



## BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

**Pentecost 13**  
**Proper 17 (A)**  
**August 30, 2020**

**RCL: Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28**

### **Exodus 3:1-15**

The episode at the burning bush is one of the most memorable Old Testament stories, perhaps because it portrays God's encounter with a particular person, as well as God's compassionate response to the afflictions of his people. This is the first of many divine acts that will bring forth Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt and culminate with the blessings of the new covenant of God's Law. And, as is the case in many other places in Scripture, the Lord asks for the cooperation of an individual in order to fulfill his design. He comes to Moses, not during worship and prayer, or at a busy place for everyone to see, but in the intimacy of an otherwise mundane hour of labor. For a moment, God displays dominion over time and space to express his will: it is Moses, and no one else, whom he has chosen for a momentous task. It is he whom God calls by name in a uniquely *paternal* way: "I am the God of your father," the Lord announces, before revealing his relationship with the patriarchs of Israel.

Despite the very personal nature of this passage, it is difficult to deny its outright strangeness; the Lord manifests in the form of fire, and the scene is perplexing and even frightening to Moses. Upon hearing a voice coming from a plant that burns without being consumed, Moses discovers the all-powerful God, the God in whose presence nature is elevated and freed from the menace of death. The very ground on which Moses meets God is declared sacred and undefiled. These signs suggest the heavenly plan is a return to that fellowship between the Creator and the created which had been ruptured at Eden. But for Moses, it is not enough to recognize the Lord and commune with him, as he experiences the inherently human urge to name God. The name God provides is strange because it is more a declaration than a label. "I am who I am," is the sign of one who has no beginning or end, possessing the ultimate claim of *being*. It is this consoling permanence of God that promises to be with Moses on his journey.

- In what places and circumstances have you experienced closeness with God?
- What is your interpretation of the name of God that was given to Moses?

### **Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c**

The words of the psalm invite God's people to engage in worship that is multidimensional and ongoing. It involves giving thanks to the Lord, but also singing his praises, glorying in his name, searching for him

continually, and calling to mind his great deeds. In that light, the use of language, music, and ritual are all important aspects of religious devotion. But just as necessary is an inward disposition to know the heart of God more deeply, so that our own hearts may be converted, and we can know the kind of fulfillment the world is incapable of delivering. It is not merely for the sake of triumphant commemoration that the characters and events surrounding Israel's exodus are recalled, but rather as part of a pledge of faithfulness to an ever-faithful God.

- How important is worshipful singing to you? What difference does it make in a church service?
- What are some ways in which God invites us to “continually seek his face”?

### **Romans 12:9-21**

Paul unpacks for the Christian communities of Rome the evangelical duty of mutual love (cf. John 13:34). Christ's original and most important commandment is presented in no uncertain terms and believers are asked to love others and deny themselves in ways that would have appeared as countercultural in their day as they do in ours. It is pertinent, however, to imagine a world in which Christians were anything but a majority, under circumstances that did not allow for a less-than-profound embodiment of the faith. In order for evangelizing efforts to be fruitful, the service of God was expected to encompass every aspect of life. But the Church of today is called to that same radical love, that “extra mile” which Jesus speaks of in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Matthew 5:41) – not as a suggestion for the occasional act of charity, but as a way of life that involves constant renunciation, a way of life that transforms and speaks louder than words.

- Who can you visit or call today that needs your fellowship?
- What does the idea of overcoming evil with good mean to you?

### **Matthew 16:21-28**

Jesus leaves no room for ambiguity as he prepares his disciples for the kind of fate that awaits him. He discloses to them the place and culprits of his death, and they can probably deduce the time as well. To follow Jesus into Jerusalem will mean seeing him suffer and die. This must come as a shock to the disciples, and their natural reaction is to reject the prospect of a path so dooming, because they have endeared themselves to their Teacher and Lord. To put it bluntly, their suffering has already begun.

In his impetuosity, Peter, who in the previous passage had just confessed Jesus as the Christ, now defies him. “God forbid it, Lord!” he cries out. In return, Jesus reproaches him heavily by calling him the name of the enemy, Satan. This impassioned exchange seems to showcase both the frailty of the zealous disciple and the most human side of the Savior when presented with the slightest temptation to avoid the sacrifice of the Cross.

Jesus knows he must die to bring completion to the Father's plan of deliverance initiated since time immemorial. His followers are called to carry their own crosses and follow the Lord, at the risk of losing their lives for his sake. This is what being a disciple means -to proclaim that the Kingdom has come, in the

example of Jesus, the ultimate servant and victim (cf. Matthew 20:28). The Lord knows that the disciples are liable to fail – several times. They will fall asleep in the garden of Gethsemane, and after Jesus is captured, the same Peter will deny knowing him. These examples of weakness, however, are part of what makes the Gospel feel genuine and relatable to Christians of different eras and cultures. The overriding message of hope of these pages is not that we are perfect, but that in seeking perfection after the heavenly Father, we are not alone. After all, Jesus’ very last words in Matthew’s Gospel are almost the same as the ones spoken to Moses at the burning bush, “I am with you...” (Matthew 28:20).

- How do you think the apostles feel when Jesus tells them he must die?
- What are some of the difficulties of being a follower of Jesus? How do we overcome them?

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