

March 6, 2011

Last Sunday after Epiphany, Year A

Exodus 24:12–18

2 Peter 1:16–21

Matthew 17:1–9

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week I spoke about a great, old, black and white movie *The Lilies of the Field*. Just a few years before it, Cecil B. DeMille made *The Ten Commandments*. It's sort of a polar opposite: vivid Technicolor, Charlton Heston, conventional, four hours void of subtlety, void of intended irony; it's literalistic and un-poetic, even if Moses is light-skinned, blond-haired, and blue-eyed. It's so overwrought, so serious, so naïve that you think it's a camp send up. It's one of the most popular films ever. The last time I watched any part of it I found myself rooting for the bad guys. Pharaoh is almost as sympathetic as Wile E. Coyote or Sylvester, and Heston as annoying as Tweety Bird.

What it's got, what makes it compelling, if not for four hours, is a great story, and DeMille very roughly stays to script with rather sentimental, elaborate, and sanitized embellishments. The story is Israel's foundational narrative. The story provides the basis for Israel's identity, its sense of self and sense of God: a people enslaved and bitterly oppressed, being broken by hard labor and misery in Egypt by Pharaoh, the powerful and worldly king, who proves no match for God and Moses. God liberates Israel, and Israel goes on a long, demanding adventure, a journey – forty years in the wilderness, once approximately the span of a human life. God brings Israel into the Promised Land, their true home, the land of milk and honey, an analog of Paradise or heaven, the place of God's presence.

Exodus is your story and mine. We can find ourselves in it. To some extent, we live in Egypt, shackled, brutalized, stunted by the world, confused about what's truly meaningful, yearning for the good life, struggling with internal as well as external adversaries. Freedom begins by boldly setting out on a journey, taking risks, passing through the sea. It comes from a new identity in Jesus, a new sense of self, dying to the world and rising to new life in God.

On our journey through the wilderness, trying to avoid the lies and warped values of the world, we seek to follow the signs of God. But it's frightening, and we sometimes look back to our former life, what the Bible calls the fleshpots of Egypt, where there was food and a seductive type of security. It tempts us. We backslide. But still, we press toward a life fully in the presence

of God. Like Israel we face challenges, experiencing successes and disappointments, ups and downs. Gradually we recognize that God is with us on our journey in the wilderness, that the spiritual life is a journey with God to God.

One of the peak moments in Israel's journey was Mount Sinai, where God gave Israel the Ten Commandments, the law. Today's reading from Exodus comes from this moment of covenant making. Up to this point, the Hebrew people have been united by a common enemy, Pharaoh, and by a common fate, suffering in Egypt. They came together for comfort and protection – basic human, even animal, needs. Now, after Mount Sinai, the covenant binds them together with common aspirations and ideals. They share a hope. What unites them is no longer what someone else is doing to them, but a common purpose to which they have dedicated themselves: serving God. The covenant becomes their identity. This is the moment Israel becomes Israel, born from the Hebrew people.

The Covenant between God and his people does NOT mean that he does something for us if we do something for him. It's NOT tit for tat: "you do this, I do that." That's a contract. It's conditional and transactional. It has collateral. It's about benefitting each party as if they're separate, as if they're not in it together. It's "us" and "them." It's the way of Pharaoh and the world.

A covenant is a relationship. It requires mutual trust. It's about coming together, binding together, forming a common identity, making an "us." A covenant is transformational. We enter a covenant, say for example "the covenant of marriage," and it changes us. It's the way of God and his people. So when we become Christians, we enter the baptismal covenant, an understanding of our relationship to God and of our identity, Jesus as the cornerstone of our identity.

The trouble is that we, God's people, often backslide and treat covenants as contracts. We see our relationship with God as about requirements and rewards: he wants this from me, and I get that from him. We start looking out for our own benefit rather than staying in it together. So our relationships need continual renewal.

Possibly we might see the Transfiguration as a covenant renewal. Matthew intends us to see Jesus as the new Moses, the new lawgiver, the new covenant maker. Like Moses, Jesus climbs a mountain. A cloud, the Spirit of God, overshadows. There's a light show. Jesus' face shines like the sun, and after being in God's glory, Moses' face shines. When God speaks he scares the wits out of Peter, James, and John just as the Israelites had trembled with fear at

Sinai (Ex 20:18–19). Moses told the people not to be afraid. Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid.

At the Transfiguration, Jesus is with Moses and Elijah, who also encountered God on a mountain. Moses and Elijah stand for the law and the prophets. God says, “Listen to him.” “Listen to my Son.” It’s: listen to Jesus, not Moses or Elijah. Jesus is the new law and prophets, the new basis for covenant, for relationship, the one who summarized the law as loving God and loving your neighbor.

Part of being a Christian is believing in God, trusting in God’s love and care for ourselves, for every person. But often belief becomes believing the right things about God, having the correct views, the right theology – as if that is what makes us acceptable to God. That’s nonsense. God has already accepted us. We don’t need to do anything or believe anything to have God’s care. He already does – no matter what.

In a few moments, we’ll sing the Creed, a statement of belief. It’s important to our faith, but not primary. What happens after the Creed shows us what’s primary. We break bread. We have a meal. When you have a meal with someone, it builds relationship. That’s what God desires most of all. Christian life is primarily about relationship with God. We can call that living in Spirit or growing in Christ.

We often make believing the right things simply a head exercise. It seems to me now that when I converted, became a Christian, got baptized, my faith was mostly in my head. I became convinced of the arguments for Christ, and I was mostly detached from my emotional need for God, from my heart which longed for him. I became a Christian because I decided that Jesus Christ was true. Much of my early years in Christ seems to have been an intellectual exercise.

But God wants all of us, through and through. Our Christian journey is about God converting our hearts. I think of the new covenant announced by Jeremiah the prophet, many centuries after Sinai and many centuries before the Transfiguration. God said, “I will write my law on their hearts and will be their God, and they will be my people. They will no longer go around setting up schools to teach each other about God. They’ll know me firsthand, the dull and the bright, the smart and the slow.” (Message, Jeremiah 31:33–34)

We can be full of the law and the prophets, of doctrine and spiritual discipline, of worship and the sacred tradition, and still have our hearts cut off from God. The Church is the best place to hide from God. We can know all about God, but not really know him. What matters most is not what people tell

you about God. It's our own firsthand knowledge of God – what's available to each of us. In this and every moment, here and now, Christ invites us to open our hearts more fully, to enter his life, to live in the Spirit.

Conversion, covenant, relationship – whatever you choose to call it – is about knowing God in our hearts. For Jesus, the heart represents us at our deepest, the essence of who we are, our soul. We may first know him in our heads, but that's not the full deal. Developing an open, receptive, playful heart is the work of a lifetime, a long journey through the wilderness. An open heart, it's the Promised Land, our destination, the presence of God with us. It's what the Eucharist, the manna we receive in the wilderness, is nurturing in us. It's the sign of our renewal, our Transfiguration.

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