

Pick Up Your Cross and Follow

How quickly things can change in the Gospels! Last week and a few verses back, Jesus was praising Peter and promising him the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. This morning, when Peter tries to talk Jesus out of martyring himself, Jesus calls him Satan and a stumbling block. There are many lessons we can learn from this sudden shift. For now, though, let's just note that Jesus gets pretty intense when anyone, even Peter, tries to mess with the Divine plan.

Scripturally speaking, there's a lot going on today. Our reading from Exodus gives us Moses' mystical encounter with God in the burning bush. Our excerpt from Paul's Letter to the Romans offers a tidy checklist of the things good Christians should do. And, in addition to his tense exchange with Peter, Jesus instructs his followers to deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow him, promising to return in glory with the angels to repay them.

This is also the first Sunday of Creation Season, a time when we join our fellow Christians worldwide to renew our commitment to care for Creation. This year's theme, "Let Justice and Peace Flow," draws on the words of the prophet Amos: "let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" God calls his people to be part of that blessed river of justice and peace. But before diving too deeply into the river, let's talk a bit about fire.

Our reading from Exodus gives us Moses at the moment where he first encounters his destiny. He's working for his father-in-law as a shepherd, taking the flock up Horeb, "the mountain of God." In Scripture, miracles happen on mountaintops; this miracle is a bush that burns without being consumed. It's such a wondrous sight that Moses turns aside to look at it, giving Adonai a chance to strike up the conversation that will change Moses' life forever. The former prince of Egypt can no longer play small. Adonai commissions Moses to confront Pharaoh and lead the Hebrew people out of slavery. It's the beginning of a grand adventure and a

beautiful friendship between God and one extraordinary man who doesn't think he's anything special. It also tells us that, if God really wants our attention, he may light a fire to get it.

Moses' reply to Adonai – “who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” – is an appropriate first response to a heavenly summons. I suspect that anyone who fancies himself worthy of a divine commission probably isn't. Narcissism doesn't sit well in the Kingdom of Heaven. But we know what transpires. Not without some kvetching, Moses steps up and fulfills his mission, becoming one of the greatest spiritual leaders of all time. Moses shows us what Jesus means when he tells those of us who want to follow him – and everyone here presumably does, because you could have decided to skip church and sleep in on this holiday weekend, but you didn't – what denying yourself and taking up your cross really entails.

Some of my fellow clergy get dramatic about taking up the cross, warning that you must be ready to die a grisly death like Jesus if you want to follow him. They're not entirely wrong. There are places in this world where Christians are persecuted, but Annapolis isn't one of them. Here, we're better served by C.S. Lewis' idea that self-denial means giving up what he calls the “natural self,” with all its petty, personal interests and desires. Before we become Christians, Lewis says, we meet society's standards for good behavior while still expecting that, once we have, “the poor natural self will still have some chance, and some time, to get on with its own life and do what it likes.” Lewis compares it to dutifully paying your taxes in the assumption that there will be enough left over to live on. Jesus asks us to give up our natural selves altogether so he can replace them with new selves that incorporate his goodness. It's hard to let go of the natural self, but still easier than trying to be “good” while clinging to our personal desires. As Lewis observes, “[i]t may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder

for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.”

We learn to hatch, Lewis says, by repeatedly shoving back our personal wishes and hopes so we can listen for Jesus’s voice, “taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.” Although we can only do it for moments at first, change flows through us over time because our making the effort gives Jesus room to work on us. Eventually, with faithful practice, we are drawn into Christ and can become part of the divine plan. Lewis believed that, once we are drawn in, “a great many other things in Nature will begin to come right.” And that leads us back to fire, and God’s great river of justice and peace.

To get Moses’ attention, Adonai set one bush on fire. NASA’s Earth Observatory website reports that “[o]n Earth, something is always burning.” Even so, this summer has been a doozy. Canada’s arboreal forests have been ablaze for months. Maui has been reduced to ash. Much of southern Europe – France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Syria, and Turkey – has been decimated by wildfires. And, although U.S. media haven’t said much about it, huge swaths of Central and South America and Africa have also gone up in flames. The world is on fire and our exasperated God has to be asking, “do I have your attention *now*?”

Wildfires are caused by elevated temperatures and strong winds, byproducts of the climate change that Western consumerism has inflicted on Creation. And, as the World Bank reports, “Climate change hits the poorest people the hardest, those living in vulnerable areas with the fewest resources to help them adapt or recover quickly from shocks. As the effects of climate change worsen, escaping poverty becomes more difficult.” We know that Jesus has a special concern for the poor. As his followers, we can’t just stand by and watch our less prosperous neighbors suffer while the world burns.

Water quenches fire, although many of this summer's wildfires have been so large and hot that the water firefighters dumped from airplanes evaporated before it even hit the ground. God's river of justice and peace will need to be enormous if it's going to extinguish the fires, physical and spiritual, that human greed and short-sightedness have started. But if C.S. Lewis is right, our willingness to be drawn into Christ will help Nature recover. Care for Creation flows naturally from our commitment to social justice because we can't create a just, peaceful society without paying attention to living conditions across the world we all share.

Paul's list of Christian virtues offers good guidance, but we need to be careful with it. To borrow from Lewis, we can't hatch by ourselves, so following even the best checklist won't teach us to fly. It takes a regular practice of prayer and discernment to hear Jesus's voice and grow into the people he wants us to be. We can tell it's working when we start behaving as Paul says we should, not by force of will but because we've been transformed into people who naturally act that way. As we do, we gain the spiritual strength to carry whatever cross Jesus asks us to bear although, these days, he might prefer that we carry buckets of living water to put out the flames that threaten our neighbors. It won't be easy – nothing worth doing ever is. But we can draw inspiration from Moses, who might have lived and died in obscurity if he hadn't turned aside from his planned path to see the miracle God had prepared for him and accepted the mission God gave him. If we let him, Jesus will hatch us from our self-interested shells and teach us how to fly. He has plenty of work for each of us to build a world where justice and peace flow down in a mighty river. But he has promised that his yoke will be easy and his burden light, and I believe him. So, let's pick up our crosses and follow our Lord to the river. It will be a grand adventure. Amen.