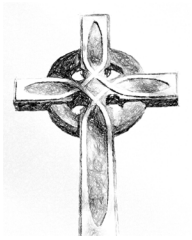

Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, March 23, 2025

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

Exodus 3:1-15 Psalm 63:1-8 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 Luke 13:1-9

O God, we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves.
So, my soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast. Amen.

Good morning, beloved.

Well, there is sadness today in the region. Gonzaga is out of the running. Sadness, right?

As our weather turns toward spring, we are preparing and doing early plantings in our gardens. And, it's a little alarming to know that there is avalanche warning across the panhandle for our mountain regions, as there is some early and rapid melt-off.

Today, in our ongoing journey of Lent, we have rich and sometimes challenging texts from scripture. Today, we hear of God's call of Moses, and we have Jesus speaking some strong "wake up" words. So, let's begin where Jesus first takes us in today's Gospel reading.

Disaster surrounds us.

Jesus does not sugar-coat the realities of the world.

Floods, droughts, earthquakes, and other natural disasters; wars, killings, enslavements, and other human-made terrors; all of these happen in this world. And, as scripture says, it rains on the just and the unjust. And horrors can happen and do happen, in our lifetime.

It can be a world of terrifying anxiety, in fears of uncertainty about the world and its climate, in fears of creeping injustice and cruelty by leaders and rulers and empires.

It was clearly in the news and buzz across Judea. The collapse of a tower in Jerusalem that flattened eighteen people. And the blasphemous cruelty and brutality of Pilate who ordered the killing of Judean men and the mixing of their blood with their animal sacrifices – a desecration of life and of all that the Jewish people held sacred.

We have seen horrors over the years, across this world. The gas chambers and ovens of Auschwitz and other concentration camps that slaughtered millions of Jews. The cultural revolution in China and a similar movement in Cambodia that resulted in slaughter and enslavement of hundreds of thousands of people. The genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia. The systematic lynchings of Black Americans and the destruction of their property, including the Tulsa massacre of the entire neighborhood of "Black Wall Street." The Trail of Tears and so many other cruelties and betrayals against indigenous American tribes. The rape of China's city, Nanjing, by Japan during Japanese occupation. The obliteration of villages in Vietnam. The systematic annihilation of the Uighur people by China. The absolute destruction of cities in Gaza by Israel.

Do I need to go on?

And so, we are always at least a little unsettled. Always, there is a fresh terror. And always with us are memories of disasters or horrors or injustices we have seen, heard of, or experienced ourselves.

And so, our hearts cry out with the writer of the Psalm,

> "O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you, as in a barren and dry land where there is no water."

and

> "My soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast."

We may feel ourselves breathing such prayers, at first in desperate yearning or deep concern.

This last verse of the Psalm today became my own breath prayer during a time in my life when my emerging career path hung in the balance that was being tipped by unjust decisions and actions. I needed this verse as I sought God's help. I commend it to you as a prayer that can recenter and anchor.

> *[Breathe in]* "My soul clings to you." *[Breathe out] "*Your right hand holds me fast."

Today, then, ringing out in a world of cruelty, we hear the story from Exodus of Moses meeting God in the burning bush – in a fire that did not consume. And on Tuesday this week – March 25th, nine months before Christmas day – is the Feast of the Annunciation, when God's messenger Gabriel visits and meets with Mary. Both of them, Moses and Mary, called by God to be God's vessel, to allow God to act through them. Both called to give of themselves completely in service to God.

I want to share with you two paintings that are striking portrayals of these encounters with God or God's divine messenger. The first painting is by a living Israeli Jewish artist, Yoram Raanan. The second painting is by the African-American artist, Henry Ossawa Tanner, in the late 1800s. Both artists used bright, light-reflecting paints to depict the light that is the fiery presence of God in the bush, and the brilliance of God's messenger Gabriel visiting Mary. The light of the burning bush and of the visiting angel stand out as dramatically different from the surrounding world.

In keeping with Jewish tradition of not painting exact representations of humans, Raanan has kept the figure of Moses vague. But he is alight with the glow from God's presence in front of him in the fiery bush full of color. Henry painted this scene of Mary after visiting the Middle East and seeing homes and public places there. Mary is sitting up awake on her bed, looking directly at the angel. God's messenger is shown with vague suggestions of a visible body that otherwise can only be perceived as pure light.

These are stunning visitations by God. The images are of light and fire, in places you are not expecting to see them. A flooding with light – like happened to the apostle Paul when he was still Saul and convinced of a mission to persecute followers of Jesus. And Paul truly needed an overwhelming breakthrough of God's light.

God's presence and message breaks into our lives in different ways. Sometimes, it is like a quiet voice, a bird's song, or a prolonged stillness. At times, it is (like for Abraham) an unnerving darkness. Often, it is in the voice and presence of people around us. Other times, it comes in dreams, daydreams, or sparks of imagination. And sometimes, it comes in a much more direct, brilliant form – like for Moses and Mary.

Yoram Raanan

Henry Ossawa Tanner

I invite you to meditate on these images first. Put yourself in Moses' place and in Mary's place, seeing directly what they see. God (or God's angel) is meeting you directly. See if you can sit in God's brilliant presence, and let the light flood through you.

What changes for you, in God's direct presence?

Now, a couple questions as you reflect being in God's presence and hearing God speak. How has God called you, at any points in your life? How did God speak to you? What did God prompt or ask you to do, to say, or to be – or maybe what did God prompt or ask you not to do, to let go?

There are moments small and great, but mostly small, through our lives. What have been some of them?

Finally, as you consider these times in your life, consider your own response. How did you respond to God? Moses argued and pleaded with God, tried to dodge the whole thing, and was not very willing at first. Mary had her own serious questions and concerns. But in the end, each said "yes." And the world changed. The world changed. Not right away, certainly. Moses went to Egypt and faced Pharoah, and at first things got worse for the Hebrew people before they finally could escape their slavery in Egypt – and then, they were wandering in the wilderness for decades while the people began to come to terms with what it meant to be called by God. And Moses never saw them cross into the promised land of Canaan. Mary and her husband had to escape with their child into Egypt to get away from the paranoid Jewish king Herod, then she watched as her child in adulthood came into conflict and confrontation with religious and political powers, even as many people began to follow him – and then she watched this promised child be killed. And, even in the early years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, she watched as a followers of Jesus struggled to move forward together. But, even so, Moses and Mary each said "yes," and set in motion something that changed the world. Not overnight. Not in one lifetime. But what they began set in motion a continuing tide of God's movement.

And their holy, world-changing work began with what God gave each of them, implanted in each of them. In answer to Moses's questions, Adonai gives Moses God's own name and identity, the tool (his familiar shepherd's staff) to exercise power, and companionship of his brother for the work. To Mary, Adonai gives God's indwelling presence in her own body, and the protective, embracing companionship of her fiancé who took her as his wife and made the perilous journeys with her.

God will come this close. The God who calls us is with us. To Moses, God promises, "I will be with you." In God's message to Mary through Gabriel, we can hear God saying "I will be in you," and "I will come forth from you."

My soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast.

When God comes this close and pledges to be with close to us, this prayer changes in tone – from an undercurrent of worry or desperate concern to a deep sense of rest, trust, and grateful openness. Just as God embraces and holds us, we begin to embrace and hold God. God has said to us that God needs us, *and* that God is with us and in us.

What have been the ripple effects in your life and in the lives of others, when you have said “yes” to God? What have you helped to set in motion because you said “yes” to God’s prompting and call?

Friends, no space is beyond God’s lifechanging power. At different points in our lives, it may seem like all is lost. It may seem like there is no saving the situation. It may seem like the decision-makers in the world are going to jettison what they judge as unproductive. Just like the owner of the fig tree growing in a vineyard. What was he thinking in the first place, planting a fig tree in a vineyard? This owner is ready to make a snap decision and destroy the fig tree. But the servant God calls out for more time, for a season of grace, for a time to nurture and coax life from what seems dead. Because that is what God does.

But God’s lifechanging power comes through those that God calls – in big ways and in small ways. Today. It begins today.

So, friends, as you come into the life-altering Light of God, what is it you see? What is it you hear? As God calls you, remember that God also says, “I will be with you.” “I will be in you.” “I will come forth from you and through you.”

“Abide in me.”

My soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast.

Let us seek, and feast on, the Light.