

**Sermon: 2019/03/24 (3rd Sunday in Lent) - Exodus 3:1-15;
Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; & Luke 13:1-9_BTR**

[Invite children to the front.]

The Bible is a book of "revelations."

What is a "revelation"?

A "revelation" is to *reveal* something:

[Unveil a cardboard burning bush from beneath a sheet.]

This is the "burning bush" that we were just being told about in the Old Testament reading: Moses - a Hebrew who had been living in the palace of pharaoh as an adopted son - fled after murdering a man he saw whipping another Hebrew, and he became a shepherd in a barren place somewhere in the Sinai.

And one day when he was out with his sheep, he turned a corner and saw this astonishing "revelation."

A bush that was covered in (hot) flames but 'was not consumed.'

And from it the voice of God spoke to Moses.

The second "revelation" was what Moses then *learnt* about the *character* of God from the voice: that He loves *all* people and worries about them when they are hurting.

We know that our "hurting" matters *a lot* to God because He tells us:

our story said He both 'observed' - which means, "saw" [Hold up cardboard eye] - 'the misery' of the Hebrews, *and* that He 'heard' it [Hold up cardboard ear]: [v.7].

In other words, God uses *all* of His "senses" ["air quotes"];

gives *all* of His attention to our situation

- as someone who only *really* loves us would:

with both His "eyes" and His "ears."

Let's pray: Father God, help us to see and hear you in the Bible and in our world, and help us - by the powerful indwelling of the Holy Spirit to see and hear the needs of others, in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

So, God *loves* everyone.

God loves everyone.

Which means He loves them the same.

(He loves everyone *equally*.)

How do I know this to be true?

Well, it *isn't* evident from glancing around at the world.

All kinds of natural, unjust disparities exist, don't they?

Some people are born beautiful.

Some people are born thin.

Some people are born fast - on the ground, like Usain Bolt.

Or in the water like Michael Phelps.

Some people are born *tough* - with good immune systems, seemingly impervious to allergens - to pollen and dust, lilies and so on.

And some people are sickly and weak and prone to obesity.

So, how do I know - how can I be confident - that, despite our *widely* varying loveliness, God truly loves us all.

Because Jesus Himself tells us explicitly: *John* 3:16, for example.

And He died to prove it.

But - and hear me now: this is the key question before us this morning - does His loving us all mean that He will grant everyone "salvation;" that everyone will enjoy life-after-death with Him in 'the new heavens and the new earth' promised in John's *Revelation* and by the prophets? [See: *Is. 65:22; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1*]

No.

This is why He warns the crowd about the "Galilean" in *Luke* just now:

The love of God - His fatherly desire that each and everyone of us - His "children;" humanity - should flourish and enjoy 'life...abundantly' [*Jn. 10:10*] - should not be confused with the promise He makes in the Bible to a (*select*) few of the *second* blessing of (physical) resurrection.

And the difference "hinges," highlights Paul in our *1 Corinthians* reading, on whether God is 'pleased' with you. (That's verse 5.)

Such an important, little word yet hidden in the middle of a paragraph.

(You can see it on the back of your insert at the end of line 4.)

"Pleased."

Is God, then, *pleased* with you?

And this, *surely*, is the point of our extra efforts at holiness in Lent.

The rationale for this somber, sober season.

It lies in the recognition that having the love of God doesn't automatically mean enjoying also His pleasure and good will; that His love for me doesn't mean being (automatically) qualified for *all* the blessings that He has to offer.

This is what the Apostle was trying to convey in today's Epistle extract:

he reminds his audience that *all* the Hebrews - the descendants of Abraham -

were rescued from slavery in Egypt.

He reminds his audience that *all* those former-slaves were given safe passage across the Red Sea, divided by a miraculous wind that held the deep waters apart and exposed a narrow dry path leading from the African continent across to the Arabian peninsula.

He reminds his audience that *all* that special generation were then gifted with "ma-na" - sweet, honey-cakes - that daily fell from the sky like snow in an abundance that meant they *all* ate well.

He reminds his audience that though they had to cross a hot dry desert to get to Canaan, God split rocks open and caused new rivers to spring up in unexpected places so *all* could drink.

And he could have said *even* more than this:

Paul neglects to mention that God also protected them from the giant-king, Og [Deut. 3:1-11];

from the armies of other nations that constantly harried the Hebrews' caravan-train as it snaked its way north to the "Promised Land."

That He threw down hailstones (from Heaven) to drive hostiles away; [Jos. 10:11] and, on another occasion, turned the day into night, eclipsing the sun so that the Hebrew guerrillas - their light infantry - had advantage over forces who were better equipped and armoured: [Jos. 10:12b-13].

The Apostle says, "I do not want you to be unaware' of these things.

Why?!

Because of what they communicate; what they *reveal* about God to be always and unchangeably true - that God is and has been remarkably generous to every man and woman and child.

However, Paul continues - actually, he says, '[n]evertheless' - and your ears should prick up now when he does: '*most of them...were struck down in the wilderness.*'

That is to say, most of the Hebrews died.

- And remember the claim in *Exodus* is that *millions, literally* were liberated by God and His angels, [Ex. 12:37] but by the time we get to the book of *Joshua* and the river Jordan, the border - about fifty years have passed, and we hear these words: 'About forty thousand armed for war crossed over before the Lord to the plains of Jericho for battle.' [Jos. 4:13]

("Jericho," of course," was the gateway-city to Canaan, and the first place that must be reconquered.)

40 thousand.

That's it.

Granted, this is, strictly speaking, only the army - the soldiers.

But do some quick mental math: let's imagine that everyone of the those Hebrew

warriors is married, has - oh, I don't know - 8 children, two parents, a sister and an elderly relative.

(Remember this is an entire nation on the move.)

What does that give you?

Anybody?

Let me tell you: still much, much, *much* less than the total figure of those who, we're told, had been enslaved in Egypt.

And God liberated all those "huddled masses" because He cared for each one of them *deeply* as any parent does.

And, because He's omniscient, He still did that knowing that many would actually turn on Him in their ingratitude; that many would 'test' His love.

(Paul uses that word in verse 9.)

That they would become 'idolaters';

that they would 'indulge in sexuality immorality';

that they would 'complain';

and so on.

But, you see, they needn't have.

The first blessing - and we've all got it - is...to exist; to be present (breathing, here and now); to have this day ahead of us.

And "the script" isn't written.

Your outcome isn't fated.

Those "millions" who saw the fiery, cloudy pillar in the wilderness, who saw miracle after miracle after miracle were given an unexpected, undeserved opportunity at a new life in a far better place and yet the majority squandered it through unfaithfulness, and so 'were destroyed'.

In one instance, (we hear), 'by serpents.' [1 Cor. 10:9]

And we face "serpents" - or, rather, *one* serpent, *the* serpent: The Devil.

Our whole lives are like those forty days of Jesus' temptation, and that's a very long time - we will stumble and we will fail - I probably have already this morning a few times - but we've an 'example'; a warning; a test-case to galvanise and inspire us.

And we have something that the Hebrews didn't:

A Savior.

A "savior" who is gracious and patient - which is the other point of the gospel reading today:

We are the fruitless 'fig tree' in the garden - in *the* Garden, a noun that in the Scriptures is nearly always a cipher - a metaphor - for all of Creation.

And it wouldn't be wrong for the owner - my owner - the Creator - to tear me up *right now* and make us firewood, but then this mysterious voice says, in the parable, "Hold on, 'Sir'. Not yet. Give it - *us* - some more time.

Here, look, I'll even add some 'manure' - which is the fertilising power of the sanctifying Holy Spirit.

And let's wait just a little longer." [See: Lk. 13:8-9]

Jesus is that "voice," and He has, in other words, *intervened*.

He is a second Moses, offering a second way out - only this time it is to a marvellous undiscovered country of *perpetual* bliss(, which we don't need to *even* fight for because the Messiah already did (on the Cross)).

Let's take a moment to reflect.