

In just the past couple weeks we've seen Hawaii, literally paradise, catch fire. Then, a map of California showed—simultaneously—a tornado, an earthquake, and a hurricane. It was about that time that wildfires reached the Canadian territories where our On Eagles' Wings ministry partners work. Then Ft Meyers, where our synod's youth team went in July to clean up from Hurricane Ian, got slammed again by last week's hurricane. And that's just the weather report. In that same time, another white supremacist murdered black people for being black; a man killed a shop owner for flying a rainbow flag outside of her own store; and students crawled out of the window of their classroom to escape the latest school massacre. News reports aside, we carry our own personal burdens, and there have certainly been days when I've wondered if I'll be crushed under that weight. Sometimes it's hard to believe that God is paying attention or that God cares. But Exodus is the story of God seeing and caring very much about human suffering.

I haven't preached on the Old Testament in a few weeks, but to reorient ourselves in the story, remember that Joseph's jealous brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt, but Joseph prospered there, becoming Pharaoh's chief administrator. Thanks to his foresight and predatory tax policy, Joseph not only saved Egypt from starvation during seven year's of drought, he was able to offer his whole extended family a place in Egypt and provisions to wait out the famine. But the Israelites never left, and the book of Exodus opens with a new Pharaoh forgetting Joseph and his service to the nation, instead seeing only this ever-growing population of foreigners as a potential threat. So he forces the Hebrews into harsh slave labor and undertakes a campaign of genocide against them, killing their baby boys. Moses' mother hides him, then places him in the path of Pharaoh's daughter who rescues him and raises him in the royal household. But as an adult, Moses witnesses the abuse of his people and kills an Egyptian slavedriver; to escape punishment, Moses goes into exile in Midian and starts his own family. But God has not forgotten Moses or the suffering of Israel.

From a burning bush the Lord calls Moses to go back to Egypt, get Pharaoh to free the Israelites, and bring them into the land of Canaan. Moses is a good choice for this job: he is ethnically an Israelite himself; he was moved to action once before on their behalf; and having been raised in Pharaoh's household, he understands the Egyptian ruling class. Yet Moses is reluctant to undertake this mission. *Who am I to go?* Moses asks. *Who am I going to tell them sent me?* And although our appointed passage today stops in the middle of Moses' argument, he continues, speculating that nobody will believe him, that he is not good at public speaking, and eventually just begging, *O Lord, please send someone else.* You can hardly blame him: he has made a life for himself where he is; if he goes back to Egypt he's a wanted man; because he grew up in royal privilege the other Israelites don't accept him; and he knows how cruel and violent Pharaoh can be. Why go looking for trouble?

With Moses' reluctance echoing in the background, we hear Peter try to talk Jesus out of his mission. Having watched Jesus perform miracles, heal and feed people, and walk on water, and having watched crowds of supporters grow into the thousands, Peter has just identified Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God...but he's not prepared for what that means. Jesus explains that his life of sacrificial love—forgiving enemies instead of getting even with them, showing mercy instead of vengeance, healing people who can't afford medicine, feeding people who can't afford bread, demanding justice from the religious and political systems that kept people in desperation—that life, though perfectly godly, will eventually lead to his own suffering and death. Peter wants no part of that. *God forbid it Lord! This must never happen to you!...*and we might understand Peter's subtext to be, *because if it happens to you, it can happen to us who are following you.* Like Moses, Peter knows a good thing when he's got it, so why would he want to give that up?

Jesus's response is surprising: Not “Get away from me!” but “Get *behind* me, Satan!” It helps to remember how Satan—in Hebrew, the *Accuser*—functions in scripture...which is not trying to get people to do awful, evil things, but just to get them to, as Jesus says, set their minds on human things instead of divine things. In the wilderness Satan tried to get a hungry Jesus to turn stones into bread, or jump off the temple, or seek political power over the nations—not terrible things but self-serving goals that deviated from the life of loving service to which Jesus was called. Jesus reprimands Peter for playing the devil's advocate—not suggesting something egregiously sinful, but advocating for common sense self-preservation instead of selfless love. Jesus says, *get behind me, get on board, get behind my message, don't try to argue me out of my mission but support my mission AND be part of it by following me in doing the same.* And Jesus is honest with the disciples, that if they live like he lives, their lives will take them to crosses just like his life will take him to the cross. Because the powerful aren't just going to give up their power easily; the cross is the consequence for Jesus' radical claim that godly life is a far different life than what they all have been living.

It's always tempting to argue like Moses, to avoid like Peter, to listen to the devil advocating for common sense inaction. Why get our hands dirty wading into a mess that's not of our own making? Why give up the good thing we've got going to go looking for trouble? If that struggle doesn't really affect me, is it really my responsibility to get involved?

There is a fascinating little bit of midrash on the Exodus story suggesting that God didn't light the bush on fire when Moses arrived at Mount Horeb, but that the bush had been burning for a long time, and Moses was just the first person to investigate. Moses lists all the qualifications he believes he lacks, but the question remains: If not Moses, who? If not now, when? We will always be able to find reasons—logical, prudent, common-sense reasons—to keep on walking past the burning bushes in our world. But the God who does see and does care very much about us and our world just may be waiting for us to notice—and to do something about it.