

Exodus 3:1-15
Ps. 63:1-8, 1 Cor.10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

Sermon
By
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3rd Sunday of Lent
March 23, 2025

This, the Third Sunday of Lent, marks the halfway point on our journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. So now is perhaps a good time to stop and reflect on where we find ourselves along the way. Have we given our Lenten journey much thought? Have we found there are many distractions that get in the way or trip us up? Do we know where we would like to be at the end of this journey? If anything, I would guess that we are all in different places at this point.

When my wife and I walked the Camino de Santiago almost six years ago, the ancient pilgrimage trail that extends for 500 miles over all kinds of terrain from the southern border of France to St. James's Cathedral in Santiago, Spain, I can vividly remember reaching the town of Sahagun, the halfway point on the Camino. There, I gave thanks that we had made it that far, but also prayed that we could somehow make it to the end, only another 250 miles! By that time, we had discovered that there were fellow pilgrims from all over the world who were at different places on their journey, and hiking for many different reasons. Some were only hiking a portion of the trail. Some were hiking it for the second or third time. Some were hiking it for the challenge and fun of it, some as a way to work through a transition in their life, and others as a religious pilgrimage. For most of us, it was a spiritual experience in some way.

So as we pause during this year's Lenten Journey and take stock of things, we may find there are some of us who, like Moses in today's reading from Exodus, have discovered that we have encountered God in our lives for the first time. While it may not be a burning bush that is not consumed, something has caught our eye and enabled us to see God as never before. We too, may have found ourselves standing on holy ground in awe and disbelief, and want to remove our shoes. We might even have a sense that we are

called to do God's work in the world, but unsure of what that might be. Like Moses, we may be afraid to share this experience with others, unclear how to describe it, or what to call the voice we have heard or vision we have had. Can we dare say to others, "*I am* has sent me to you?" The last thing we may want to do, as was the case with Moses, is face the wrongs we have committed in a land we fled, and stand as a prophet before the pharaoh or ruler to be ridiculed and laughed at. But if this is where we find ourselves, we must ask for the strength and courage to take the next step.

Others of us on our Lenten journey may identify with the people of the church in Corinth, who Paul likened to their forebears, the Israelites. Although the Israelites were baptized by their deliverance through the Red Sea, received communion in the form of manna God reined down from heaven and water that bled from a rock which Moses struck, and although they were led by the Spirit as they journeyed in the wilderness, a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night, they turned against God, and many were struck down by God's wrath. So to the faithful followers of Christ in Corinth, Paul warns them of their history, and the danger of repeating the past by committing the sins of their forefathers in the wilderness - the sins of idolatry, sexual immorality, putting God to the test, and complaining that God does not provide ("If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread," they cried). No matter where you and I are on our Lenten journey, we, like the Corinthians and Israelites, are still human and can give in to temptation, doubt, and sin, all which lead us many steps backward instead of forward.

At the town of Irache along the Camino, my wife and I had read there is a winery which offers free wine to pilgrims. A spigot is conveniently located outside the winery where you can stop and get a sample of their wine. The temptation for some is to get more than their share. When we arrived at the winery in the late afternoon with great anticipation and our drinking cups in hand, to our disappointment we found that the spigot was dry! Perhaps those before us saved us from our own temptation of over indulgence!

Many of us have made this Lenten Journey before, and could very well find ourselves at this halfway point filled with at least some sense of self-righteousness. Haven't we been faithful in our Lenten discipline? After all, we have attended special offerings and services, taken on the reading of scripture and meditations, given up desert (except on Sunday of course, which is always a feast day), and been kinder to our family and neighbors. Aren't we better Christians than those around us who don't take Lent seriously or practice any Lenten discipline at all? In Luke's gospel, Jesus addresses this misconception and tendency to self-righteousness head on. To those followers who told Jesus about fellow Galileans who were killed by Pilate as they offered their sacrifices at the temple, Jesus asks, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" To their surprise, he tells them, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." In Judaism, it was a common belief that misfortune will befall those who sin and disobey the Law. So also concerning those killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, Jesus says, "do you think they were worse offenders than all the others in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." What Jesus suggests to his followers is that we all stand in need of repentance, we all need God's grace. None of us can claim to be more righteous than another.

Guidebooks for walking the Camino warn those planning to hike the entire pilgrimage trail, that when you reach the the town of Sarria, where many pilgrims begin the journey for the last 100 kilometers, the minimum to earn their Compostela or certificate, you may find yourself resenting the growing crowd and those who have not struggled for the entire pilgrimage. That was indeed true for us, and my wife and I had to remind ourselves that, like those of us now on our Lenten journey, we are no more righteous or deserving than anyone else. We are all at a different place, with different needs and capabilities.

And in the parable of the fig tree, Jesus reminds his followers that although God is demanding, God is also merciful. When a fig tree produced no fruit for three years after being planted in the owner's vineyard, the gardener is told to cut it down. But the gardener replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." Like the gardener, Christ intercedes on our behalf when we fall short, assuring us our God is indeed a merciful God. May this knowledge enable us to continue on the right path this Lent.

So as we continue on our journey through Lent, now is a good time to ask ourselves where we wish to end up spiritually by Easter. Here, the psalmist provides us with true inspiration. Far different from Moses who was just beginning a relationship with God, hearing God's voice and learning God's name, the psalmist shares a deep and personal relationship with God, whom he loyally turns to as his helper and sustainer. Reflecting on Psalm 63, we may ask ourselves if we are spiritually ready and able to sing out in adoration, "O God, you are my God; eagerly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you." How close are we to honestly and passionately declare before God, "...your loving-kindness is better than life itself." Can we see God satisfying our most basic hunger as does the psalmist, who states, "My soul is content, as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips." If only this is where we could all end this year's Lenten journey!

But as we take stock of where we are and how far we have journeyed, let us remember that we are each uniquely at the place we are. And, it is only from this place that we are able to take our next step. Yes, it may be that some of us are just encountering God for the first time, whether because of some miraculous vision or a traumatic event in our lives. Some of us may be faithful and steady pilgrims, but have forgotten that none of us is beyond reproach and the need to repent. Others of us may be well rooted in the community of the church, and yet are not producing real fruit for the kingdom - neither

that which we expect of ourselves, much less by God. To all of us, our Lord assures that God is a merciful God, and he encourages us to move forward in our spiritual lives from wherever we find ourselves.

On the Camino, there were fellow pilgrims who did not finish their journey the first time, and so were taking up where they had left off. One courageous woman we met had planned to walk the Camino with her husband, but unfortunately he died before they could even get started. She was now walking it for both of them. Another pilgrim we encountered took a half-hearted approach, hopping on a bus or taking a cab now and then to make the journey easier for himself. Still another person shared that she had walked the Camino before at a time when she was young and struggling to find her way in life. Afterwards, she completed school and became a doctor. Now, she was walking the Camino again as a real spiritual journey for herself!

As we look ahead to the next half of this Lenten Season, if we see that we have lost our way or gotten distracted from whatever Lenten practice we adopted, I pray that we will take the next step anyway. If we find ourselves complacent and not in need of a Lenten discipline, take the next step anyway. If we find ourselves resentful of those who have just begun their Lenten journey, take the next step anyway. Knowing that when Easter arrives we will not all be at the spiritual place we wish to be, deeply devoted to God and one with the Father as Christ and the Father are one, take the next step anyway.

As my wife and I walked the Camino, I will confess, for myself at least, that I did not have a great awakening, a miraculous vision, or a clear discernment for my life's future direction. But we both took the next step anyway, and found that we encountered God in the many wonderful people we met all along the way, people who showed us the love and kindness of Christ in many unexpected and undeserved ways.

Our Lenten journey, as the Camino de Santiago, is practice for our greater life-long journey, a journey to grow ever closer to God and to one another, embracing God's love, grace, and mercy that sustain us wherever we find ourselves in life. And when we become lost, discouraged, afraid, tired, or even apathetic, let us take a moment to pause and take stock. We are all standing on holy ground, and God is calling out to each of us, whether from a burning bush that is not consumed, or in the voice of an angel, or by a stranger who shows us kindness: "Take the next step anyway!"