

# ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

23 E. Airy Street | Norristown PA 19401 | (610) 272-4092



## NEEDED: AN ENCOUNTER

**The Rev. Andrew F. Kline**

Text of a Sermon preached the Second Sunday of Lent

March 20, 2022

EXODUS 3:1-15 | PSALM 63:1-8

I CORINTHIANS 10:1-13 | LUKE 13:1-9

Moses said to the Divine One, Ha Elohim, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The Divine One, Ha Elohim, of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

At this exact moment, at this point in the story, let us pause, take a breath, and wonder at how it is that Moses manages to ask just this question. Moses is a fugitive, a wanted murder, taken in by the Midianites in the middle of the desert, given a life through marriage into this nomadic clan. He has one job, to watch his father-in-law's pre-

cious sheep. And he can't even do that. As the text reads, he becomes 'distracted', and leaves them to go up the mountain to investigate a bright shiny thing. Forgetting his responsibilities he finds a flame retardant talking bush that bids him take off his shoes and come closer. And if he could make sense of it, in what must have seemed like a dream, with the beating tick tick tock of his heart that was in his throat, has a conversation where he learns that in the thin places, the ground and the sky talk back, and that the universe actually cares about the suffering of his people, who he hardly knows and who have rejected him.

And in just this moment, he takes a sharp breath, and pauses, and asks: O Divine One, who are you? "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God, Ha Elohim, of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

What Moses learns is not a fact, or an idea, or a point of view. Rather, Moses has an encounter with the living God. "God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.'" In a flash Moses no longer needs the abstract title of God, The Divine One, to refer to what he could never understand or what his place is in the universe. Rather, he is face to face, in a personal encounter, with the verb "To Be," with all that ever was, that is, that ever will be. He is not just thinking about the One who was, who Is, and who Is to Come. He is face to face speaking with "I AM." I AM WHO I AM.

If there is a God that matters, it is this personal presence that grounds us and orients us and animates us. Most of the time we are unaware of this divine presence. Often we only realize its reality looking backward. So, God keeps Moses grounded. He also says: "I am "I AM" and I am also the God of your ancestors. I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." I am the God who has been there all along and who will be there always. If you still need a title for me, take this one with you. It will help you find me when you have lost me again. At least until the Christ is revealed.

Here, we find ourselves right in the thick of things, the dead center of our Lenten journey. Many years ago, an old priest, after listening to me trying half heartedly to figure out what discipline to choose for Lent, snapped, "Whatever you do, take it seriously man. Make it count!"

And the Christ who was in the flames on the mountain says:  
Repent.

Indeed, our sin is ever before us, it is crouching at the door, as surely as our ancestors could not be saved though they were baptized into Moses and drank from the spiritual rock of Christ in the desert, we refuse to take off our shoes and kneel down and beg for a word of life.

As surely as there will never be an acceptable explanation that bad things happen to good people, or why we are judged when we are judged, our sin is ever before us. The point is, judgment is coming, and we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves.

Today, we also learn, that if we get on our knees, always, there is a conversation to be had, face to face, heart to heart, where mercy is found, where another chance presents itself. That is the nature of the Christ, who instead of being content to discuss the current affairs of Herod and Pilate, wants to give us a very strange, almost comical image, to get us back down on our knees.

Jesus has one message for us today: Repent! Change your mind, stop, turn, go another way! He does not want to assure us. Rather, feel his gaze. Don't let your eyes go from his. Do you feel it? His frustration with us, his displeasure? Yet, do you see it? The twinkle in his eye. Listen. Consider the fig tree. It takes three years for a young fig tree to start bearing fruit, and then three years to discover that it is at the end of its useful life. And what if God were like a gardener - see how Jesus winks and implies the joke's on him! - and throws a pile of manure on us, and gives us one more chance. This story is so odd. We squirm just a bit. Maybe God is the manure! Fancy that. Repent!

I AM judges. Yet, I AM WHO I AM, is above all, merciful.

Why hasn't the fig tree produced fruit yet? Um, here's the manure, and here's a spade — get to work. Why do terrible, painful, completely unfair things happen in this world? Um, go weep with someone who's weeping. Go fight for the justice you long to see. Go confront evil where it needs confronting. Go learn the art of patient, hope-filled tending. Go cultivate beautiful things.

Go look your own sin in the eye and repent of it while you can.

One headline yesterday read: Vladimir Putin not ready to sit down face to face will Zelensky to negotiate.

Do all you can, then take off your shoes. Ask, seek, knock.

Go look your own sin in the eye and repent of it while you can.

As King David, the man after God's own heart, sings:

“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.

“Therefore I have gazed upon you in your holy place, \*

that I might behold your power and your glory.”

“For your loving-kindness is better than life itself; \*

my lips shall give you praise.

“So will I bless you as long as I live \*

and lift up my hands in your Name.”

Seek the Lord while he wills to be found.

Maybe you have done this. You have knelt down beside your bed, beside your parents, beside you child, and raised your hands, and looked up. You have sought the Lord. Why not now?

It has been said: Pray as if everything depends upon God. Act as if everything depends upon you. Helpful, but not quite right. It is rather, I think, the other way round. Act as though everything depends upon you. But know that everything depends upon God.

This is how, slowly but surely - with a little manure added! - we become people after God's own heart.