

“Take Up Your Cross,” FPC Marshfield, Pentecost 13, Sept. 3,

2017 Texts: Ex. 3:1-15, Ps. 105:1-6, 23-26, Rom.12:9-21,
Matthew 16:21-28

For the last few weeks, our guests have been presenting some of their own statements of faith in their sermons. I will do something like that today. We have heard the story of the call of Moses for our Old Testament reading. I have a “burning bush” story, too. I was scheduled for an oral exam for my master’s degree in political science at the University of Colorado. I had written a thesis on the political philosophy of the theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, who made many connections between our faith and our life together as communities. Based on how this exam went, I would decide whether to go to seminary or to work on a Ph.D. in political science. I was playing the organ in the Protestant chapel near campus when someone came running in saying, “There’s a bush on fire outside!” Unlike Moses, I grabbed a bucket of water and ran out the door. A piece of trash from the neighboring fraternity house had floated out of their incinerator and landed in the bush. I didn’t hear any voices

and I put the fire out. But later that day, I made my decision to go to seminary!

We don’t have to take this story literally. It has many similarities to other call stories in the Bible. First, there is a theophany—an appearance of God, in this case a voice from the bush. God called Moses, who had been raised in the Pharaoh’s court but who was forced into exile when he killed an Egyptian who was mistreating an Israelite slave. He fled to the land of Midian, where he married a priest’s daughter and was shepherding the sheep for his father-in-law Jethro when the vision came to him.

Like most who receive a call, Moses was reluctant. God promised to be with him as he confronted Pharaoh and his brother Aaron was also called so he didn’t have to do it alone. Moses wanted more proof, so he asked for God’s name. The answer was, “I AM WHO I AM.” In Hebrew the letters are YHWH. There are no vowels, so the pronunciation is not clear. Besides, for the Jews, God is too holy to pronounce a name. So usually in scripture God is called “Adonai,” which we generally translate as Lord. In the King

James Bible, YHWH is called Jehovah, and in more modern translations it is Yahweh.

The whole point of this discussion of names is that we cannot define God. God doesn't fit into our boxes. God cannot be defined as an old man sitting on a throne in heaven or a great clockmaker who set the universe running and then stepped aside. The definition I find most helpful comes from the theologian Paul Tillich: "the ground of all being." But again, no human definition can really name God.

However, the incarnation, the coming of Jesus, helps a lot. He is called "the Son of Man" or the "New Human Being." Our passages in Matthew for last week and today give us a story about how the disciples sought to figure out who Jesus was for them. Last week, Peter identified him as the Messiah. Jesus affirmed Peter's statement, then told the disciples not to tell anyone. Possibly the reason for this is because the popular idea of the Messiah at that time was one who would come riding in on a white horse with a two edged sword to throw out the Romans and restore the Kingdom of David and Solomon. That was not Jesus' idea. There is a different model

in the prophet Isaiah, the four suffering songs. That is closer to what Jesus believed was his mission.

So in today's lesson, often identified as the first of three passion predictions, Jesus explained to the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, where at the hands of the Jewish leaders and the Romans, he would suffer and die. On the third day he would be raised. Peter would not accept that. After he said that it must not happen, Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Many today find this as scandalous as Peter did. All we have to do is look at the attendance on Good Friday and Easter. Many avoid the midweek services during Holy Week because they are uncomfortable with the suffering part. I have problems myself with what is called "substitutionary atonement." That belief arose from the thinking of St. Anselm in the 11th century, claiming that God required recompense for human sins and Jesus had to die in our place so that we would be saved. Rather, it seems to me that Jesus was willing to die if that was what it took to confront the principalities and powers of this world. When the temple leaders and the

Roman officials decided to put him to death to set an example, God vindicated him by raising him from the dead.

In our reading from Matthew, after the passion prediction, Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Many people throughout history have fully paid the price of martyrdom, though we are not all called to do that.

I think of two 20th century martyrs well known to us all. The first is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was a Lutheran pastor from Germany. During the rise of Hitler he had opportunities to live and work in Britain and the United States, but he chose to go back to stand with his people. He was part of the Confessing Church, which opposed Hitler's takeover of the German church. It trained ministers at an underground seminary in Finkenwalde. The confessing church issued the Barmen Declaration in 1934, one of our official confessions. Even though Bonhoeffer was a pacifist, he joined the resistance and took part in an effort to assassinate Hitler. It failed, and he and others were imprisoned in concentration camps. On April 9, 1945, he and some of his colleagues were hanged at Flossenbergr prison only a short time before the

Allies liberated the camp.

Martin Luther King, Jr., after seminary and graduate school, began his ministry at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, where he was called to lead the bus boycott. He eventually returned to Atlanta to be a co-pastor with his father at Ebenezer Baptist Church. He founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Though he had many struggles and failures along the way, his most successful efforts were in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, where he confronted Sheriff "Bull" Connor with his firehoses and dogs turned on children. Only a couple of weeks after the March on Washington, August 28, 1963, where he delivered his "I have a dream" speech, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham was bombed by the Ku Klux Klan, killing four young girls. Eventually that campaign was a success and desegregation began to take place. The final successful campaign was in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. The march from Selma to Montgomery led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965. I was fortunate to attend the last day of the march and then return to work on registering voters in Greenville, Alabama, with the SCLC-SCOPE project during that

summer. Those activities are among the highlights of my faith journey. They were inspired by the Rev. Wally Toevs, Presbyterian campus minister at the University of Colorado.

Martin Luther King had less success after 1965, but in 1968 he began a Poor People's Campaign, part of which was to stand with the striking sanitation workers of Memphis. Though he did not feel well, he spoke to a mass meeting the night of April 3, 1968. Some of his most well known words were delivered that night:

“Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead, but it really doesn't matter with me now—because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long time, longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will—

I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people *will* get to the Promised Land! And so I'm happy tonight I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!

Only the next night, April 4, 1968, standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel with colleagues, he was shot in the head and died shortly after that.

Both Bonhoeffer and King were 39 years old when they gave their lives for causes that they strongly believed were

derived from their faith. They are well known, but many others gave their lives for the causes for which they stood.

We do not all have to be martyrs to causes, but in whatever way we are called, God will be with us as we journey on our faith. We did not read the passage for today from Romans 12:9-21. It is an accounting of the ethics of the Christian life. It has many similarities to the Sermon on the Mount earlier in Matthew. I particularly like v. 19-20, where Paul says, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, for it is written, ‘vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them, if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’”

This was the text in the fall of 2002, shortly after the Amish began moving to farms around Arpin. Some of the neighbors objected to such things as their wish to use a one room school for their children, while others favored it. One couple who were members of the church disagreed on this. The man, who favored the Amish' request, gave an Amish family a bunch of apples. Soon, they came back, bringing a hot apple pie for the wife, who had been opposed. That

family eventually became very supportive of the Amish presence in the community. They also showed their capacity for forgiveness when, in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, a neighbor shot several Amish schoolgirls in their school. He later took his own life. The Amish community attended his funeral and gave support to his widow. In Arpin, I gave them credit for helping the Presbyterians to get over their own squabbles.

May we all listen carefully for the call of God, to discern God's will for us, and to know that God is with us in both suffering and joy.