

**Holy Life on Holy Ground**  
**Matthew 16:21-28; Exodus 3:1–15; Romans 12:9-21**

**Exodus 3:1-15**

<sup>3:1</sup>Moses 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.

<sup>2</sup>There 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.

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

<sup>4</sup>When 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.”

<sup>5</sup>Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

<sup>6</sup>He 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.

<sup>7</sup>Then 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, <sup>8</sup>and 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.

<sup>9</sup>The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.

<sup>10</sup>So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

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

<sup>12</sup>And the LORD 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.”

<sup>13</sup>But 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?”

<sup>14</sup>God said to Moses, (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה)—“I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

<sup>15</sup>God 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 16:21-25**

<sup>21b</sup>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.

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

<sup>23</sup>But 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.”

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

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

<sup>9</sup>Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup>love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup>Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup>Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. <sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

<sup>19</sup>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.”

<sup>20</sup>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.” <sup>21</sup>Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

### The Sermon

Is God waiting for your attention? Or, have you already turned to see?

The poet Mary Oliver, who died last year in her mid-80s, wrote a poem in which, imagining the perspective of looking back on her life at its completion, she talked about how she hoped to live it in the meantime.

With your indulgence, I would like to take the second half of that poem and offer it up to God as a prayer.

O God,

“I think of each life as a flower, as common  
as a field daisy, and as singular,  
and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,  
tending, as all music does, toward silence,  
and each body a lion of courage, and something  
precious to the earth.

“When it’s over, I want to say all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

“When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.  
I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.

“I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.”<sup>i</sup>

Amen.

On August 24th—this past Monday—a Greek family including a 3-year-old girl were vacationing at the beach.<sup>ii</sup> Among the beach toys they brought with them was one called a “floaty”—in this case, an inflatable unicorn with wings. It was big enough that a 3-year-old could sit on it like they’re riding a horse; the wings are like a saddle that keeps the kid in place while she holds onto the unicorn’s neck, which when she is riding the unicorn is taller than she is. For a toddler, it’s kind of like being in an inflatable life raft.

She did what a 3-year-old does and climbed onto the floaty, and instantaneously, to the horror of everyone on the beach, before the parents could react, suddenly she was being carried far out to sea.

The Dad immediately tried to swim after her, but no effort could match the wind and the aerodynamics moving the floaty. A bunch of other beachgoers tried; some gallantly jumped into a rowboat and rowed with all their might, but the ocean held them back.

Eventually the authorities located a ferry boat which was the closest boat in the area; they contacted the ferry captain, who moved immediately to find that poor little girl, clinging for dear life to the neck of an inflatable unicorn. It didn't take too long, and when the crew saw how small she was, they were shocked. It had been almost 20 minutes, and she was hundreds of yards out to sea.

If not handled correctly, the ferry could easily have capsized the floaty just by coming anywhere near it. With pinpoint precision, the captain was able to position a boat large enough to carry 300 cars and 500 passengers right up to where the girl was floating, gently lowered the ramp by which cars enter and exit the ferry, and had half a dozen people standing there, ready in one motion to grab that little girl and bring her to safety. It was the ship's mechanic, the captain's brother, who got close enough to grab the girl, and one second later, it was done: she was in shock, but safely on deck.

Naturally, social media immediately filled up with messages condemning the parents for a dozen different lapses both intellectual and ethical, because when the opportunity arises, why give thanks to God and issue praise where it belongs, when instead we can all just curse each other while hiding behind screens and screen names?

This is a hard world to sail into in such complete innocence. No wonder Jesus had earlier said to the disciples, "See, I am sending you out like

sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”<sup>iii</sup>

Sometimes it feels like we Christians are sent out there with our ten commandments about loving God and each other, and our gospel teachings about loving our neighbor as ourselves,

and we’re like that old fisher’s prayer from Brittany, “O God, watch over us; your ocean is so vast, and our boat is so small.”<sup>iv</sup>

After the youthful idealism of the late 60’s had given way to the Me Generation of the 1970s, and all that hippie-dippy stuff had long since been subject to ridicule, a songwriter named Nick Lowe wrote a mature pop song in 1974 with a refreshingly un-ironic title: “What’s So Funny about Peace, Love and Understanding?”

Called and sent by God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we try to follow Jesus into the world, equipped to bring, to all of our encounters, peace, love and understanding—but not equipped with much more than that.

And it’s easy to wonder what Moses must have felt like when God said, “I’m sending you to Pharaoh,” and Moses said, “Who am I to go to Pharaoh?” and God said, “I will be with you.”

So, we pack up our gear and take the message out into the world, trying to imagine ourselves as that masterful captain of the ferry boat, with skills and experience and power over large machinery at our hands,

but in retrospect we usually realize it was more like we were climbing onto our blow-up unicorns and getting swept out to sea, at the mercy of winds and riptides and a world of people drowning in their own cynicism and hatred and fear, more primed for a fight than they are willing to be touched by heartbreaking beauty and precious innocence and absolute vulnerability.

Anne Lamott said in *Traveling Mercies*,

“I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had some kind of inner toolbox, full of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience.

“But then when I grew up I found that life handed you these rusty, bent old tools – friendships, prayer, conscience, honesty—and said, Do the best you can with these, they will have to do. And mostly,” she wrote, “against all odds they’re enough.”<sup>v</sup>

When the angel of God appeared to Moses in a flame of fire coming out of a bush that was not being consumed, God waited to make an introduction until Moses had turned to look. When Moses noticed something unusual, he had to decide whether to stop and look, or ignore it and go on about his business.

Is God waiting for your attention? Or, have you already turned to see?

Or, are you afraid to look at God—especially if it’s “fear” as it’s used in the Old Testament, meaning a faithful disposition toward God: to honor; to know the awe of being vastly out of one’s depth; to feel the feeling of absolute dependence?<sup>vi</sup>

When Moses did turn to see for himself, God spoke. And the self-revelation of God was not for its own sake—check me out, I’m God, isn’t that great, Moses?—but God comes and speaks with a purpose in human history: to announce and initiate the freeing of God’s oppressed people.

God has *heard* the cries, and has directly *seen* the suffering of God’s people, “and indeed I *know* their sufferings,” says the LORD.

And now God is calling someone, by name, to be God's agent in the world and in the long, ever-unfolding story of saving lives, saving hope, saving lost and wandering souls, saving the whole cosmos.

Take off your shoes, Moses. The ground you are on is holy.

Jesus tells his followers that discipleship is going to involve a certain amount of self-denial; that you *can* take up your own cross and follow wherever he leads you.

Peter had just said the right thing—that Jesus is the messiah, the Son of the living God—and Jesus had immediately called him the rock upon which Christ would build his Church, and the gates of Hell would not prevail against it.

Five verses later, Peter says the wrong thing—that suffering and death at the hands of the authorities in Jerusalem must never happen to Jesus—and Jesus calls him not the mighty foundation stone of the Church but a stumbling block to Christ.

How did Peter the Rock go, in the space of less than a paragraph, from a mighty fortress to a pain in the, uh, foot?

“You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Then Jesus tells Peter and all the disciples—and through them, all who follow Jesus—that if you really plan to follow the messiah and be the Church that even the gates of hell will not withstand, know that there will be a cost in terms of human things.

You will give up, or have taken from you, some things that humans like to cling to, things we think we are holding onto for dear life—our pride, our money, our egos, our need to be correct about everything. But the very act of our clinging to those things is preventing us from, as I Timothy 6:9 says, “the life that really is life.”



Paul practically begs the church in Rome to hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor; and not to be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

What's so funny about peace, love and understanding?

The way Christians talk and act is, always, not just a personal but a theological matter.

The way you and I act in the world, from our loftiest achievements down to the way we talk to (or about) one another—especially people who are not like us, and with whom we are not at peace; about whom we all but cross our fingers when we say we love them, or love them only in the abstract; and whom we definitely do not understand, even or maybe especially if we assume we do understand them, but only through the lens of how we understand ourselves—

the way we act and speak and even think about those people is a theological matter, not just a personal one and certainly not just a matter of opinion.

Christians in Rome, said Paul, hold on: you may be persecuted, you may be slandered, you may feel like you wish you could just lash out at somebody or everybody.

And yes, there will be times you need to call out abuse and lies and injustice and fear-based hate-mongering.

But you will not tackle evil with more evil. You will overcome and transform it with good.

Christians know that faith is not a final destination at which you arrive; it's the beginning of a long journey, a journey that may be intimidating

at the outset, but which is beyond all measure of beauty—because we are walking on holy ground.

And on holy ground, there are no shortcuts.

A few weeks ago, a billionaire died at 97. According to the obituary in the Wall Street Journal, he was a “health nut” who at one point was working on a book he wanted to title, “How to Live Forever.”

The obituary noted that he was “mercurial... famously hot tempered in both his business and family dealings. Known to his own grandchildren as ‘Grumpy,’ over the years he sparred with and dismissed several top executives, feuded with nearly all of his closest family members and was so hard on wait staff that he was barred from some restaurants.”<sup>vii</sup>

One reader who sent in a comment said, “To fight with your competitors is tough combat. To belittle and abuse those who are of lower social or economic rank is just mean bullying.”<sup>viii</sup>

Another reader noted the irony that despite a long lifetime of spectacular achievement, if his behavior was as it was being reported, in the end, he was “a failure.”<sup>ix</sup>

Another said that the way a rich, powerful person treats waitstaff is one of the best judges of character there is.<sup>x</sup>

Another reader pointed out the following, which was not mentioned in the article: A commitment of \$105 million to fund research in cancer and burn recovery... \$1.5 million to the Global Poverty Project... Millions to the Cambodian Children’s Fund... \$1.5 million for research into causes and effective treatments of Autism... \$24 million for cancer research... \$350,000 to fund projects in 21 countries with a focus on helping orphans and other needy children... \$1 million to a New York City-based nonprofit literacy organization... \$10 million to Harvard Law School for public-interest fellowships.<sup>xi</sup>

None of which was required; all of which was a tax write-off; all of which is money those organizations would not otherwise have had; none of which came anywhere near costing him anything he would ever have missed. Good guy? Bad guy? Who's to say?

We are, all of us, messy and complicated; we are all altruistic and egomaniacal; we are all usually well-behaved and sometimes, interpersonally, absolute catastrophes.

The way Christians act—the way you and I act in the world, from our loftiest achievements down to the way we talk to and about one another—is a theological matter.

What we do with our money, our time, our passion, our energy, our freedoms, our privileges, our votes—these are not just private matters, but a public witness of what we believe about God.

Is God waiting for your attention, or have you already turned to see?

“When it’s over, I want to say all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

“When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.  
I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.

“I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.”<sup>xii</sup>

I hope I will always take the time to turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush from which God calls someone by name is not burned up.

And I hope there will always be many, many others who show me and teach me and inspire me to set my mind on divine things so that I might take a better approach to human things.

And I hope one day all of humankind will learn to remove the sandals from our feet, recognizing, finally, that the place on which we are standing—side by side—is holy ground.

Keith Grogg  
 Montreat Presbyterian Church  
 Montreat, NC  
 August 30, 2020

---

<sup>i</sup> Mary Oliver, “When Death Comes,” in *Oliver, Devotions* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 286

<sup>ii</sup> The information behind this narrative comes from Iliana Magra, “3-Year-Old Clinging to Unicorn Float Is Rescued From Sea in Greece” (New York Times, Aug. 28, 2020 Updated 11:11 a.m. ET, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/28/world/europe/greece-girl-unicorn-rescue.html?searchResultPosition=2>)

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 10:16 (NRSV)

<sup>iv</sup> There are many variants of this prayer.

<sup>v</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 103

<sup>vi</sup> The “feeling of absolute dependence” is a term of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)

<sup>vii</sup> Keach Hagey and Amol Sharma, “Sumner Redstone Dies at 97; Media Mogul Who Said ‘Content Is King’” (Wall Street Journal, updated Aug. 12, 2020 6:10 pm ET (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/sumner-redstone-media-mogul-dies-11597234760?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=2>))

<sup>viii</sup> A WSJ reader identified as Lawrence cerf [sic.]

<sup>ix</sup> A WSJ reader identified as STan Merrill [sic.]

<sup>x</sup> A WSJ reader identified as Louie Perkins

<sup>xi</sup> A WSJ reader identified as Scott Rappoport

<sup>xii</sup> Oliver, “When Death Comes,” 286