

Love, a Moving Sanctuary

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First reading

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We are called to love our neighbors, regardless of race, sexuality, religion and wealth, with no exceptions. We need to be in solidarity with people in and outside of our congregation who are suffering attacks from our government and society. To be in solidarity requires an acknowledgement that we are interdependent beings—we cannot thrive independently of others When we look upon another human, we must see them as indispensable to us and see the sacredness of God in them. This is our call to stand with the oppressed—to see them as an essential part of the Body of Christ with whom we are called to suffer and rejoice together.

Scripture reading

Exodus 3:7-12 Common English Bible (CEB)

Then the Lord said, “I’ve clearly seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I’ve heard their cry of injustice because of their slave masters. I know about their pain. I’ve come down to rescue them from the Egyptians in order to take them out of that land and bring them to a good and broad land, a land that’s full of milk and honey, a place where the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites all live. Now the Israelites’ cries of injustice have reached me. I’ve seen just how much the Egyptians have oppressed them. So get going. I’m sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

God said, “I’ll be with you. And this will show you that I’m the one who sent you. After you bring the people out of Egypt, you will come back here and worship God on this mountain.”

The Exodus story is one of my favorite biblical narratives, not only for the theme of justice and liberation, but also the theme of love and the transparency in the interactions between God, Moses, and the people. As read in the scripture, we meet Moses living in Midian with his wife Zipporah, and father-in-law Jethro. He is taking care of the sheep and providing protection over them. But before we jump into the encounter with the bush, I think it's important to reflect on how Moses ended up in this space.

There's a quote by an author named Theodore Volgoff that says, "Love is sanctuary, a safe haven and place to rest." I believe this is what Moses had found in Midian. He was previously the adopted son of Pharaoh and lived a life of royalty, until he learned of his true identity. It was in the glass-shattering moment of learning he was the child of a Hebrew woman that Moses went into a state of turmoil. He had lived his life from a place a privilege where he had no obligation to blink an eye at the lives of the slaves. This was the way of life! Natural order! In that moment, he realized that he too was meant to be oppressed. He could not bear to see the suffering of his own people, knowing that it should be his own. The life that Moses had loved and known as his sanctuary became his death sentence.

After killing one of the slave overseers, Moses fled Egypt into the desert, seeking to find a new identity and a new sanctuary. As the story goes on, he meets his soon-to-be wife, finds a new community, a new identity, a new sanctuary. Moses was content, he was safe, and to him sanctuary was a physical place. He had no intention of moving. But then he met God on a mountain.

Moses' usual routine of taking the flock out for a stroll and tending to them took an interesting twist when he saw a bush on fire that wouldn't stop burning. Can you imagine that? Out for your normal stroll and you suddenly come upon a bush that's burning eternally.... And yet Verse 3 of the scripture reading says, "Then Moses said to himself, *Let me check out this amazing sight and find out why the bush isn't burning up.*"

Now for starters, I'm not sure I would have been thrilled to see something on fire that wouldn't stop burning. For me, that's a red flag. However, for Moses it was an opportunity, one that he obviously felt safe enough to explore. Imagine feeling such a strong sense of sanctuary that you find the courage to take risks. And so Moses goes to investigate this bush, and instead encounters God. God provides an introduction to Moses, and then starts to lament about the cries of the oppressed slaves in Egypt. God declares that now is the time to answer those cries and rescue the people, bringing them to a new land of freedom full of milk and honey. And then God says to Moses, "So get going. I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

I can only imagine that Moses is triggered by God's instructions. He now has to return to an unsafe place, full of traumatic memories, the continued oppression of his own people, and additionally to challenge Pharaoh, his own brother. Moses' current sanctuary and oasis is disappearing before his eyes, as this intriguing bush has now shaken up his existence, forcing him into a dangerous place. It's only expected that his response in Verse 11 would be, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

As stated earlier, Moses understood sanctuary to be a physical place composed of all the things he loved and a sense of security, so God's request not only called him to leave his idea of sanctuary, but also to go lead a liberation quest in a place unsafe for him. How many of us have been and/or are currently in a place just like Moses was? We want to ensure safety for ourselves and those around us, but we question if we're capable of doing so. We are scared to leave our "physical" sanctuaries to lead a mission that juggles the livelihood of many. Or maybe we're not sure that we are able to make enough impact to liberate those in danger and oppressed. We are wondering if there is a way to bring those in danger to our physical sanctuaries instead of venturing into their battlefield.

But then God answers Moses. God said:

I'll be with you. And this will show you that I'm the one who sent you. After you bring the people out of Egypt, you will come back here and worship God on this mountain.

I don't think Moses understood fully what God was saying to him at that moment. The narrative continues with Moses expressing his doubts and fears the entire way to Egypt, and while delivering the people out of Egypt, and during the trek to the Promised Land.

I appreciate the transparency of Moses. He reminds me a lot of myself. Compassionate, justice- and people-oriented, but terrified of being pulled out of my comfort zone at times. I understand coming from a hard, dangerous place into a safer space, and then being called to do dangerous work. It is terrifying, and it is absolutely a journey that stretches and tests you. However, what Moses would soon realize was that God's presence with him would be his sanctuary.

God's love for us goes beyond having a deep connection and sense of care and dedication towards us. It's not just a stationary feeling. God's love is an action. It's the courage that fights for justice, the compassion that feeds another, the patience that walks the long journey with another, the empathy that allows the capacity to suffer with another and the ability to provide rest and comfort for another. God's love is sanctuary, and when we're called to act in that same love, we become vessels of sanctuary.

God was calling Moses to be a moving vessel of sanctuary. The more Moses lived into his calling, the greater became his capacity to hold courage, patience, compassion and empathy. He understood that God's love covered him and equipped him not just to lead the people to the promised sanctuary, but also be a living, moving sanctuary.

God is calling out to us be living, moving sanctuaries. As the quote stated earlier, sanctuary creates a safe haven, a place to rest. The reality is that we are fighting boundaries. Boundaries are being established to further limit the movement and liberation of those oppressed. Specifically, our immigrant brethren are crying out for sanctuary in an imprisoned space. That means God needs us to be moving sanctuaries, going across boundaries into these imprisoned spaces and providing the love, safety and rest that is needed.

Our calling may not look like it did for Moses. It may be providing the meal for a family in crisis, *sanctuary*. It may be the ride to a doctor's appointment or a court date, *sanctuary*. It may be the comfort of a hug, a song, a prayer, or a companion in what can feel like lonely times, *sanctuary*. It may be marching in the streets resisting the creation of more boundaries and fighting for freedom of all people, *sanctuary*. Just as God is a moving sanctuary for us, we are equipped and called to be living sanctuaries for each other and those in need. And just as God calmed Moses' fears and doubts in his journey, God will do the same for us. "I'll be with you." That's God's promise to us. That's God sanctuary for us. Someone else right now needs that same promise for a loving sanctuary to turn to them and say, "I'll be with you." Will you go?

Amen.

