**St Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**Third Sunday In Lent**

**Exodus 3:1-15**

[**Psalm**](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Lent/CLent1_RCL.html#nt1) **63: 1-8**

**1 Corinthians 10: 1-13**

[**Luke**](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Lent/CLent1_RCL.html#ps1) **13:1 – 9**

**Silk Tree Theology**

When the nights were long and the mornings foggily dark and damp…from out of the depths….out of the darkness …..out of holy ground, .a minute piece of root left in the ground, from the remains of a long since dead and broken old Silk Tree, formed a pale green grass-like shoot that began to move toward the light.

What awaited it there, it could not know….nor was it capable of knowing, except to be obediently responsive to a call that promised that if it kept on moving, its faithful work would be rewarded. That there would be light and something would be tangible, and yet also with an indefinable and intangible opportunity to experience life in a new way...a way promised since the beginning of time…a way that never seemed to fail. A way that you could trust, even if you couldn’t see it, so that you could be undaunted by the unseen and just keep moving until you could be seen and so you could see the world again in a new way…..then wait…… and be prepared…..for what would happen next.

So it was for Moses. A simple man, small, tending his flocks, unchanging and unknowing, and yet invited, as are all God’s people, to enter onto holy ground, to come before God in order to hear God’s word and to find the courage to follow the guidance found there. For Moses, it was the voice of God coming out of a burning bush that would not, could not be consumed. Just as for us are hard-to-understand instincts that cause us to stop, turn and pray, called to listen for once closely to God’s voice rather than the noise of the world.

What God had to say to Moses wasn’t easy for Moses to hear, and what God has to say to each of us isn’t easy to hear either. Would that any of us had it so easy as did the small green shoot. To be simply called to reach up into the world, nothing more, nothing less. To continue moving through dark unknowing, in trust that we will reach a place where each of us can fulfill our own particular destiny, a destiny designed to be embraced and received as fully authentic, as designed by God, as one belonging in the place made available for us in the revealing light of day.

The shoot cannot know or understand the complexities of how it was created, how it finds the strength to push its frail blade against a particularly hard clod of dirt or a pebble buried deep in the earth, barring its way. It only knows, deep within its DNA that it must and will keep moving in as straight a line as possible to reach the light

Within the complexities of our lives we meet the same hard clods of dirt…the same pebbles buried deep in the ground and yet, rather than simply moving through them or around them, we allow them to impede our progress…and we are quick to place the blame for our delay.

Moses needed to push his way through his own insecurities and indecision, his profound preferences, and to be given the chance to explain his personal choices. Like us, Moses had all these and felt comfortable in his role as shepherd with hearth and home a known and acceptable part of his life. Now he is being called to change all that; to leave it behind; to step out into the world in a new way, to rescue and to shepherd a nation of people. It seems an impossible task for Moses, and if he were to follow a path of his own choosing, he would likely have stayed put, or been pulled into directions which would have been unfulfilling and even disastrous.

When it comes to personal preferences, we’re not really that much different than Moses. We allow ourselves to be controlled by our misguided needs and desires, making decisions that seem satisfying but only leave us empty, undernourished, leading to life that seems acceptable, but put to the risk of a kind of starvation and ultimate death of the soul.

The small shoot, unencumbered by choice, continues to make its way….like a pilgrim on a dark, lonely Lenten walk…..one step at a time…in patient acceptance and trust that the light of Easter will eventually come.

In the midst of our own Lenten walk we, too, come to seek the Light, still searching, wanting answers now that can only come with an enlightened awareness of our own deep call. Once learning of that, like a small shoot rising out of a single cell, we are called to walk on in trust, through this dark time of unknowing we call Lent, and beyond. We are called by God to keep moving, in anticipation of what we are unsure. We hear the voice of God when we set out to listen for it. Moses listened, but do we?  “…the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ He said, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid…”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Like Adam, we are afraid of what God asks of us, but like Moses, we are to summon the courage to respond. God wants to be there with us at our greatest times of uncertainty and doubt about what direction we should take, and how we are to enter on to a path that God wishes us to take. Yet, too often, the holy ground we are invited to enter, seems too difficult to encounter, guarded by a burning bush that we cannot understand and that seems to challenge us, daring us to come closer.

Holy ground is that of God. And, how sad it seems that obstacles, real or imagined, rise up to block our way, that we either don’t notice God’s abundance of gifts or we don’t want let go of our own definition of Godly living in order to allow God to be part of it. It is when we allow God to enter the conversation about our own destiny that we find our singular call to move forward, perhaps in a very different way. Perhaps, in a way, that is outside the expected, the ordinary of our lives.

To allow God in is to move away from the ordinary. We are pushed to think about living a life that transcends the ordinary….grows beyond our known comforts or beyond our own self-sanctification of what we think we deserve. Ours is a world that has limits…..and like a fenced mansion, we can become entrapped by our own self-identity and meaning in life.

And yet, all that being true, and as the psalmist reminds us, God enters easily into the ordinary. The psalmist thinks of God as he lies in his bed…..as he pads around his room in the middle of the night……and he shows us that God can just as easily be found there….in the ordinary. It is the ordinary that becomes extraordinary, as our trust in God grows.

Spurred on by its innate ability to respond to God’s creative call, the little shoot has continued faithfully on its way. It has become slightly misshapen, but the hard clod of dirt has been split open and the pebble buried deep in the earth has been moved. Would that we could be so content to simply grow, mindlessly trusting in an expected outcome that has nothing to do with our own control over the situation.

For instances, we just heard about the Galileans who are in conversation with Jesus, and are angry at the treatment and working conditions of their fellow countrymen under the thumb of the Romans. And you can’t blame them for being angry about what they have heard….even though there is a chance of what they are hearing may not be true. Yet, they want Jesus to control the situation, to do something about it, to fix it.

But Jesus does not enter this place of blame and condemnation and focuses his attention on the angry faces before him. His call for their repentance, their about face from anger to self-awareness, is a tall order, but Jesus challenges them on the way they are allowing themselves to be defined by the forces that surround them. Jesus calls them and us to be aware of our own actions before we come to conclusions about how to deal with life on our own terms.

It is into this broiling world filled with discontent, that Jesus tells the parable of an old fig tree that doesn’t seem very productive. The farm owner, seeing fertile land being taken up by a tree that doesn’t seem to bear fruit anymore, wants to cut it down. But his head gardener intervenes on the tree’s behalf…..and persuades the farmer to allow him to treat the ground and fertilize the tree to see if there is an improvement.

Jesus brings our self-righteous clamoring for what we think we are entitled to and our competitive need for power back into perspective. We are brought down to size with his example of a poor, old tree, asking us the question…..are you bearing fruit, or just taking up space. Are we bearing the fruit of divine forbearance or are we more interested in our own position and our own self-righteousness to find room and space to think another way.

Jesus knew that it probably made more sense, given conventional wisdom, for the old unproductive tree to be cut down, and yet his parable has the farmer making a management decision that seems inefficient given the circumstances. But Jesus wants to emphasize something far more important than the place taken by an old tree. He wants us to glimpse the amount of power that a mere hint of God’s mercy can bring about. Far more power than righteous anger and blame. As powerful as the opportunity to live anew, with a new way of thinking and being in the world.

Like the tree that has one year to turn itself around and bear fruit, so we are given yet another chance to repent and move humbly into a place that will fill us with an abundance of God’s grace and mercy until we are overcome with its strengthening goodness.

The little shoot finally breaks through the surface of damp, cold earth and greets the world in which it must live with humility and unspoken but with visible gratitude for the strength and power it was given to reach this place. It absorbs the spring rain and discerns an irresistible pull toward the cool warmth of the sun as it begins to form itself into what it is to become. The shoot, now in full sight of its destination, increases the pace of its growth and sends out young leaves that carry out a promise made in infinity…..all supported by the shoot that itself, soon becomes an identifiable as a Silk Tree sapling …..grown from deep remnants of the old tree which had been cut down a year before.

In its reaching for its authentic identity and presence on the earth, it assumes nothing, demands nothing but is clearly the recipient of God’s wealth of food and drink, surviving through that nurturing grace, to take its place in the world. It could have died, but it was called to live, reaching forward, breaking out, filled with the Spirit and establishing itself as God’s own, firmly implanted in a place on the earth, while taking its place as part of the body of all God’s creation, a partner in the building up of God’s Kingdom. Think of it as Silk Tree Theology. What a mighty designation!

For ourselves to gain this kind of bread and water of life, without God is an effort in futility. We may grow but are in danger of ending up growing in the wrong direction, encountering clods of dirt too big to break open, or rocks too large to circumvent. We try desperately to live as best we can, loving the wrong way, embracing wrong relationships, wrong jobs, wrong desires for wealth and power, wrongly judging and blaming, as we perpetuate the age-old paradox of needing to find God when God is already at our side waiting for us to receive God

God makes the deal abundantly clear. God is continually calling us into relationship and when we enter authentically on to that holy ground, God’s powerful richness of gifts give us strength for the journey we are called to make.

Whether we are deeply seeking or simply aware that we have to make some changes in our lives, God is prepared to take us in the present with our minute desire for change and enter into it. We start where we are, and then, with whatever amount of longing we have, we begin to grow toward the light. It’s alright if we’re small. God understands the small, the vulnerable and the forgotten…and celebrates them as His own: a small nation of Israelites, a baby born in a barn, fear on the eve of a cross. Called to defend and uphold them, he fills them to overflowing with His grace and blessing, with the living bread and water of life.

Lent presents a challenge for us humans that seems so less difficult for much of creation that chooses God’s way. We are called to repent, to turn from materialistic deadening choices that lead to only fleeting satisfaction and then to emptiness of spirit, and to move toward choices that might fly in the face of conventional wisdom. In Lent we are called to find a path which leads to renewed intent, .renewed trust, and renewed hope that will lead us to a new way of living.

Like the birth of a new tree, Lent offers us the opportunity to find life in the unexpected, rather than the uniform, a life found in the complexity of the divine rather than the wisdom of convention

The old Silk tree was left as dead and yet it rose again in a divine state of grace. It rose to stand firm on the earth filled with the strength of renewed life and purpose Brand new. Vulnerable. But with all the presence of the tree born before it. One among many others destined to be just as beautiful, just as noticeable, barely daring to think it could be noticed at all, especially by God. But it is beautiful in God’s eyes and has the capacity to be far grander and far bigger than it could ever hope to be without an innate sense of God’s presence in and around it. It takes its place from which it will continue to grow, out of holy ground, responding to God’s call with humility and grace.

Like that small green shoot, like Moses and like all those who would call themselves the people of God, we are called to do the same.

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

Esme J. R. Culver+

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1. Genesis 3: 9b-10a [↑](#footnote-ref-1)