

Lent 3
Ex. 3:1-15
Ps. 63:1-8

St. Barnabas
1 Cor. 10:1-13
Lk. 13:1-9

“Earth’s crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees takes off his shoes.” Do you remember that beautiful quote from your days in Middle School English class? It comes to mind every time we read from Exodus: “Moses came to the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush....Then the Lord said, ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’”

High in the desert of the Sinai in a barren and dry land where there is no water is a monastery built around a bush that blossoms every year with red flowers. The monks of St. Catherine’s Monastery believe this is the burning bush of Exodus, and they have worshipped here since the 4th century, safeguarding within their walls some of the earliest Christian manuscripts and frescoes, assembling Eastern Orthodox icons and other irreplaceable relics. One of their icons of the Virgin Mary pictures her with a burning bush in her womb.

Pilgrims have journeyed to St. Catherine’s Monastery for centuries and journey there still, seeking reassurance and answers. And if we were honest you and I might admit that we too have wished for a burning bush from time to time in our lives, to reassure us and answer all our questions about decisions we had to make and faith and even God.

Lent is the season of the church year when, more than at any other time, we are bidden to turn inward and face those questions, when we in worship are given the words, “O 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.”

Western cultures differ from the Eastern Church in the ways they celebrate Lent. The Spanish brought the custom of religious processions when they conquered the New World six hundred centuries ago. Today one can join in processional routes during Lent and Holy Week in Antigua, Guatemala. Following a Mayan custom, all during Lent carpets are made of pine needles, flowers, flower petals, feathers, dyed sawdust and sand to be laid from curb to curb on the cobblestone streets of Antigua. Processions begin with incense carriers, banners, then floats carrying sculptures of Mary and Jesus on the shoulders of pilgrims who walk on the flower carpets, wiping them away as if to wipe away the material reveals the immaterial.

In America, especially in the increasingly secular sections of our country, observing Lent can seem contrary to culture. While many of us received “Ashes to Go” at the ferry terminal on our way into Seattle three Wednesdays ago, I suspect most of us wiped our foreheads clean before disembarking the boat so as not to call attention to ourselves. I am reminded that while Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote, “Earth’s crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees takes off his shoes,” she actually ended the poem with words appropriate for Western Washington: “...only he who sees takes off his shoes. The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.”

Disembarking the ferry and taking the 70 Express bus to the campus of the University, one sees stanchions flying purple and gold banners. The purple doesn’t stand for Lent. Some of these flags have giant “W’s,” while others have reflective statements. One in particular catches the attention of passers-by because at first glance it seems to offer advice to student test-takers: “Answer the question.” But upon closer examination, one realizes it says anything BUT “answer the question.” In fact, it admonishes “question the answer.”

Question the answer. That challenge is at the center of Jesus’ message. Question the answer the world gives. “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No!...Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them---do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No!” Jesus says. But blaming the victim was the customary answer to all the evils that befell human beings in the ancient world. They counseled, “If you just behave, you’ll

always be wealthy. If you do what is right, you will have a long and good life. On the other hand, if you sin, you will have short and pain-filled days. “Those were the answers the world gave then in its search for control, and those are the answers the world gives now in its social-scientific substitution for faith.

There must be a reason, the world says, looking for cause and effect answers. But it’s not just non-believers who tout that logic. Preachers of the prosperity gospel are all too ready to provide easy answers: “Live right, and things will work out fine,” they proclaim. “Health, wealth, and happiness are yours if you do what I tell you to do,” they say, ignoring the fact that one day that cardboard painted world will come tumbling down, and then what answers will satisfy?

I once knew a woman who prayed for parking places and believed when she found them that they were the answer to her prayer. But praying to manipulate God is not the worst of it. Some people, in order to explain evil, claim suffering is good in itself. They believe suffering is cleansing, purging. Others believe suffering has no real existence and give as examples the mind training of Indian fakirs who sleep on spikes without discomfort. And finally, there are those who say, “Since God is all-powerful, this must be God’s will. It’s a test.”

“It’s God’s will. It’s a test.” How many times have you and I heard that? Faced with pain and suffering, unmitigated evil, you and I have been told: “It’s God’s will.” Are you satisfied with that answer?

I’ve listened to that answer in hospital rooms. You and I have read it on the front page of newspapers. We’ve heard it from the survivors of airplane disasters: “It wasn’t my time,” they say, as if those who died were predestined by God to extermination. We know in our souls that all things are not good. But if we believe that all the horrors we have seen are God’s will, we are advocating a human moralism, an effort to find some purpose for what we’re going through, some justification for what’s happening, an attempt to start from our situation and reason to God, seeking to move from conflict to meaning instead of reasoning from meaning to the circumstances and conflicts of our lives.

Question the answer, Jesus says. If you are looking for easy answers, don’t come to the Episcopal Church. But if you are seeking meaning, this is where you belong. If you want someone to tell you what to think, don’t come asking at our church door. But if you want to worship God and reflect, this is the place. If what you want is a prosperity gospel, you won’t find it here. We question those answers. Self-control is not a theology, and evil cannot be explained away.

The poet William Butler Yeats characterized a world spinning outward such that it can’t recall its own meaning in these words: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere The ceremony of innocence is drowned. The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity.”

Yes, we know all about passionate intensity as an answer. The events of the month of February bring intensity readily to mind: News media report poisoned water in our biggest cities, terrorist bombings at home and abroad, angry verbal barrages launched by our politicians, millions of homeless seeking sanctuary from Seattle to Syria. Young people, we are told, are increasingly disillusioned: They do not believe their lives will be better than the lives of their parents, they mistrust institutions from government to the Church, and still they search for meaning.

So what would you say to these young people in search of meaning if they were to walk into St. Barnabas this morning? What does the Episcopal Church have to say to a young person whose innocence is drowning or to a man or woman facing a job loss at Boeing or to an old person who has just received a threatening health diagnosis?

We don’t tell them what to do. We invite them into a reality. We have another way of interpreting what goes on around us. We frame our questions within the story of Christ Jesus.

We relive the foundational events of the Christian world-view through our worship. Christians participate in a calendar that is encompassed by Church seasons; and when our day-to-day calendar is created from that perspective, we see a different world. The liturgical story is the context which clothes, enwraps, embraces us with Christ's presence. We lay the foundation of our lives in the incarnation, in the fact that God became a human being; and we frame our questions of meaning through the stages of the Christian story: first, the season of Advent, then Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. As we interpret our lives and the scriptures that inform them in incarnational time, in time that enfleshes the life of Jesus Christ, we are formed in the gospel story. And from that story we question the answers society gives us.

As we address the questions and answers in this season of Lent, we acknowledge that neither evil nor meaninglessness is easily cast out. But scripture tells us this morning to find our way by bearing fruit. Serving at our culture's stress, even breakdown points, we can minister at the points of greatest creativity and new life; for it was out of chaos that creation came. With a spirituality of engagement, questioning the answers, we the church can claim the high ground of thoughtful, critical Christianity, viewing chaos and uncertainty as opportunities for God's grace to penetrate our reality.

With grace, we view creation from God's perspective. Enveloped in grace, we await the flowering of the tree of life with Christ's strength to bear our spirits up, knowing that there is no place we can go where Christ Jesus has not gone before, even unto death. For Christ does not give answers: He gives himself. And that giving extends across the ages, across all questions, to say, "I am with you. I am."

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