

“So Far as It Depends on You”
Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-26; Exodus 3:1-15

Exodus 3:1-15

¹Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

³Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.”

⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.”

⁵Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶He said further, “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 observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from 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 country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

⁹“The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

¹¹But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

¹²And God said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

¹³But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

¹⁴God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”

He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” ¹⁵God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’:

“This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.”

Matthew 16:21-26

²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

²³But he turned and said to Peter, “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.”

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for

my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?"

Romans 12:9-21

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹

⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

²⁰No, "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." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The Sermon

In 2010, a British professional adventure traveler named Jim McNeill called off an expedition that had been painstakingly planned for the distant, Arctic north.

The goal had been a place called, not the North Pole, but the Northern Pole of Inaccessibility, which is, practically by definition, the hardest point for any human being to reach in the Arctic. No human being has ever been there.

To visit the place on foot would require crossing more than 800 miles—imagine walking from here to Kansas or Oklahoma, but instead of mountains, fields and prairies, the entire journey would be on dangerous pack ice, the floating surface that substitutes for land in the Arctic—and no support stations or rest stops on the way. And the pack ice regularly breaks up, leaving large areas of treacherous, open water.ⁱ

McNeill has coined a term for the people who do what he does: “ice warriors.”ⁱⁱ The plan had been for Jim to set out on foot for the Arctic Pole of Inaccessibility with, at various points, a total of 28 other ice warriors, who would accompany him on specific segments of the journey.

But shortly before departure in 2010, even seasoned, knowledgeable and well-trained veterans of adventure and exploration recognized that conditions on the ice were too “dangerous and unstable” for the expedition, and McNeill had to report the disappointing news that, in his words, “The risks of early failure, of cold injury and of needing to be rescued [were] too high to justify setting out.”ⁱⁱⁱ

At the time, they were talking about trying again in 2011. Whether that attempt was made, I don’t know, but I do know two things: one, humankind has yet to reach the Northern Pole of Inaccessibility; and two, McNeill and his crew have another attempt scheduled for this February.^{iv}

There are other poles of inaccessibility around the world. There is a Southern Pole of Inaccessibility in Antarctica, and there are poles of inaccessibility on each of the other continents as well: the places that are furthest inland from every direction, places where you have to travel laboriously, through long, hard, inhospitable conditions, to make your way there.

I wonder where that human urge comes from,

to reach for that which is most remote—
 that we long to see and know that which is furthest from us,
 if only just to know that we have somehow overcome
 the vast and treacherous distance that lies between.

Annie Dillard is a Pulitzer prize-winning writer who throughout a long and thoughtful career has gone in and out of Church membership, and now says she has “quit” the Catholic Church but “stays near” Christianity.^v She has written that the Absolute—whom you and I call God—is also a Pole of Relative Inaccessibility.^{vi}

Of course, Absolute is a term that means different things in different disciplines. Depending on who’s talking, the Absolute is the most real thing in the universe; or it is existence itself, or ultimate reality itself; or it’s the laws that govern the universe; or it’s the One who encompasses everything that is, and knows all of it intimately.

That is the Absolute whom you and I call God:
 the God in whose awesome presence
 we take off our sandals, and we look away
 lest we be overwhelmed by the light;

the God who has called us to a life of holiness,
 in a covenant relationship
 in which God promises to be our God
 and we are covenanted to be God’s people.

Annie Dillard says that God, the Absolute, is the metaphysical Pole of Relative Inaccessibility.

“After all,” she says, “one of the few things we know about the Absolute is that it is relatively inaccessible. It is that point of spirit farthest from every accessible point of spirit in all directions. Like the others, it is a

Pole of the Most Trouble. It is also [she says] the pole of great price...^{vii}

Jesus had begun to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem
and undergo great suffering
at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes,
and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

And Peter—loyal, impetuous, wonderful Peter, everybody’s protective big brother—took Jesus aside and said, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

And Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Tempter! You’re a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

We have a mission, a goal, a call; our lives are now given not to everyday survival but to eternal holiness.

Tom Long has said that in John’s gospel, the kingdom of heaven already exists, but suspended above this world, like a canopy. But in Matthew’s gospel, the kingdom of heaven is a future that’s on the way.^{viii}

Peter, don’t be a stumbling block:

we have a journey to make, and we are on it,
and I will complete my journey to Jerusalem,
to the cross,
to breach that final distance,
and we will reach the Point of Relative Inaccessibility.

But you have to think in terms of heavenly things, divine things,
and get out of the rut where you can only think of human things.

God calls us to a life of holiness,
in a covenant relationship wherein God promises to be our God

and we covenant to be God's people.

Jesus has taught us to set our minds on divine things.

And Paul, the Apostle, writing to the Church in Rome,
 spells out what that ought to look like
 in the way that a Christ-follower lives in the world
 in relation to others.

It's a long and treacherous journey in this world.
 There is a market right now for pushing people's buttons
 to get us all riled up and keep us that way—
 Cable (so-called) "news channels" are getting
 absolutely fat on that right now—
 And yet, simultaneously, there are constant attempts
 to muffle our cries for justice,
 to mock, shame and humiliate our calls for peace,
 to drown out with bellicose volume
 the pleas of the meek
 for understanding, mercy, and forbearance.

It's a long journey, and icy cold, and the goal seems always distant.

*Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
 love one another with mutual affection;
 outdo one another in showing honor.*

Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

*Contribute to the needs of the saints;
 extend hospitality to strangers.
 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.*

Our relationships with the people around us are delicate, and they're crucial.

Sometimes it feels like the real inaccessibility is the epic distance between us.

That challenging terrain between people who don't know or understand each other—sometimes uncharted—is exactly the journey that God invites and equips and trains us to attempt.

And we probably need the training. Sometimes we push people away so strongly that we *turn* them into poles of inaccessibility, pushing them away like ice floes and then wondering why they don't allow us access any more.

Years ago, the comedian Richard Lewis was talking about the agonized love letters that get sent back and forth during a break-up: "I can't stand you; get away from me; I hate you; I never want to see you again. P.S.: My door is always open."

Discipleship calls for a radical love that becomes its own blessing,
 in both the thrill of discovering what it means
 to be a mature human being in God's image,
 and the mutual rewards
 of compassion, empathy, acceptance and forgiveness.

*Rejoice with those who rejoice,
 weep with those who weep.*

*Live in harmony with one another;
 do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;
 do not claim to be wiser than you are.*

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil,
 but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.*

*If it is possible,
so far as it depends on you,
live peaceably with all.*

You and I have been chosen by the God who created and rules the universe. We don't have to know why—Moses was never told why—but God has called you from some burning bush, somewhere along the line.

There is every Biblical indication that if we look and listen closely, we will find that our covenanted God, the Absolute, is not a pole of relative inaccessibility, but is right here, *has* been here, *will* be here.

This is not *our*, isolated world, from which we can only send out faith signals to a distant God, hoping one day, at some time in the future, to be rescued from our castaway island.

It's God's world, into which God has graciously brought us.

Your life and my life are God's lives, not our own,
and God calls them precious, and calls us good and beautiful.

And we are put here for a reason,
and it is God's reason,
and whatever it is, it is good, and true, and right,
and our lives are meant to be life-giving and life-affirming.

*Beloved, never avenge yourselves,
but leave room for the wrath of God;
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..."*

*Do not be overcome by evil,
but overcome evil with good.*

God has called us to a life of holiness,
in a covenant relationship wherein God promises to be our God
and we covenant to be God's people.

Jesus has taught us to set our minds on divine things.

And the Word of God spells out what that ought to look like
in the way that a Christ-follower lives in the world
in relation to others.

I don't know what's ahead on this journey.

But if Jesus wants my life to be a blessing
not only for me but for the people around me,
so abundant with graciousness, kindness and generosity,
I'll take up my cross and follow him anywhere.

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
September 3, 2017

ⁱ Kraig Becker, "Expedition to the Pole of Inaccessibility is Postponed"
(<http://theadventureblog.blogspot.com/2010/02/north-pole-2010-expedition-to-pole-of.html>,
Wednesday, February 10, 2010; retrieved September 1, 2017).

ⁱⁱ <http://www.ice-warrior.com/>

ⁱⁱⁱ In Becker, "Expedition to the Pole of Inaccessibility is Postponed."

^{iv} <https://spark.adobe.com/page/q0tJq/>

^v "For the Time Being" (book description) from Annie Dillard's website:
<http://www.anniedillard.com/books-annie-dillard.html>, retrieved September 2, 2017.

^{vi} Annie Dillard, "An Expedition to the Pole," in *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (HarperCollins, 2007), 31. Kindle Edition.

^{vii} Dillard, "Expedition," 31.

^{viii} Tom Long, sermon, Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, July 2009.