

Sermon Meeting God in Service February 17, 2008 Rev. Thomas L. Hall, Sr. Interim Pastor, Shadow Rock United Church of Christ, Phoenix, AZ Scriptures Exodus 3: 1-15 Call of Moses

All of us inquire at some time or another how to meet God, and how does God meet us. Last week, we learned that we meet God and God meets us in nature, in ordinary events, in prayer and in scripture. Today we address the way we meet God in compassion, and next week we'll consider meeting God in community.

The scripture we have today lend themselves to identity. Moses turns aside to view a burning bush. From that encounter, God's identity is shared. The identity is that of a compassionate God who looks upon the community of Hebrews with compassion and justice. God will act. God does act. God is acting. We learn from this event that God is not some distant entity in the sky, but dwells here. God sees the misery, the suffering and God will deliver.

But note it isn't God who does this by some magical wave of a wand, for this is most important: God calls Moses to be God's advocate, God's representative, God's spokesperson. Listen again, "The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites out of Egypt."

The rest of the story is similar to what most of us often do: Moses makes excuses, oh I'm not important, or it's too much, or I'm not ready, or "let me go and do something else, like bury my brother, or my head in the sand" or I can't speak, I'm not eloquent, or I just want to sit here and be peaceful and think warm, nice things about you, God, and live my life."

God meets Moses. Moses meets God. And this God is a God of service! God wants us to be people of service, to be evangelical, to hear the cries of the people, to see the oppressed, and to act accordingly.

There are important actions on Moses part and on our part to understand meeting God in service. We might call them the "three L's." The following three points are appropriate to Shadow Rock.

The first is to LOOK.

This is most important. There are so many activities and events that lend themselves as opportunities to serve others that it can be difficult. It is necessary to become focused. Jesus was! He came when the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he was sent to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. Jesus saw the sufferings of people but he also became involved with them. He healed and brought new life to them.

The second is to LISTEN.

We meet God in service when we learn to listen. This means that we are to seek less of our own needs and desires so that we can become open. Henri Nouwen wrote "real training for service asks for a hard and often painful process of self-emptying. The Main problem of SERVICE is to be the way with out being "in the way."

Learning to become open to others teaches us many things. It cultivates an attitude of honesty. We see ourselves as well as others, more clearly. We are able to open ourselves to God, to let God have those parts of us that are wounded and in need of healing and forgiveness.

The third is to LOVE, love in the most radical, sacrificial kind. You and I are so captured by our own special interest and self-absorption. We think we are the cat's "meow." However, when we follow Jesus, when we become disciples, normal priorities get turned upside down. We encounter what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls "The cost of discipleship."

As I understand this scripture, as I wrestle with my faith and the role of the church in society today, as I discern God's call on me, and on the church, it is precisely the role of God in making decisions that people begin to separate. The words are: "God is personal, but never private."

God was saying to Moses, Jesus is saying his disciples, and to the church "Your relationship to me may be personal, but it is not private." Your words, your attitudes, your actions are not private. They will affect many."

When we consider Jesus' work, it was always with the poor, the needy, the unwanted, the discriminated, and the downtrodden. Jesus was an activist, having a personal relationship with God, **BUT IT WAS NOT PRIVATE.**

The church might well remember that. I hold very strongly the image of a God of love. The church has focused in many ways on the personal love. It ends there with many. But not with God.

God transforms our self interest, whether it be political, economic, social, religious, racial, sexual, family, communal, to a new awareness of our interdependence. We look and listen for ways that we need each other in order to grow in faithfulness and obedience. We find a new identity by centering our lives in the One who Created Us, Who Loves Us and Who Sustains Us. We read and hear the familiar "ode to Love" in I Corinthians 13.

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (I Cor. 13: 4-7)

The phrase "love does not insist on its own way" is most particular. Michael Gorman in his book *Cruciformity, Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Page 158) writes: "Love is not to seek its own advantage or edification. Instead it seeks the good, the advantage, and the edification of others. It is characterized by regard for them. Love... is the dynamic, creative, endeavor of finding ways to pursue the welfare of others rather than one's own interest. It is not self-centered but others-oriented. This means that love is self-giving for the good of others. God's love was not for God but for us. It was not centered on God, but centered on God's creation."

Love does not seek its own, but instead seeks others. This takes us right into the very heart of God. The understanding of God's nature and ways has led to the realization that God is constantly giving for all people. This is what Moses would experience. This is what Jesus came to share, not just to a select few.

If we say scripture tells us that God wants us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and soul, and our neighbor as ourselves, then the question becomes: How do you see that taking shape among us, here, in this place? What does it look like? What kind of church are we truly being called to become, and taking shape right now. What kind of church have we been? What do people outside of the church say about Shadow Rock? And most important: what kind of

church, what actions will identify Shadow Rock? When scripture tells us that God desires us to walk humbly with God, what does that mean, right here, for us?

Shadow Rock's symbol of the Wedge blade is important: it can be cutting. It can hurt, it can be comforting. Being on the cutting edge is dangerous. One can be put to death for doing so. Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and I'm sure you can name numerous others who have been on the cutting edge and who have given their lives. This last Friday, people gathered to remember the life of Congressman Tom Lantos, who was the only Holocaust Survivor to serve in Congress. He strove for human rights, he was a diplomat, but he wasn't misunderstood. People from around the world came to celebrate his life and his work. He was on the cutting edge.

I have not been with you long enough to know all of the things that point to your being out on the point. I have discerned some that I would include such as the pre-school philosophy, being Open and Affirming, after school program, mission trips. Probably the most important though, is the radical inclusion and acceptance of all people, the deep understanding that we treat each other with respect, dignity and the awareness that we are all God's children, whether we all recognize it or not.

This past week, Bill and I had the opportunity to meet and greet a homeless person who was here at the church, early in the morning. We woke him, spoke with respect and dignity, inquiring if we could assist him in any way. We offered coffee and gave him a ride to a destination of his choice. This is in a small way, what is meant by the acceptance of all.

But accompanying this radical inclusion is that of humility. It is being compassionate, working for justice, thinking not more highly of yourself, seeing God in each person, "Namaste" and lifting up that Spirit.

I like the story told of Mohammad, blessed be his name, when he was teaching long into the day and evening. Many people had gathered. Mohammad, blessed be his name, wearing a most expensive robe, didn't want to disappoint the people. A cat came and sat on the most luxurious robe and proceeded to fall asleep. When it was time to leave, the prophet took a knife, cut his expensive robe so as not to disturb the cat. That is compassion.

What would we be willing to cut to show our compassion, peace, justice, love for all of God's people, here at Shadow Rock? What traditions, attitudes, opinions, prejudices, need for control, do we carry from our past that we need to let go so that God can transform us, for God is still speaking?

God invites us to a ministry to love the world as God loves the world. Meeting God in service is opening us up for ministry for the love of God.

We become Evangelical in our compassion, in our all inclusive love. Amen.