

Turning Aside to Seek God

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Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves: Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Readings

Exodus 3.1-15

PS: 63.1-8

I Cor. 10. 1-13

Luke 13. 1-9

Moses:

The story of Moses and the burning bush is one of the most famous stories in the Bible, but it is really not a story about a burning bush. It is a story about ‘turning aside’ to seek God. You remember that Moses was raised in the court of Pharaoh in Egypt. One day he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, and Moses killed the man. When he learned that someone had seen what he had done, Moses fled into the wilderness – a fugitive and murderer.

He became a shepherd, the lowliest job an Egyptian could have, and he married a local girl, and went to work for her father. He had lost everything, and was even working for his father-in-law, not easy under the best of circumstances.

Then, one day when he was out tending the flock of his father-in-law, he saw a bush that was burning, but not burnt. Now people often ask about this bush. Did it really burn? Was it a miracle? Did the Bible writers make it up? All of this is to miss the point. In fact, I am told, that there is a bush that grows in that part of the world, that often, in the early morning hours, when the dry desert air blows on it, will crackle with static electricity. It will appear to burn, and not be burnt. I like to imagine that if Moses’ brothers-in-law had been with him that day, they might have said to him, “Oh yeah, we see that all the time.” But Moses was a city kid. So, he said, “I must turn aside” Then, the Bible says, “When the LORD saw that Moses had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush.” In other words, the story tells us that when we turn aside to seek God, God speaks to us out of the place where we seek Him. That is what we do, when we come to Church each Sunday. We turn aside from the business, and routine of our lives to seek God. And God speaks to us, when, and where, we seek Him.

This moment was a turning point in Israel's relationship to God. The major themes of holiness and justice are sounded here. God said to Moses, "Take off your shoes, because the ground you are standing on is holy ground." Then, God said, "I have heard the cry of my people under their taskmasters, and I have come down to deliver them." In this moment Israel learned that God, "the Holy One of Israel" is a God of justice, compassion, and mercy, who hears the cries of His people under oppression and comes down to deliver them from slavery, to bring them into a covenant relationship of freedom with him. The twin themes of holiness and justice are the pillars of Israel's religion throughout the Old Testament.

Of course, Moses wants more. He wants to know God's name. In those days, people believed that if they knew the name of a god, they could invoke the god. They could call upon the god whenever they wanted, and get god to do their bidding. It's always a temptation, and we have to be careful when we say "my God," or "my Church" that we are clear that it means that we belong to God, or to the Church — not that God or the Church belongs to us. Amazingly, God tells Moses His name. He reveals Himself, and yet in a way that leaves much mystery. The name of God in Hebrew is Yahweh. You can recognize it in the Bible by the word "LORD" spelled with all capital letters. Scholars tell us that it is based on the verb "to be." In this story, it is expanded as "I AM that I AM. God is the ground of all that is. God is all being. Or it could be another form that means "I cause to be, what I cause to be." God is the Creator. Another possibility would be for it to mean, "I will be as I will be." God is free, unbounded. He exercises His freedom, as He chooses. God remains a mystery. Even in His revelation of Himself, He is unknown, and unknowable. God is holy, and we must approach God, cautiously, with humility, in prayer.

The Anglican Communion

Lent is a season of prayer. It is a time for us to turn aside, and seek God, or a deeper knowledge of him. It is a time to take off our shoes, so to speak, and enter holy ground. It is a time for special acts of prayer and devotion, and a time to examine our conscience, and to repent of anything that may hinder our relationship to God.

Last month, the Primates of the Anglican Communion met in Tanzania to pray and read the Bible together. They were called together in response to the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Since the General Convention of 2003, which ratified the election of Gene Robinson to be Bishop of New Hampshire, the Anglican Communion has been under great strain. Bishop Robinson is an openly gay man, and his election has raised questions about how we can live together, when we disagree. The Archbishop of Canterbury said that he sent a questionnaire to the Archbishops of the Anglican Communion, which asked whether they were satisfied with statements that we had made at our last General Convention, in response to the Windsor Report that was issued by the Archbishop after our convention of 2003. Eleven Archbishops were satisfied. Eleven were not, and the rest were in between.

I've often thought that you can be a Roman Catholic without a prayer life, because the Church will tell you what to do. In the last Presidential election, some Roman Catholic bishops told Catholics who to vote for. You can be a Protestant, I suppose, without a prayer life, because the Bible will tell you what to do, or your preacher will tell you what

the Bible tells you to do. But Anglicans have always believed that the authority of the Bible and the Church was to bear witness to Christ. And Christ is not only the Jesus, who lived and died. But the Word of God, Who was in the beginning with God, through Whom all things were made — Jesus, who was raised from the dead, and *is risen*, Who is even now seated at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us, and Who is present wherever two or three are gathered in his name. So, for us Anglicans, the question we must ask is not, “What would Jesus Do?” But, “What do you want?” And this is prayer. So, the question becomes, How can we live together when we ask Jesus in prayer what we should do, and we believe that He gives us different answers. This is the dilemma we face in the Anglican Communion.

Saint Paul tells us today that we are to avoid sexual immorality, and I should say that neither side in this debate believes they are arguing for sexual immorality. Indeed there is wide agreement and condemnation of sexual immorality. All condemn rape, incest, prostitution, promiscuity, child pornography, adultery, and sexual exploitation, whether of adults or children. Neither is anyone on either side of the debate advocating a blind Biblical literalism. No one, for example, is calling for homosexual persons, or adulterers, to be stoned to death. There are really only two areas of sexuality that are under discussion: polygamy and homosexuality.

Some African cultures are historically polygamous. Some African Christians argue that polygamy has Biblical sanction, and is consistent with Christian morality. In addition, the African Church is in a missionary contest with Islam. As the bishop of Kenya told the Lambeth Conference some years ago, “Muslims say, ‘Christians want you to have three gods and one wife, if you become a Muslim you can have one god and three wives.’” (It’s clear to me that Christians have the better deal.)

Homosexuality is more of an issue for the West. For some, acceptance of homosexual persons is a matter of justice, tolerance, and an end to oppression. For others, the condemnation of homosexuality is a matter of holiness, and purity of life. So, again, how can we live together in community, when we ask Jesus in prayer what we should do, and believe that Jesus has given us different answers?

I don’t know the answer to that, but I tell you, we had better figure it out. Or else, we should all go home, because we have nothing to say. Our homes have not been invaded over this issue. Our cities have not been bombed. We have not been deprived of life, or liberty, or uprooted from our land. We have not suffered ethnic cleansing. There are no ancient tribal hatreds at work here. If we can not figure out how to live together in the same Church in the name of Jesus Christ, then we have nothing to say to Serbs and Croats, Palestinians and Jews, Sunnis and Shiites, or Tutsis and Hutus.

The Anglican Via Media

But, we do have something to say, as Christians, as Anglicans, and especially as Episcopalians. We have been here before. English Christians endured a civil war, and Anglicans learned that the way to live in peace was to pursue the *Via Media*, or Middle Way. This is not the way of compromise. The *Via Media* is based on the conviction that Truth is comprehensive, and that any dispute is evidence that we have not attained the mind of Christ. Therefore, every dispute in the Church calls for humility, dialogue and prayer, until the mind of Christ is revealed to us in such a way that the affirmations of each side in a dispute are comprehended within a larger Truth. So, again, how do we live

together in community in the mean time, when we have only partly discerned the mind of Christ, when we must walk by faith, and not by sight? When it does not yet appear what we shall be? When we see through a glass darkly, and do not yet know, as we are known? We vote. That's right. We vote. Because we believe that Christ is risen, because we believe that the Holy Spirit is given to every Christian, and to just to the Apostles who wrote the Bible or the hierarchy of the Church, because we pray for every baptized Christian to receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit that will confirm our faith, and lead us into all Truth, because we believe therefore that the conscience is the final seat of moral decision making, we vote — and we protect the sanctity of the choice of conscience by a secret ballot. (If I could enact any reform in the Church, it would be that the House of Bishops vote by secret ballot. We should not know how our bishop voted. The secret ballot not only protects the individual from partisan pressure. It protects the community, by protecting the individual.) Democracy did not arise in Italy, or Germany, or Geneva. (When the Puritans came to power in 1640, they closed the theaters, shut down Parliament, and established a dictatorship.) Democracy arises out of English spirituality, especially in the Episcopal Church, because of the happy circumstance of our experience in the American Revolution.

A Call, An Admonition and a Warning

So, we are called today to turn aside, and seek God. We are called to humility, dialogue and prayer. We are admonished not to engage in sexual immorality, and we are warned by Jesus not to judge or point fingers. What! Do you think those Galileans whose blood Pilate mixed with the sacrifices were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? No, but unless *you* repent you will also perish. Or, do you think that those who died when the towers fell on them were worse sinners than all the others? No! but you must repent.

Until Then

So, as we are called to turn aside, as we are called to a season of prayer and self examination, let each of us say, three things:

1. Lord God, I'm so sorry for all the things I have done that I know are wrong.
2. Jesus, Thank you for taking my sins upon you on the cross.
3. Please, Lord Jesus, please fill me with your Holy Spirit, so that I may continue in the Holy Communion of the Church, and may by Your Word and Spirit, little by little, with each morsel and drop of the sacrament of your Body and Blood be transformed until I come at last into the joyous company of the saints in light.

In the meantime, the kingdom of God is like a vast net that was thrown into the sea and drew up fish of every kind. At the End of the Age, it will be the job of the Angels to sort it all out. Until then, you and have to flop around together and pray that we may continue in that holy fellowship, and do all such good works as God has prepared for us to walk in. Let us confess our faith together, in the words of the Nicene Creed.