

The Hand We Hold

Exodus 3:1-15

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

Psalm 63:1-8

One of the things that people in southwestern Colorado do for fun is hike to the top of very tall mountains. The very first time I hiked a fourteener, was up a mountain called Mount Sneffels. It was less than 6 miles round-trip, but it had nearly 3000 feet of elevation gain, and very little oxygen at that altitude. For any of you who have ever hiked a steep mountain, you understand that the closer you get to the top, the closer you get to having your legs give out from fatigue. One of the least fun parts of hiking 14-thousand-foot peaks is that the top sections are almost always covered in shale. For every step you take up, you slide back about nearly as far, as you struggle to keep your balance with nothing but air around you, and you fear falling thousands of feet. Ridiculous thing to do for recreation!

On this first peak hike experience, by the time my group was nearing the top, I was so tired and scared, and frustrated with the shale, that I was just about to burst into tears when a friend saw me struggling. He hiked down to me and held out his hand. I was not a person who accepted help well, but in that moment, I was extremely grateful for that support. The strength and stability he offered doubled my efforts, making it feel possible, and the emotional support gave me renewed courage to keep trying. I clung to his hand, and he practically dragged me up the last few hundred yards to the peak.

Have you ever needed a hand to hold?

Today in our Old Testament lesson we see Moses encounter the Angel of the Lord in the burning bush. If you recall, anytime we see the Angel of the Lord in the Hebrew Scriptures, or the burning of fire in unusual places, we understand that to be the presence of the preexistent Christ. This is the Savior, preserving the covenant, because once again the people had gotten themselves into a situation they couldn't handle on their own. And God

speaks through the Angel of the Lord, telling Moses of the plan to rescue the slaves from Egypt and uphold the ancient promise. God's words describe all that had been done in the past for the people and all that God would do for the people in the future. But when Moses asks God what his name is, God answers Moses in the present tense. I am who I am. Yahweh. The God of Moses' ancient ancestors had sent the Savior to rescue them so the covenant would be preserved forever. But in every generation, God's name will be present tense. I am. Not, I was. Not, I will be. But I am.

Moses had a lot of ground to cover before he would experience the blessings he was being promised. After forty years away from Egypt, he had to go back and convince the people God was going to do an unimaginable miracle before he would receive the sign God promised. Worshiping God back on this mountain. It hardly seems fair to offer a sign as confirmation that he wouldn't experience until after the rescue was complete, but that's God for you. We are given promises that seem impossible and must do the work of faith while we wait for God to prove faithful.

Paul tells us the stories of our ancestors were given to us as examples. If you read the Old Testament stories closely, you see that the examples they left us were not glowing representations of flawless faith. But our forebearers were sustained by God through terribly challenging experiences by their reliance on God's help and presence through their struggles. And when they failed to be sustained, God was not the one who had failed to extend a hand to them. It was they who failed to grab that hand for the help they needed. Paul says to those who think they stand, to take heed lest they fall. In other words, if we aren't holding onto God right now, in this moment, then we are at risk of falling. Our sustainability in this life has always been and will always be Christ. Yahweh, I am, who exists in the present, is the hand we hold, the support and strength we require. And beware lest we think we do not need that hand at each moment.

In last week's gospel lesson, we heard Jesus' grief over God's people's failure to shelter under the safety of his wings. In today's Psalm, David expresses the riches he experiences when he does, saying "you have been my helper and under the shadow of your wings I will rejoice". David had a rich prayer life with God, eagerly seeking God, gazing on and beholding God, remembering and praising God. Let's be realistic. David was a mess, and he sinned worse than most of us ever will, but he also loved God. As horrific as his sins were that led him away from God, the presence and Grace of God continually drew him back. Like Paul says, the stories of David act as amazing cautionary tales for us. In some ways, it's far more relatable to model our lives after a complicated figure like David because, like us, he made tremendous errors. And yet he repeatedly returned to God. In the final verse on this Psalm, he says "my soul clings to you; your right hand holds me fast". When David found himself falling, when he reached out for help from God's outstretched arm, there was always a hand ready to support him. David experienced God as I am, a present and ready help.

This idea of help is an interesting one in light of Jesus' harsh words today. But help does not always come in a gentle, fuzzy form. He starts out citing two events that were clearly on the minds of the crowd. One had to do with the horrifically cruel actions of Pilate, the ruling political figure, who would eventually murder Jesus. The second had to do with a natural disaster that killed 18 people. These outraged complaints and justified fears sound exactly like the types of conversations filling our public spheres lately. And don't think the issue of Pilate's brutal murder of Jesus' own countrymen wouldn't have caused Jesus' his own deep grief! But rather than fuel the people's righteous indignation and valid fears, he turns the conversation back on them. Jesus speaks of repentance.

We've probably all heard that the word repent means to change one's mind. That is a great explanation of what Jesus wants them to do. Stop freaking out. But more than that, this Greek word for repentance comes from the Hebrew word (shuv) which means to go home. Jesus knew that all their rage and terror, regardless of how justified, would never bear good

fruit in their lives. As much as God longs to comfort our hearts, sometimes the best way for us to find that comfort is not in airing our grievances, but in coming home, grabbing God's hand for support as we walk through the injustices and anxieties of this world.

My favorite part of the parable Jesus teaches to try to get their minds off the drama is in the gardener's response. The gardener knows the tree isn't bearing fruit, just like these people who were flipping out, but he had hope that it would bear fruit. He says, hang on Jesus, give this tree another year...let me put manure on it first and see if that helps. See, manure is part of the compost pile, it's part of all the dead and useless things that have regenerated from death and now offer fresh life to others. Sometimes the best thing we can do for our own fruitfulness is remember that we come from the ground, and we will return to the ground. God is patient with us on our brief sojourn on top of the ground. God is present with us, even when we need another year, even when we need manure tossed on us to get stop freaking out about the state of the world. And we are sustained and upheld by the outstretched hand of the savior who has been preserving God's people and God's story since the beginning.

May we be a people who know the God who is present, I am, Yahweh. May our knowledge of God, cause us to keep hold of God's hand as we navigate the difficulties of this life. And when we find ourselves spinning, afraid, and unsteady, may our knowledge of God remind us to reach back out for the hand that is always waiting.