



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 24A, OCTOBER 18, 2020  
EXODUS 33:12-23; PSALM 99; MATTHEW 22:15-22

## NAMING THE FUTURE

*Exodus 33:12-23* [Moses said to the LORD, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.’ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.” He said, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And he said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”]

The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.” Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”]

When I was pregnant with each of our children, my husband Will and I did a lot of daydreaming about names. It felt like an enormous responsibility to name a baby – a name has such tender power. So we talked about it a lot.

We wanted each child’s name to be beautiful and distinct, yet also resonant with the names of prior generations. We knew a name isn’t destiny – each had their own innate personality, gifts and challenges that would be revealed over time. But a name

could be a container of sorts as they became themselves.

We started our imagining the moment I was pregnant. As we prayed for their health, pondering names made them more than an idea. So when we finally held John, Katherine, and Elizabeth in our arms, face to face, there was a sense of joyful fulfillment in confirming their names. And with the two babies we lost in miscarriage, cherishing their potential names gave the grief shape so that we could carry it together.

Naming another living being expresses desire and commitment and hope. It's a powerful and tender thing.

Today's reading from Exodus is a crucial conversation between Moses and God. Literally "crucial" – a crux, a fork in the road. The Israelites are nearing the end of their 40-year journey through the wilderness and the land of God's *promise* seems nearer than ever. But God's *presence* is distanced from the people and entirely mediated by Moses. Every day Moses retreats to a tent far off from the camp to receive divine communication in a pillar of cloud. The people watch from a respectful distance, imagining that God and Moses speak "face to face, as one speaks to a friend."

From this, Moses relays God's commandments to the people, including the one prohibiting idols, and they promise to follow them. Now they are ready to take the next step. They will forge an explicit covenant with God, symbolized by a tabernacle, the home for God's presence, to be lodged in the middle of their camp, not on the outskirts. God will pitch a tent and dwell among them. It is the culmination of their spiritual journey.

But things do not go as planned. As Moses spends forty days away on Mt. Sinai to receive instructions for construction of the tabernacle, the people get restless and convince themselves that they have been abandoned. They want a new god – one they can see and touch. So they build a golden idol – a calf – that they worship with abandon. They've only just gotten their commandments and already broken the first one. It's a mess.

So God is furious and cancels the plans to dwell among the Israelites. The people must continue their journey to the promised land, but they will go without God's presence. The community is devastated and remorseful, which gets us to today's reading. I know this is a long backstory, but it's important to

understand why Moses' conversation with God is so crucial.

Now, Moses is angry with the Israelites, too, but he has changed in these years. He is no longer a reluctant young man, but a confident leader who knows he is not "living for me" but "living for we," as our presiding bishop would say. So Moses intercedes with God, asking for forgiveness and a new beginning for all of his community. To Moses, God is a trusted parent, one who can be reminded of the commitments they've made.

So Moses approaches God, "You've said that you know me by name and that I've found favor with you, and you've told me to lead these people, but you haven't said who will help me." "Remember these are your people too, distinct and beautiful, with whom you've made a covenant. You know them by name, too." Moses insists that it is God's nature to forgive and begin again.

And God replies. Not as a clap of thunder or in a pillar of fire, but in language that can be understood by any human. It's like the author of this part of Exodus wants God's intentions to be completely clear. God says, "You have found favor with me and I do know you by name. I will do what you have

asked. My presence will go with you and I will give you rest." Can you hear God's desire and commitment and hope? It is powerful and tender.

And that is indeed what happens. The covenant is renewed, and the people build the tabernacle in the center of camp. God's presence fills it and journeys with them day by day to the land of promise.

The entire story of Exodus explores the essential question, "What is the character of this God who we claim? And as Exodus unfolds, the answer builds in clarity and strength, "The nature of God is mercy and grace, abounding in steadfast love, faithfulness and forgiveness."

Thousands of years later, Jesus of Nazareth embodies this nature, proclaiming, "The Spirit of God is upon me, and has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom to the oppressed, and healing to the sick." The character of God in flesh and in action.

This week the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center for Racial Healing celebrated its third anniversary with a webinar conversation between its director Dr. Catherine Meeks, and our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry.

They talked about Bishop Curry’s new book, *Love Is the Way*, in which he recounts the heritage of faith and resilience he received from his elders, who were descendants of sharecroppers and slaves, and his firm conviction that love can lift up, liberate, and heal when nothing else will.<sup>1</sup> I commend the book to you – and our gathering via Zoom on November 9 to discuss it

Dr. Meeks and Bishop Curry also talked about the role of the church – the people, the body of Christ – in our world today. Dr. Meeks said, “the church is going to have to grow some courage in order to not be complicit in the nightmare of division and selfishness that is our country.” If we are to claim that the nature of God is mercy and grace, love and forgiveness, and that we are made in the image of God, known by name, both individually and collectively, and as Dr. Meek’s said, “if we are to follow Jesus, there are some things we can’t do anymore.”<sup>2</sup> And there are some things we must surely do.

We cannot be silent in word or deed; “we must speak the truth, not to dominate, but to make us better.”<sup>3</sup> We cannot combat hateful speech or disdain with a second helping of the same. St. Paul says, “Do not repay evil with evil, but consider what is noble and good.” We cannot live with ourselves at the center – we must clear space for the presence of God at the heart of our individual lives and collective life. Renew the covenant.

So today, imagine what it looks like, what it feels like to have our nation’s life characterized by justice, equity, mutuality, compassion, forgiveness. It’s a far way from the nightmare. But it is not a daydream. Imagination is the first step to reality. Let’s name it together, with God’s help.

Amen

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<sup>1</sup> *Love is the Way*, p. 248.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Catherine Meeks, October 15, 2020.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid