PRAYER OF THE DAY

P Eternal Lord, your kingdom has broken into our troubled world through the life, death, and resurrection of your Son. Help us to hear your Word and obey it, so that we become instruments of your redeeming love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C Amen.

HOLY SCRIPTURE

Exodus 3:1-15, RSV

1Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian; and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. 3And Moses said, “I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.” 4When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here am I.” 5Then he said, “Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” 6And he said, “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.

7Then the LORD said, “I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, 8and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. 10Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.” 11But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?” 12He said, “But I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain.” 13Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers 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.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’’ 15 God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

HYMN WOV 670    When Israel Was in Egypt’s Land

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text speaks of the first words spoken between the LORD and Moses — their first-ever conversation. The passage goes this way:

When the LORD saw that [Moses] turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here am I.” Then he said, “Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” (Exodus 3:4-5, RSV)

I have said that this was the first conversation between the LORD and Moses, and so it is. But it was not the first time the LORD has paid attention to Moses. You will recall that the LORD was also with Moses when Moses was but a wee baby. His mother had defied the Empire by hiding her newborn baby boy away in a basket along the river’s edge. The hand of the LORD is evident from that point on in watching over Moses, from his infancy to his old age standing there on Mt. Pisgah overlooking the Promised Land. We should immediately take this story to heart and apply it to ourselves: The LORD has watched over us too from our very beginning, even through years when we might not have known him or paid him no mind. Here we are, by God’s grace. In this evening’s Bible story, the LORD has some great work ahead for Moses. It is so with us too: By God’s grace here we are, right in the presence of our Lord Jesus, right here in church. He is going to speak with us this evening. May God help me that I will somehow say to your hearts what the Lord wants you to hear. There is no burning bush at my side, yet our situation is similar to that of Moses. Through thick and thin, we have arrived at this place in life. We should believe that the LORD has good words and good work for us going forward.

1 Exodus 2
2 Deuteronomy 31:1
My method in this sermon is to look at the cast of characters in the story and to end by trying to say something about the “holy ground” on which Moses was standing. The cast of characters I have in mind are the people of Israel, Moses, and the LORD. Let’s begin with the people.

They are a suffering people. When I think of the Israelites in bondage down in Egypt, I also find myself thinking of one of my heroes here in America: Harriet Tubman. Her day of commemoration on our church calendar is coming up—this Saturday, March 10. She is remembered as a Renower of Society. In her day she was called “America’s Moses,” because she led so many slaves out of bondage down south. Pity the slave, including the Hebrew slave in Egypt. The official policy of Pharaoh was to work the Hebrews to death. He did not like their growing numbers and influence and so he tried to kill them through exhausting labor. When that did not work, he used a more straightforward method: he ordered that the Hebrew baby boys should be killed. It was by the LORD’s mercy that little Moses escaped that fate. Still, even if the baby boys were not killed, the Israelites were suffering in Egyptian bondage. And then, on top of the misery that any slave knows, there was also this: The Israelites were the LORD’s chosen people. He had not promised them slavery. Just the reverse: The LORD had promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their descendants would live in the Promised Land, have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and would prove a blessing to all nations. The Israelites, then, were bearers of special dignity—meant by the LORD to be a blessing to the whole, wide world. Yet here they are, slaves in Egypt, with a Pharaoh who wants to kill them. So, this part of the cast of characters is a downhearted and suffering people: the Israelites in Egyptian bondage.

Next, let us speak of Moses. He was on the run for homicide. No, let us be more plain: he is a murderer. Moses had witnessed an Egyptian beating an Israelite. So Moses looked left, look right, saw no one in sight, and he killed the Egyptian. But word got out about it, Pharaoh was furious, and Moses had to flee to the land of Midian. That’s where this evening’s story picks up: Moses is a shepherd in Midian. He leads his flock to the “backside of the desert,” near Mt. Horeb. It is there that he sees the burning bush.

What we have in Moses is a young man of mixed character. His anger seems to have been explosive, so that he kills the Egyptian. But in his new life in the land of Midian, he shows himself to be a kind and helpful young man. He is a mixed man, like many of us.

So, let none of us think that God cannot love us or use us because of a wicked past. The past of Moses was wicked, but the LORD could sure love and

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3 Exodus 2:12.
use him. With the Lord, there is forgiveness of sin and the life-long chance to live a better life going forward.

So, that is Moses. Let us move on to the LORD. We see in this story that the LORD is a Maker and Keeper of Promises. He makes promises, and he does not forget about them. To Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob the LORD promised lots of descendents and settled life in the Promised Land, Canaan. These Israelites in bondage are those descendents. It cannot be, then, that Pharaoh can destroy these people. In fact, Pharaoh is going to learn the will of the LORD “to let my people go.” That is why Moses must go down to Egypt:

Go down, Moses, way down to Egypt land,
Tell old Pharaoh, to let my people go.

We worship a God who connects who he is with the way things go here on earth. If the LORD makes promises to people, then either he must see those promises through, or he becomes untrue to himself and a disappointment to us. But the Bible teaches us that our God never forgets or forsakes his promises. We might walk away from them, but the Lord does not forget a single promise he has made to us, and so we always have a chance to return to him.

That is the great lesson of Jesus and his disciples. They were a fickle group of people, pledging total loyalty to Jesus, but then fleeing from him in the moment of crisis. But when Jesus gives himself to someone, he does so in a whole-hearted way. When Jesus said to those disciples, one by one, “follow me,” he did not mean to flee from them, ever, not even when threatened by the cruel cross. And so, those fickle and fearful disciples always have a chance to return to Jesus. They do, and they go on to become apostles and saints of the church.

If you are baptized, then the God who made promises to Israel has woven you into his people, and you have become a promise bearer of God. When you were baptized, Jesus promised you everything. He promised that he would walk with you and love you endlessly. He promised to forgive your sins, to teach you his ways, to make you a blessing on earth and an inheritor of heaven. Jesus will not compel you to walk with him, but if you should ever stray and want to come back to him, he will not forget his promise. He did not forget the Israelites in Egyptian bondage. He will not forget you or me.

So, those are the characters I had in mind and something of their application to us. I have spoken of the people of God in slavery, of Moses, and of our God.

Let me end by saying a few words about the holy ground on which Moses stands:
Then [the LORD] said, “Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” (Exodus 3:5, RSV)

What makes something “holy”? We speak of the “holy Bible,” for example. What makes the Bible holy? When I was boy, I grew up in a household that never placed anything on top of the Bible. If we stacked up books, the Bible was always on top. That’s because we thought of the Bible as “holy.” We were not superstitious. We did not fear harm from putting things on top of the Bible. It was rather that we wanted to show respect for a book that we believed was connected with God! There are a lot of good books in this world, but we believed about the Bible that it was not only “good” but also “holy.” It was set apart by our Maker for his own good purposes.

Likewise with the Holy Communion. It is not just bread and wine. Bread and wine are good things in this world, but the Holy Communion is not simply good, but “holy” because this Bread and Wine are connected with God. Indeed, we believe that our resurrected Jesus Christ is present “in, with, and under” this bread and wine. We could well join Moses in taking off our shoes in church, to show respect for the Bible and the Sacraments in the church.

Indeed, we could well have a sense of awe at our position Sunday by Sunday, liturgy by liturgy. Moses of old was astonished by the burning bush that was not consumed. Likewise with us: We could well be astonished, humbled, and grateful to be in church, where the love of God for you and me is always burning, but never extinguished. The love of Jesus for his disciples of old is a love he bears for you and me. It is inexhaustible, inextinguishable, welling up to eternal life, and always beckoning to us to walk with him and let this world have some notion of how good he is, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.