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Pentecost 4 (Exodus 3)

When we left Moses last week, he had fled Egypt in fear of Pharaoh, and he had ended up in Midian where he married Zipporah, the daughter of the local priest, Jethro. No longer a young prince in the court of Pharaoh, he's now a shepherd tending to his father-in-law's flocks. Moses may have run away, but he cannot escape God's plans for him and God's promise to save the people of Israel.

We pick up Moses' story this week as he is leading his flock through the wilderness and up to Mt. Horeb, when he notices just off to the side what looks like a fire—a shock of orange and yellow and red bursting from a bush. He turns to see it more closely, and his life will never, ever be the same.

Because from that burning bush comes the voice of God. The voice of God proclaiming that the suffering and oppression of the enslaved Israelites has been noticed, even felt, by God, and that their cry has been heard and will be answered.

This tells us a lot about God. What we find here in this voice booming from the burning bush is a God who chooses “not to remain safe and secure in some heavenly abode, untouched by the sorrows of the world.”¹ This is not a God who looks on from a distance, but relates deeply to the suffering of the world, entering fully into oppressive situations and making them God's own. This is a God who suffers with the people but is not powerless in the face of their suffering.

Another thing we learn from this story is that God does not act alone. We see here that God needs Moses. Moses will be the instrument through which God works to bring the Israelites out of their oppression and suffering and into liberation. Just as the midwives, Shiprah and Puah, and Moses' sister and mother, and the Pharaoh's daughter were all instruments in saving the life of Moses so that he could now be called by God for this mission.

In the coming weeks, we'll hear more about how God works through Moses to bring the Israelites to freedom. And on this 4th of July weekend, I can't help but think of our American story of liberation from the tyranny of England almost 250 years ago. Was God on the side of our Founding Fathers and those fighting for independence in the Revolutionary War?

That's always a dangerous question, isn't it...whose side is God on? What we discover time and again in our holy scriptures is that God is on the side of the oppressed, so as far as these new Americans were fighting against their oppression, I imagine God supported that. But one group never has a monopoly on God's compassion. So I can't help but wonder if God may have supported the American struggle for freedom and yet at the same time been disappointed that 250 or so years ago, our Founding Fathers

lacked the imagination to seek liberation for others...like women, the poor who did not own property, the indigenous peoples who had a prior claim to the land that was being fought over, and, of course, liberation for the enslaved Africans brought to this country to create wealth for those with land.

Christian nationalism is just one example of the dangers of believing that God is on our side without the willingness to be honest and truthful about our past and the creation of our nation. Perhaps what's more important than wondering if God was or is on our side is asking what we now do with our liberation. How do we act in the world as those who have agency and varying degrees of power and privilege?

If God is our model, then we'll notice that again and again God demonstrates compassion toward the suffering and the oppressed. And God calls us to that same compassion. Just as God called Moses.

Several years ago when I was writing Sunday School curriculum, I came across Susan Bock's retelling of the Moses story. She's an Episcopal priest in Michigan, and I loved the way she used the call of Moses to challenge each of us to answer God's call. She wrote,

*All we can know is that each of us is called by fire, into fire. A fiery ordeal, a fire in the belly, a burning passion. A fiery God calls us to the fire, and into and through and beyond the fire. And why? Because he hears the cries of his people, and he sees their affliction, and comes down to save them, and needs our help to do it. And if you're going to rescue folks from the fires of affliction and sorrow and wandering and brokenness and ignorance of the God who loves them, you have to get in the fire with them. That's how God called Moses, and in some hot, bright way that you can't ignore, will surely call you, too.ⁱⁱ (Susan Bock, *Liturgy for the Whole Church*)*

God may not be speaking to us from burning bushes, but that doesn't mean that God isn't speaking. It doesn't mean that we won't feel a fire burning within us calling us to something.

So as we celebrate freedom this 4th of July, we must ask ourselves: What are we doing with it? Are we using our freedom to follow God into the way of compassion for others? Are we willing to be called away from what feels easy and secure and called into noticing where there's suffering in our world? Are we then willing to work for the healing of that suffering?

Are we willing to get into the fire with those who need us? May we each find that courage. Amen.

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- ⁱ Terrence Freitheim, *Exodus: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary*, 2010
- ⁱⁱ Susan Bock, *Liturgy for the Whole Church*, 2008