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I don't know if you know this but, for those of us with the joyous responsibility of preaching the Word of God, the lectionary is like a box of cracker jacks. We find out the date we're preaching and quickly flip through our prayer books to find out our passages for the week. And then celebrate, cock our heads, or cry out in distress. Its like ripping off the plastic seal from the cardboard box, reaching in to the sticky, crunchy, muddle and pulling out—yes! The burning bush!

As is God's way, that which initially delights..... Well, we'll see where we end up.

The burning bush. To this day, this iconic story, serves as the organizing meta-narrative of the Jewish people. God led the people Israel out of Egyptian bondage and into the land of promise. In Christian discourse, however, the story of the Exodus is often held at arms length, a quaint fairy tale that is connected to our Judeo- Christian History, but is really kind of barbaric and well, embarrassing –what with the parting of the Sea (a tide-and-sandbar issue no doubt) and the unseemly death of all of those innocent Egyptians. We hear it in church, learn the story in school and then tuck it away on the nursery shelf between Suess and Silverstein.

This relegation is most unfortunate. Honestly, its a huge bummer...because this simple narrative contains essential truths about the life of faith. So, let us heed Father Talbot's advice from earlier this summer, if we can, and allow this text to speak on its own terms and let it from its world, reach forward and enliven ours.

The bush was burning. It wasn't formidable. Just a shrub. It was on the side of the road. Odd, but not commanding in its bid for attention. And Moses turned aside to see, this curious happening. A puzzlement. A bush burning from its center, that was not consumed.

As Moses approached the shrub, God called to him from the flame. "Moses, Moses.." And he took off his sandals for he knew he was on holy ground. "The cry of the Israelites has come to me," the divine voice continued. "I have seen how the Egyptians Oppress them. I have come to bring them out of that land, into a good, broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey." From that bush, on that day, God said "I see you. I know. And I am grieved."

We can almost feel Moses' shoulders drop, inch by inch, as the possibility of rescue sinks in. "I have heard their cry. I know their suffering and have come to deliver them from the Egyptians, to bring them out to a land flowing with milk and honey. My land. Where you will be my people and I will be your God." Ahhhh.

"So now, Moses, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people Israel out of Egypt."
"Pharaoh? Really?"

“Go and demand of him release of the Israelite captives and tell him that if he does not comply there will be consequences. Deadly consequences.”

“Pharaoh? Really? Isn’t there someone else who could... Who am I, anyway? That I should go before Pharaoh?”

Ignoring his objection, God offers this encouragement: “Go. *I will be with you.*” God was going to lead *them out*, by sending Moses *in*.

Moses was afraid to confront Pharaoh, to speak truth to power, to rail against the man. He feared retribution, failure, mockery, death. Even so, Moses’ most vociferous objections in this conversation concerned the anticipated response of his peers. *How on earth will I get them to listen to me? What will I say when they ask on whose authority am I “leading them to freedom?”* The story seems to imply that the people’s compliance was as great a long shot as Pharaoh’s, and for Moses “What will the neighbors say,” trumped “what will the despot do.”

And so the flame responded----“I AM is sending you. Tell them. I AM who I AM. The Alpha and Omega. The Beginning and the End, the Creator and Redeemer and Sustainer of all life, Almighty God, Lord of Hosts, the Lord, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. I AM. That’s who sends you. Tell them.”

Thus a conversation that began with awe and unprecedented hopefulness became for Moses, in a matter of sentences, a dreaded project that would most certainly result in his death, social or physical. Preferably the later. Probably both. So it goes with God’s people. Sometimes the first steps of obedience are the hardest. When the means are treacherous and the ends unknown. Consider Daniel in the Lion’s Den; Joseph, in prison, and Paul and with him Bonhoeffer and MLK Jr. and Mandela. Remember Jonah, running from Nineveh, and God sends a fish to swallow him whole and bring him back to the place God had sent him. And Jesus, headed now for Jerusalem.

When God calls and we respond, a battle for the steering wheel of our lives generally ensues. We are often called to do uncomfortable and even humiliating things, to **be** the children of God. To work out our salvation. We might lose everything. Certainly everything upon which we depended for our security, and sense of personal power in the world. Just ask the disciples who left their nets, and the man who went away sad because he couldn’t leave his.

The funny thing is, what we have, and won’t give up, usually isn’t all that great. But we are holding on for dear life and will not let go. Ironically, it is *dear life* of which our clinging robs us. What we sacrifice for not giving it up the paltry familiar, is life itself, abundant life.

The seventies Christian folk singer Keith Green performed a funky song called *So you want to go back to Egypt*. Its one of those songs whose lyrics stay with you, for decades.

So you want to go back to Egypt, where its warm and secure.

So you’re sorry you bought your one way ticket, when you thought you were sure.

The “Israelites then proceed to compare their idealized past in Egypt—*Eating leeks and onions by the Nile*— with the monotony of Manna, expressed in a litany of desert cuisine, including *manna burgers* and *manna soufflé*. (I am not making this up. Peter knows this song.) As silly as Keith’s songs sometimes seemed there was usually a very serious intent. He understood that when God calls us out, we might not be happy with the topography of the road to promise. Today’s shrub-side chat was Moses’ first indication that *his* road to promise would be unexpectedly harrowing. At least the first leg.

The real tragedy of the sanitizing and sidelining of the Exodus story is that we miss this essential truth, that freedom *from* is also freedom *to*. The Israelites experienced freedom from their Egyptian oppressors, who forced them to build bricks from straw until their bodies bled and broke. From the Pharaoh who ordered that each Hebrew son be killed at Childbirth. God invited Israel out *from* this deadly relationship in *to* another one. The new relationship would be governed by God’s law. One Lord was being exchanged for another, or as one Bible commentator puts it, “it is the definitive story of the establishment of Israel as a people freed from human slavery who become slaves to their own loving God.” Who become slaves. Slaves. We don’t really like that idea. Slaves. We live in America. The home of the free and the brave. We are not slaves.

Well, actually, we are. We are slaves to the Pharaohs of our culture who drive us with myths of fulfillment and meaning---win, acquire, dominate, accumulate, and never let them see you sweat. To move into true freedom we have to be tired of this tyranny. Truly tired. Like sick to death of it. And when we are really done being slaves in Egypt, we can see God calling us to be bound by a new covenant with a new King, an Absolute ruler, voluntarily enslaving ourselves to the law and Lord of Absolute Love.

When we fail. We are absolutely loved. When we sin, we are absolutely forgiven, no exceptions. When we weep we are unconditionally held and treasured. When we delight, the Angels dance with us. Every one of us. When we pray, God is present. When we don’t, God is present. The Lowly are lifted, the foolish made wise. The poor are rich, the last are first, the dead are raised. When we sleep, God is. When we hurt people, God is. When we rage, God is. When we doubt, God is. God is who God is. God is... I AM.

God is big and good and trustworthy. But here’s the thing, if we don’t trust, we won’t know. We won’t get *to* if we cling to *from*. It is for this reason that the *whole* of the first of the 10 commandments reads “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; Do not have any other gods before me.” Our spiritual identity is rooted in this choice. To despise the God’s of this age, as readily as we prize selflessness. To repudiate Pharaoh, as readily as we embrace the peace. We must choose this day whom we *will* serve, as truly as we decide who we won’t. Apart from choosing *both*, we will likely remain, at best, desert wanderers.

When we are welcomed to new life in Christ in Baptism, we die, under the water; We die to Pharaoh. As adopted members of the family of God, we publicly declare that having been delivered from death, we will now yield to the Lord of life.

And so the adventure begins...faith, trust, obedience, service...in short, Christian Formation. Today's passage from Romans is Christian Love 101 (or Love for Dummies). *Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Be patient in suffering, Persevere in prayer.* This is the work of faith. The process will be painful. It will be inconvenient, embarrassing, infuriating and yes, sometimes downright harrowing. *Extend hospitality to strangers...Bless those who persecute you.* It exacts a price from us, this reign of love. But let the story of the Exodus remind us, that pain and struggle are often indicators that we, as God's people, are right on track. We will resist, mightily. And let us remember that having mightily resisted, we will still be right on track. Fear not. We are not alone. God is with us to comfort, succor and heal. God will give us ears to hear and words to speak, and is absolutely committed to lovingly turning us back around when we are running for the wrong hills. *Amen.*