

## Third Sunday of Lent – March 7, 2010 – Good Shepherd Parish

### Scripture Reading: Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15

Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. Leading the flock across the desert, he came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There an angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in fire flaming out of a bush. As he looked on, he was surprised to see that the bush, though on fire, was not consumed. So Moses decided, "I must go over to look at this remarkable sight, and see why the bush is not burned." When the LORD saw him coming over to look at it more closely, God called out to him from the bush, "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." God said, "Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I am the God of your fathers," he continued, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. But the LORD said, "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey." Moses said to God, "But when I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' if they ask me, 'What is his name?' what am I to tell them?" God replied, "I am who am." Then he added, "This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you." God spoke further to Moses, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites: The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. "This is my name forever; thus am I to be remembered through all generations."

### Psalm: Ps 103:1-2, 3-4, 6-7, 8, 11

R. (8a) The Lord is kind and merciful.

Bless the LORD, O my soul;  
and all my being, bless his holy name.  
Bless the LORD, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits.

He pardons all your iniquities,  
heals all your ills.  
He redeems your life from destruction,  
crowns you with kindness and compassion.

The LORD secures justice  
and the rights of all the oppressed.  
He has made known his ways to Moses,  
and his deeds to the children of Israel.

Merciful and gracious is the LORD,  
slow to anger and abounding in kindness.  
For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
so surpassing is his kindness toward those who fear  
him.

### Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, and all of them were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was the Christ. Yet God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the desert. These things happened as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil things, as they did. Do not grumble as some of them did, and suffered death by the destroyer. These things happened to them as an example, and they have been written down as a warning to us, upon whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall.

### Gospel: Luke 13:1-9

Some people told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. Jesus said to them in reply, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did! Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them-do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!" And he told them this parable: "There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener, 'For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?' He said to him in reply, 'Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.'"



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### **INVITATION TO PRAY**

*Pause for a few moments of silence and enter more deeply into the presence of God.*

#### **Proclaim the Scriptures out loud.**

As you listen to the gospel be attentive to a word, a phrase, a question, an image, or a feeling that emerges. Reflect on this quietly or share it aloud.

### **INVITATION TO REFLECT**

The [Gospel](#) for Sunday sounds a bit angry and threatening, and we must talk about that. Is God as we have known him really furious and offended, demanding infinite justice? If so, the following should be our slogan: "Be afraid, be very afraid." But let us look. Here is the story from the Gospel. News comes to Jesus that Pilate has murdered some Galilean people. Still worse, Pilate has actually mixed their blood with that of sacrificed animals. This is a terrible, gruesome story, worthy of denunciation. But instead, Jesus seems to scold the people who brought the bad news. "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!" What is the logic here? It sounds as if you don't have to rank as the worst sinner in the world in order to get punished. You can qualify just by failing to repent. Why is Jesus so harsh? Is he an angry savior? Angry in the same way that the God of the Old Testament was, at least in the way many people think? Unforgiving, warlike, furious, demanding an infinite sacrifice to make up for humankind's sins against an infinite God?\*

To the contrary, when we look at the [First Reading](#), we do not find an angry God at all. Instead, we find God grieving over the troubles of his people. "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them." God speaks these words to Moses miraculously from the midst of a burning bush that is not consumed by flames. He begins to instruct Moses about how to rescue his people. Great compassion from the depths of the transcendent God. Why didn't Jesus have the same kind of compassion for his own people? Or maybe we have the wrong impression. Jesus tells a parable in the second half of the Gospel that might help us understand.

In brief, a sadly unproductive fig tree is to be chopped down, the orchard owner says. His gardener says to leave it one more year and see if, with some tending, it will bear fruit. Give it one more chance. We always assume that Jesus is the heartless orchard owner. We half remember the story in [Mt 21:18-19](#) of Jesus actually cursing a fruitless fig tree. Yet what if Jesus is not the owner but the gardener in the parable? The gardener is asking mercy for the disobedient fig tree. Isn't this exactly what Jesus is doing when he warns us we will perish if we don't repent? Isn't he shouting at us to turn back to God in order to avoid destruction? He is "startling the poor sheep back" from the edge, to paraphrase the poet Hopkins, and you and I are the sheep.\*\* There is still reason to fear God, of course, since he is infinite and infinitely more fiery than the burning bush. You can get hurt. But the closer you come to the real center of God, the more your fear turns to gratitude. You are not scalded or consumed by the divine fire—you are warmed and gentled at its welcoming hearth. Nothing angry or threatening after all.

\* There is a character called an "apteryx (a wingless bird with hairy feathers)" in the American comic strip "BC." One day it makes a nasty comment to the snake. Snake answers, "How can you treat a fellow creature with such disdain?" The bird replies, "I read the Old Testament, buddy."

\*\* "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil" ([John 3: 16 ff](#)).

### **INVITATION TO GROUP SHARING**

1. Is God calling all of us all the time, either to conversion or to action? God told Moses he was standing on holy ground. What made it holy? What is holy ground for you?
2. Do you have to work at keeping a friendship alive and healthy? Does your answer have any implications about your relationship with God?
3. Do you give people another chance after they make a mistake? Does God use people as "gardeners" to help cultivate and fertilize with grace? Does God use you? Has God used others to help you bear fruit?

### **INVITATION TO ACT**

Determine a specific action (individual or group) that flows from your sharing. When choosing an individual action, determine what you will do and share it with the group. When choosing a group action, determine who will take responsibility for different aspects of the action. These should be your primary considerations.

### **CLOSING INVITATION TO PRAY**

Give thanks to God (aloud or silently) for new insights, for desires awakened, for directions clarified, for the gift of one another's openness and sensitivity. Conclude with the following: Father, you have taught us to overcome our sins by prayer, fasting and works of mercy. When we are discouraged by our weakness, give us confidence in your love. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen