



## Sermon for Labor Day Weekend and the Fourteenth Sunday of Pentecost, Sept 3, 2023

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Sirach \(Ecclesiasticus\) 38:27-32](#)

[Exodus 3:1-15](#)

[Psalms 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c](#)

[Romans 12:9-21](#)

[Matthew 16:21-28](#)

*O God, help us always to remember that our common life depends upon each other's toil. We pray this in the name of Christ, the Worker. Amen.*

Happy Labor Day Weekend, everyone!

This is a wonderful "last hurrah" holiday weekend for many people. With a day off to honor all workers, we have a three-day weekend to take in a bit more of the joys of summer, turn our attention to all the things that start in the fall including the start of school and fresh efforts at work, and set ourselves toward the coming cooler days.

Today, I want to make sure we take some time to say "thank you" to God for our ability to make and create and produce things, and our ability to help one another and make life better for each other. Work is not a curse. Work, if it is managed well and directed well, is a gift. Thank you, God, for hands to work, and minds to think, and hearts to care, and feet to carry us where we are needed.

Today, we celebrate and give thanks for all workers – at all levels of skill and ability, in all places, at all levels of pay. For artisans, skilled craftspeople who make things of beauty. For factory workers, who each contribute to making things we all use and rely on. For those who work close to danger, who work close to fire, water, wind, and earth to build and create. For farm workers and ranchers and fishers who bring us food. For shippers who travel over land and sea and through the air. For all who serve in stores and markets to help us find what we are seeking. For sanitation workers, who clean up our shops and streets and homes and waters and lands. For medical and social care workers who strive for health, healing, and easing of illness for everyone. For teachers who open and light paths of knowledge and skill. For office workers, keeping our organizations flowing and moving.

No city is built without the contributions of everyone.

I love one of our prayers in the Prayerbook that asks God to "our common life depends upon each other's toil."

This is a message that can be too easily forgotten in modern, post-modern, individualistic America. We can make believe that we are all self-made men and women, that we have forged our own destinies, that the world around us exists to support our flourishing and success, that our interests drive the universe and our efforts make it all happen, that the structures and systems around us are hindrances more than they are helps to our own interests.

Labor Day reminds us that we depend upon each other, and that all that we have and take for granted has been touched by many hands, dreamed and shaped by many minds, all the products of the work of many.

But not all work is fair or just. Not all working environments are caring or kind. Not all labor is honored with fair pay.

Some places are cruel. Indeed, many places around the world have relied on cruel treatment of workers, poor pay and meager living situations to cut costs and maximize profits, in order to build great things we admire and produce things we gratefully buy for cheap.

The ancient people of Israel, the longtime descendants of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and his wives, were slaves in Egypt. And they were treated terribly, as slaves have typically been treated through the ages, especially when they are of a different race or culture than that of their owners and taskmasters. They built cities for the Pharaoh. They made bricks and more bricks and more bricks, and they carried bricks and more bricks and more bricks, and they quarried and carried stones, and they cleared fields. As they grew in population, their male babies were killed by Egyptians as a way of controlling population.

Moses had seen all this, and at first as an adopted prince in Egypt tried to intervene, and when he saw the cruelty of one taskmaster whipping an Israeli slave, fought and killed that taskmaster. When word began to spread that he had done this, he ran to the desert regions, and he made a new life for himself, in hiding and in a desire to forget all the suffering he had seen.

But the people continued to cry to God. And, even though far away and unable to hear those cries, Moses could not forget their cries. He had found work as a sheep herder, had married, and had settled into a new life.

But then, he got a direct call from God. Now maybe this call from God came regularly. Maybe there were many days when a burning bush or a brightly colored lizard or a shooting star came within range of his sight – but he turned away, or kept going and ignored what he had seen. Sometimes, we cope with what we have seen in life before by developing our own horse-blinders and trying to control where our path will take us, refusing to see what is around us. And we miss the presence of God.

But there was a day when he saw a burning bush that did not get consumed, and he turned aside and went to see. And it says – the text is very interesting here – the scripture says that when God saw that Moses turned aside and went to see, God called Moses – “Moses! Moses!” And then, Moses did another thing. He said, “Here I am.” I’m here. I am opening myself now to you.

It was then that God opens to Moses what God sees and hears – and helps recall to Moses what Moses has seen and heard. God says, “I have seen the misery of my people, and heard their cry.” And I know **you** remember! I am here recalling you to yourself and what you have seen and known.

So, God calls Moses. Like it or not, Moses! God calls Moses to his senses, literally – to remember what he has seen and heard – and to respond with action. So, Moses is given the call, and the strength, to step forward into a world he knew all too well and did not want to enter again, to seek justice and release for his people. Moses was given – well, the term doesn’t exactly apply for another 1500 years until the Roman Empire – but, as we heard Jesus say for any to do who would follow him, Moses was given a cross to bear. This was a cross not of the magnitude of suffering that Jesus bore

willingly – God incarnate, Emmanuel, taking on the suffering and sin of every person in every place and time throughout the ages. This is what God in Christ took up as the cross for us. And none of us are Christ Jesus, and none of us are asked to bear the burdens of the world. But each of us as a “little Christ,” a bearer of Christ to the world around us, is called to step forward when the moment calls, to give of ourselves, to step into the gap, to step forward as an ally and advocate for others, to shoulder the suffering of others and with others, to witness against injustice, to bear another’s burdens – to call for freedom and release of slaves from captivity. Moses was given a cross to bear for the sake of his people – and the strength to do it.

Moses was given three gifts, in response to the three desperate questions he asked of God in order to try to deflect God’s call. “Oh, who am I to do such a thing?” “When people ask the name of the One who sent me, what name should I tell them?” “What do I have to show as evidence of any power?” “I don’t speak well – are you expecting me to speak to all these people and to the rulers in power?” God reaches out to Moses and gives him three strengths – the strength of the name of God, the strength that is in the tool in Moses’ own hand (his staff), and the strength of companionship and help from his brother Aaron who was on his way to see him, whom he had not seen much since his early childhood. And, let’s look at this name of God – God says, “I am who I am,” “I have been who I have been,” “I will be who I will be.” In essence, God says, “I am the Being itself,” “I am the very nature of existence.” So, when Pharaoh or the people ask you, “Who sent you?” say that Being itself sent you! You come in the name of Existence itself – and the nature of Existence itself says that what is happening to these people is unjust and must stop. That same nature of Existence is at your core, Moses. Know it, draw from it, it is my name and it is your strength.

Friends in Christ, we are called to be vigilant, to shoulder responsibility for those around us, to keep our eyes open and watchful for what we can see – and for what we cannot see because injustice and cruelty are often hidden intentionally from sight. And we are called to step forward to the aid of those who are being treated poorly and unjustly, and to speak boldly as allies and advocates for their freedom, their dignity, and their respect that is due every human being. This is part of what it means to take up our cross – to take up the risk of being seen ourselves as allies and companions and advocates for the poor, the enslaved, the abused, the neglected, and to be seen as “one of them,” whoever “they” are. This is the work of Christ, in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, because we are all most importantly and completely one in Christ who has claimed and rescued and freed us all.