

EXODUS 3:1-15 (p. 46)

AUGUST 30, 2020

MATTHEW 16:21-28 (p. 798)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord, be with us now as we study your Holy Word. Grant us wisdom, so that we might understand your truths. Grant us discernment, so that we might truly see ourselves, as well as the people around us. And grant us compassion, so that we might freely share with them what we learn here today. In your Son's Name we ask this, Amen.

"MARCHING ORDERS"

Have you ever watched a child with a freshly opened box of assorted chocolates? The concentration is intense! As is the dilemma! "Which one should I take? Maybe the biggest one? Or maybe that small round one. It might be filled with my favorite peppermint cream? Or how about the long skinny one? It might last longer? Or that light brown colored one with the caramel inside? Which one should I choose? How do I decide?"

As an adult, a child's decision might seem trivial. Although I have seen more than few adults stare longingly at a box of Fannie May Chocolates! But we usually have a broader perspective, don't we! We see choices from a much larger point of view! And that is the fundamental parameter in making choices, isn't it, how broad, really, is your perspective? So, I wonder if we ever glimpse things from an "Eternal" point of view?

In order for you to be a Christian—says our Lord, to those who love Him—you have to deny yourself and willingly take up your Cross. If you want to follow me, be one of my Disciples, that’s the choice you have to make. You need to consider the “concerns of God”, not the “concerns of man”! And especially not your own concerns! You see it’s like this, whoever tries to save their life, will actually lose it! But whoever is willing to lose their life for Me, will truly find Life!

That’s pretty serious, isn’t it? We are so used to thinking of ourselves! But Jesus says, unless your concerns are those of God, they are not, from an Eternal Perspective, worth having! The choice is yours though. It’s your decision. It’s totally up to you! But it is decision time, says Jesus! I need your answer right now! Are you willing to make that kind of commitment? Think it through, though, before you answer. Because what could you possibly give in exchange for your soul? Will you follow me or not, be my Disciple or not? Will you choose to deny yourself or not? Will you freely take up whatever Cross Almighty God sets before you? Or will you turn, and walk away?

Can you feel the magnitude of that question, that decision before them? That decision before you really, and me! Can you see it through an Eternal Lens? I wonder! Martin Luther King Jr. had a phrase for a time like this. He called it “the Fierce Urgency of the Now”! I wonder if we can sense that, the urgency? And here is the thing! The ramification of your decision will only unfold over time! You simply will not completely understand what all this means just yet! That doesn’t change anything, though! You still need to choose! ... You see? “The Fierce Urgency of the Now!”

The Disciples are in Galilee, not too far from Caesarea Philippi, where we saw them last week, still on the edge of Gentile territory. They are in the north, near where most of them grew up! It's lush and beautiful there, a lot more-green, far more trees than there are downstate! The sky is often a deep, rich shade of blue! Cool breezes roll in off of the water, and bath the entire area inland for miles! Maybe you can imagine a place like that?

Only it's the Mediterranean Sea, not Lake Michigan. Picture taking a vacation there, with Jesus, when suddenly He drops a bombshell! "I'm going to Jerusalem, down to the Capital. There, I will be handed over to the Elders, and Chief Priests, and Teachers of the Law. They will put me through a time of immense agony and tremendous suffering! Which, with the help of the Romans, will culminate in a most horrific death! I'll be Crucified, nailed to a Cross and set up on a hill! I am going to die in a most ghastly way! And then, on the third day, I will Rise from Death to New Life! And what I need from you is a decision! Are you willing to follow me on this journey? Will you choose to be one of my Disciples? Will you go where I go, and do what I do? Will you take up your Cross when the time comes, and freely carry it, like I am about to do with mine?

The path before Me is clear, He says. But then, so is the one before you, even if you can't see it just yet! It's a path called Obedience, a path of Humility, a path of Self-Sacrifice in the Name of the Father! My journey leads to Glory, and so can yours! But it only does so by way of a Cross! And I need your answer right now!

Just as an aside, when you're sharing the Gospel, the Good News with someone for the very first time—you know, introducing them to Jesus—this may not be your best “Go To” text! I mean it doesn't exactly make you want to run right out and sign up, does it? Imagine the shock for the Disciples! Picture the expressions on their faces! Here is the Mission, folks! These are your Marching Orders! Your assignment is really quite clear!

Now it's decision time! So, let me make that clear as well! Will you follow Me, faithfully and obediently, or take off in the opposite direction! Will you embrace whatever hardships come your way, humbly stoop down, as low as you need to go, and pick up your Cross? And will you then, carry it, in unconditional love, wherever I tell you to go?

Can you imagine hearing that at some Crusade, or Revival? Would you go forward at the Altar Call? This isn't about buying a T-shirt with the Team Name on it, or our corporate Logo! This has nothing to do with putting a “Fish Symbol” Bumper Sticker on the back of your car, or carrying a Bible around, or wearing a Cross Necklace even! This is actually about shouldering a Cross yourself! A big one maybe? This is a choice, a lifestyle choice! You either follow Me or you don't!

You can't hide out in the anonymity of the crowd, at what feels like a safe distance! You are either in the Game, or you are out! There is no watching from the sidelines, not if you want to be one of my Disciples! I am calling you to a brand-new way of life! In fact, I am going to give up My life in order to accomplish the work of the Lord. And what I am calling you to do is the very same thing!

You know, now that I think about it, maybe this would be a good introductory Scripture to share with a new believer! I mean, it's honest, right, and truthful? You certainly can't accuse Jesus of deceptive advertising! He doesn't sugar-coat the Mission here, at all! Following Jesus requires self-denial! It requires service to others, in His Name! It may even very well lead to a Cross! That's what you are signing up for!

Regardless of what you may have heard on the radio, Christianity is not a technique designed to deliver prosperity! Nor is it a magic formula that will instantly whisk away all of life's problems! This isn't some kind of Key that unlocks the secret doors of happiness, at least not on this side of Heaven! Although joy and peace are certainly side effects of obedience, aren't they! Those who follow Jesus, follow Him towards the Cross! And Cross-bearers, according to Thomas Long, a prominent preacher, are those who "Forfeit the Game of Power before the first inning even begins! Christians are dropouts from the school of self-promotion!" And now, we each have to decide!

Some "Holiday" in the northern part of the state, right! It's no wonder Peter freaks out! Jesus flat out says; "You don't have in mind the concerns of God"! Your simple solutions, your human solutions—the latest fad, the next wave of Christian Ethics, your five-step plan for Church Growth, your New Development Model—isn't going to cut it! This isn't about "playing Church", no matter what you may have heard! "What you have in mind are the concerns of men!" Following me is different! Very different! It deals with the concerns of My Father!

And poor Peter. I sort of feel sorry for him, don't you! He is not trying to upset the Apple Cart here. He is just trying to find another way forward, an easier way forward! He is one of Jesus' closest friends, and now there is all this talk about suffering and pain! There has got to be a better plan, right? Peter doesn't like the idea of this Cross thing one bit! Not for Jesus, and certainly not for himself! So, from the very depths of his soul he cries out, "Never, Lord! Never! This shall never happen to you!" In essence; "God Forbid, Jesus"! "This will never happen, by God"! I don't want you to suffer Lord! And I'm not real keen on the idea of me suffering either! Can you imagine Peter's frantic emotions? Can you blame him? Can you relate?

Peter is "The Rock", remember, the one Jesus is grooming to be the leader of this fledgling Church, the one who Jesus has just called Blessed. And he just made the Good Confession, remember, and in turn, received high praise from the Lord! Peter is just trying to think of a way to shield Jesus from the pending tragedy! If that's what awaits us in Jerusalem Lord, then we'll head out in another direction!

We could go to the hills, maybe! Or stay here at home! We could hide out for Heaven's sake! We could just lay low until this whole thing blows over! Or, we could raise an army and fight! We can protect you Lord! We can keep you out of harm's way! Let's be proactive here, Jesus! Let's do everything we can in order to avoid this terrible suffering and pain! It's Fight or Flight, right! It's human nature! It makes perfect sense from a human point of view! To which Jesus answers; "Get behind me Satan! You don't have in mind the concerns of God!"

Remember, early on in Jesus' ministry how Satan tried to upset God's plan? Remember the Temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness immediately following His Baptism? Satan said; "Go make a big splash Jesus! Toss yourself off this wall so that everyone will know who you are!" Satan said; "Turn these rocks into bread! Put the focus on the miracles, Jesus! Put the focus on yourself!" Satan said; "Come in power Jesus! Take over the world! I will set you up as the ruler of everything!"

To which Jesus answered by saying; "No! My way is the way of humility! My way leads to a Cross!" None of that is part of the plan, Satan. Conflict avoidance is not what this Faith thing is all about. I have a Mission. We have a Mission. And sacrifice, and conflict, and making waves may very likely be a part of that Mission! My followers need to travel whatever path the Father lays out before us! It won't do a lick of good to make everything all comfy and cozy and good, if that requires acting outside of the Father's will!

I can relate to Peter, can't you! I think most of us probably can! Our fears, our doubts, our self-doubts even, often get in the way! And sometimes, out of our concern for others—or more often, out of concern for ourselves—we try to avoid whatever great big Burning Bush God plants right in front of us! I think we often try to ignore our Marching Orders, don't you, even when they are obvious and clear! We might decide to run and hide instead, or to kick and scream! Or we might try to explain away why "that particular Burning Bush" doesn't really apply to me, or us! We make excuses don't we, just like Peter did! And come to think of it, just like Moses did as well!

I used to picture Moses as a real hero-type—a John Wayne, or Arnold Schwarzenegger, or for those of you who are old enough, Charleston Heston! I mean God used this mover and shaker to further His plan of Salvation, right, in some pretty amazing ways! He goes toe-to-toe with the most powerful man on the face of the earth! He storms into Pharaoh's Palace and demands that he release all of the Israelites slaves! And when Pharaoh balks, Moses sends the Fear of God into him, literally, along with some pretty nasty plagues!

Moses turns one of the largest rivers in the world into blood! He sends frogs, and gnats and flies, locust and boils and even hail upon the land of Egypt, and upon its people! And when all of that fails to work, Moses, as the messenger of the Lord, announces a plague of death on all the firstborn in the country! Moses must have been fearless, right? Like Peter, the founder of the Church! No way is he like you and me!

But then I noticed that when God first approached him, here at the Burning Bush, Moses hid his face. Can you relate? And when God gave him his Marching Orders, Moses immediately started coming up with excuses. “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” “Suppose I go and the Israelites question my authority?” “What shall I tell them?” “What if they don't listen to me?” “Lord, I have never been eloquent, you know that, neither in the past nor now!” “I'm slow of speech and tongue, Lord, you know that too!” “O Lord, please send someone else to do it!”

And God replies, “I know your failings Moses, as well as your inadequacies. In fact, quite well! That's why I chose you! You cannot do it without me!

Who do you think gave you your mouth anyway? Who makes people deaf and dumb? Who gives them their sight? Now go! I will help you speak. And I will teach you what to say. Just tell the people that 'I Am Who I Am'! Tell the people that I am the Lord!"

Let's face it, Moses had issues! Just like we do! He came from a broken home! A police report would say he was abandoned by his parents and tossed into a river! The newspaper would use the word dysfunctional, I'm sure! He was then adopted, raised by a wealthy family, a controlling family, who wielded great power and prestige! Moses had a decent education though, and spent the first forty years of his life living in the lap of luxury, living in the one percent! He was waited on hand and foot! And then one day, while supervising other people at work, he had a fit of rage and killed a man! No, we're not like Moses at all, are we?

He spent the next forty years of his life as a fugitive, running away from those in authority, hiding out in some of the most inhospitable places on the planet! He farmed and raised sheep, working as a hired hand. And there is no record of him having a relationship with God during that time! He was eighty, notice, when he got his Marching Orders at the Burning Bush! He was out in the middle of the ordinary and mundane, tending the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro! He wasn't searching for God on a mountaintop, or praying diligently for Divine Intervention! He was simply doing what he normally did! And God, in a most unexpected way, called his name! No, we're not like Moses at all!

Moses did, however, choose to obey! He chose to follow his Marching Orders, even when it wasn't easy, even when they weren't particularly clear! One commentator said, "Moses spent the first forty years of his life thinking he was 'somebody'. Then, he spent the next forty years of his life realizing that he was 'nobody'. And then, through obedience, Moses spent the last forty years of his life being a 'somebody for God'!" He was transformed, by God's Power and God's Grace, through obedience! And I think there just might be a lesson there!

Today, we see Jesus revealing Himself for who He really is, the Son of God who is on His way to the Cross! More pointedly maybe, today we hear Him calling us to follow the very same path! I guess you can call Jesus crazy if you want to, a fanatic whose actions proved to be deadly! But you can't simply label Him a "great moral example," or a "fine ethical teacher". I mean, how many Nobel Prize winners, or Ph. D. recipients, or lawyers, or doctors, or teachers, or gurus, or Imams, or Rabbis, or Pastors even—how many great moral examples would willingly die for you, on a Cross?

You can claim that Jesus was an "honest social critic", or a "religious reformer", or a "visionary who was way ahead of His time". But that really misses the point, doesn't it? And only lessens the impact of His self-sacrificial giving! No, our Faith calls us to see Jesus as more than an "Ideal", someone to base our values on! Our Faith calls us to see Him as Lord, and to take our Marching Orders from Him seriously!

And that, in the end, all comes down to that choice, doesn't it? Will I follow Jesus "In the Way of the Cross"? Or will I turn and walk away? Will I shout, "God forbid," like Peter, and look for an easier way? Will I try to hide my face, like Moses? Or ask God to send somebody else! Or, will I, in Faith, realize just who it is that is calling, see things from an Eternal Perspective? And then, in Faith, step out in obedience! Will I bend down and gladly embrace my Cross, stoop as low as I need to, and pick it up, and then follow wherever my Lord calls? That's the choice, isn't it? And all of God's People said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Thank you for whispering to our hearts, Lord. Thank you for speaking to us through the experiences of our daily lives. And thank you for calling out to each of us by name. As we hear your voice Lord, please empower us with your Holy Spirit to respond in ways that are pleasing to you. Please equip us to serve in your Name. Please encourage us to step out in Faith. And please, comfort us as we face trials and tribulations along the way.

Father, you have walked with us this past week. You have shared in the experiences that we have had. You have been there when we needed your hand. And you have witnessed both the joys and the sorrows that we have experienced. You have stood beside us, sharing in our lives. You have walked before us, leading us down your paths. And you have been behind us, nudging us on, always ready to catch us when we stumble or fall. You have been there for us, and with us Lord, in each moment of our lives. Now help us to be here for you.

Because you are ever-present with your people Lord, you already know the things that are burdensome to our hearts. You know the problems that we face, and you know the people that we love. And you know the deep desires of our hearts. So, all of these we place before you. We lift up And we lift up each person here Lord, each member of this congregation, and each portion of the Body of Christ. And we lift up especially Lord, all of those who do not yet know you, and those who have turned their face away. We ask that you will touch their lives too, powerfully, and immediately. We ask that you will bring to them, the Word of Life, and empower us to do the same.

We place these things before you in Jesus' Name, as we pray now the very prayer that He has taught us, saying, Our Father...