matthew and in all the pages before, and after, and in between: Trust God. Trust Jesus.

So far, this year feels like a wilderness time. But keep faithful. Sometimes in the middle of your daily dutifulness, the Lord speaks. After all, perhaps that bush had been burning for days, and Moses was the only one to pay attention.

It's hard to know where we are headed. But keep following Jesus. Yes, there will be suffering and even death, but on the third day—that third day—he will live again.

Friends, God is with us. God hears our cries. And God can't bear to leave us to our own fate. Pay attention. Look for God's signs. Trust God. Trust Jesus.

