Invitation to the Table

Remember the praise song, *"We are standing on holy ground, And I know there are angels all around?"*

All the Lectionary readings today join worship and action. We are standing on holy ground, and there are thin places all around where we experience a Holy Presence. There also are burning bushes all around, sending us before Pharaoh to cry, "Let my people go!"

All four readings are set in a context of suffering and oppression, a context that always raises the question, "How can a loving God allow suffering?" The question forgets that, throughout Judeo/Christian Scripture, beginning in the creation narratives, God's creation of the human brain provides an ability to reduce—perhaps even to eliminate—suffering and oppression on a global scale.

Medical science is progressing toward the elimination of virtually every disease, but human greed has channeled health care into corporate profits and shareholder dividends.

Most political and economic models could create a just and equitable society, but greed and lust for power corrupt every system.

Environmental science reveals global effects of human pollution on the environment and the climate and has produced alternative ways to power our necessities and creature comforts; but greed erects barriers of denial and refuses to let go of immediate profits.

So, before we blame God for "allowing" suffering, let us as people of faith, recommit ourselves to work toward releasing the human capacity, created by God, to reduce—and even to eliminate—suffering and oppression and the *systems* that allow—*and even create*—it.

It's a daunting task, but this Table is a thin place, where we can be strengthened for the task by a Holy Presence. It also is a Burning Bush. The voice from Moses' Burning Bush sent him to Pharaoh with the assurance, "I will be with you." And Jesus sent his disciples out, assuring them, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Our Communion Hymn is #419, "All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly."

Pastoral Prayer

- Ben Hutto ~ procedure tomorrow
- Dick ~
- Pete ~ procedure Friday
- Jo Lynn ~

I lift prayers of gratitude for the blessing of serving a church that has never tried to reign in my perspective that cannot separate the life and teachings of Jesus from his confrontation with the social, political, and economic environment of his time.

The late Tony Campolo, whom I adored, said, "There are 2,000 verses of Scripture that tell us we must be committed to protecting the poor and the oppressed… There is no concern of Scripture that is addressed so often and so powerfully as reaching out to the poor."

I suspect most of us in the room—hopefully all of us—agree. And yet, it is such a difficult task; overwhelming in its scope… It's tempting to give up. But there is strength in our gathering, in our fellowship, in our friendship. It is a strength that is virtually unattainable except in community.

So, again, I lift prayers of gratitude for you. Let us be in prayer for strength to continue to journey of faith that calls us to attempt what seems impossible.

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Gracious God, in this hour of worship, open our eyes to the astonishing gift you give us in Jesus Christ. We, who were far off, are brought near. We, who were once separated, are embraced by your saving love. We, who did not know who we were, are named and claimed as your own. We, who because of our incomplete and partial faith could not turn to you, are astonished that in Jesus Christ you have turned toward us.

And now, as we sing, pray, listen, and speak—as we encounter your living Word—prepare us to go out with confidence. Go with us into the world. Go within us as strength. Go beside us as guide. Assure us that you are giving us everything we need to be faithful to you in thought, word, and deed. Help us each to join in your active salvation of your world.

In the name of the One who leads us. Amen.

Responding to the Burning Bush

EXODUS 3:1-15 (NRSVUE) *Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God.* 2 *There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.* 3 *Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up."* 4 *When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."* 5 *Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."* 6 *He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.* 7 *Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings,* 8 *and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.* 9 *The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.* 10 *Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."* 11 *But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"* 12 *He said, "I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."* 13 *But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"* 14 *God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'"* 15 *God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.*

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The Word of God for the people of God!

Go down, Moses. 'Way down in Egypt land.
Tell old Pharaoh, "Let my people go!"

I don't know how many times I've read that story. I've seen the movie three or four times; and I always think of that old spiritual. And I think about , not the movie, but the first minister's retreat I attended at Subiaco, back in 1992. Peter Morgan was our keynote speaker. He's a master storyteller, and he opened with this story. I don't remember much about how he told it; I just remember that he opened with that song and told the story.

I remember him saying, "Don't you wish you could go back to that place—hear your name called by the Holy Voice; find that clarity of call, direction, purpose."

From there it's a blur: I think it was a tour, maybe sponsored by Global Ministries. We'd fly to Cairo, board a bus, motor across the desert into the Sinai Peninsula; arrive in the middle of the afternoon at a monastery nestled in a shady crevice at the eastern foot of the mountain where we're welcomed by a monk who speaks in a heavy middle eastern accent. We're each assigned a sparsely furnished

room, and after splashing a little water on our faces, we gather in the dining room for an orientation and a Spartan meal. The next three days are spent in Bible study and meditation, and on the third night there's a prayer vigil throughout the night.

At sunrise on the fourth morning we gather at the front gate, everyone is given a small backpack with two bottles of water, a sandwich and an orange, and we start up the mountain. After a couple of hours, the leader signals for quiet, and leads us the last few yards up a narrow trail toward a gate. Inside the gate is a terraced garden, irrigated with water from who-knows-where, manicured immaculately. In the center of the garden is the bush, radiating its awesome presence.

One member of the group takes off his shoes, and we all follow suit; and one-by-one we inch closer to the bush, each one hoping to hear his own name called; each one hoping to hear that Holy Name.

Wouldn't you like to go back there?

It wasn't quite that way with Moses. It wasn't a manicured garden; it was a "nowhere" place—no TV, no phone, no running water or indoor plumbing, no people, out there in the desert with the sheep. It was a "nowhere" place, and he was "nobody," and thank you, he'd like to keep it that way. Back in Egypt there were some Post Offices that still had his picture in the lobby.

Back in Egypt there were some officials who still wanted to talk to Moses, about that day the body of an Egyptian Work Supervisor was found buried in the sand. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Moses?"

But there in Sinai, it was safe. Nobody asked any questions. The past was the past, and nobody hassled him—out there in the desert with the sheep.

And then, one day, on his way to work, there was the object and the event that would change his life forever: that bush, blazing but not consumed by the fire. And Moses said, "This I gotta' see!"

And then he heard a voice that sounded like Charlton Heston calling his name: "Moses! Take off your shoes, Moses; you're standing on Holy Ground."

No preparation. No three days of Bible study and prayer; no all-night prayer vigil… Ambushed by the voice of God—out there in the desert with the sheep.

Again, I've read the story who knows how many times; I've seen the movie three or four times… What draws me into the story this time is Moses' response.

First, he *"…hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."* In the Bible, that's not uncommon. The most common greeting from God or God's representative is "Fear not." Later, after Moses and God get better acquainted—after they've been through plagues and death angels and parting seas together, Moses leads the children of Israel back to that same spot, and goes up the mountain to meet God, and

says, "God let me see you." And God says, "OK; go in that cave and I'll pass by the opening. But you can only see my back, because you can't handle all of me."

There's nothing casual or "buddy-buddy" about an encounter with God. It's always life-changing; therefore, the first response is almost always fear. And anyone who says, "I know all about God" is either lying or terribly self-deceived.

After his initial response of fear, as Moses gets better acquainted with God, he follows up with excuses—reasons why it won't work. Moses "talked back" to God. And, incidentally, God handled it OK.

Moses said, "Who am I? I'm nobody! Nobody will listen to me and I like it that way!" And God replies, "I will be with you."

Moses said, "When I say, 'The God of my fathers says, 'Let my people go' they will say, 'Who is this God?' Whom shall I say sent me? Who are you, God?" Then comes the Holy name: "Tell them 'YHWH'—tell them *'I am'* sent you."

But Moses said, "I s-s-s-stutter. They won't listen. They'll be rolling on the f-f-f-floor laughing at me." And God said, "I will send Aaron, your brother; he will speak for you."

You see, God does not call the qualified; God qualifies the called. Whom God calls, God enables. And so, Moses ran out of excuses and went to confront Pharaoh: "The God of my fathers says, 'Let my people go!'"

And Pharaoh says, "Moses, preachers shouldn't meddle in politics."

So, maybe you don't want to go back. We like our "creature comforts," and outside the compound it's desert, hot, dry, isolated—nothing but sand and snakes and lizards—out there in the desert.

Or, maybe we don't need to go back. Maybe we're already in the desert.

Unrestrained political chaos destroys life possibilities for those already vulnerable and casually dangles threats that alienate nations who've been friends and allies, threats that jeopardize safety—and maybe survival—of entire cultures.

Racism is making a comeback, just when we thought we were making progress. Xenophobia and misogyny are openly flaunted, poverty, unemployment, rising costs of basic necessities… it's all around—unavoidable as the heat in Sinai.

The air we breathe, the water we drink is, at best, marginally safe. Environmental issues confront us like serpents in the wilderness; and public apathy and denial blur our vision like the clouds of sand that blow across the desert.

We don't *need* to go back to Sinai. Remember, when Moses encountered God in the desert, God sent him *back to Egypt*, to deal with issues of human bondage and injustice that remind us of our own desert, here at home.

Were we *able* to go back to the burning bush, would we not be sent right back here? Are not the problems at our doorstep our burning bush? Do they not blaze with the heat of human need, and yet without being consumed in the flames? They just won't go away!

Maybe it is out of the very problems we'd like to escape—the very issues of human need and injustice right here that we can most clearly hear our name called; most clearly hear the divine voice: "Take off your shoes; right here, you're standing on holy ground."

Pray with me.