



Lent 3 (C)

Aglow

[RCL] Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

The enslaved Israelites suffered under the Egyptians' hands. Those Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with sacrifices certainly suffered. Those who were killed by the tower of Siloam suffered a brutal tragedy. Humanity suffers.

That suffering is common – an inextricable part of our human experience – does not make it any easier to bear.

In times of acute suffering, it's as if the whole world shrinks to the parameters of oneself. It's difficult to see the long history of suffering or understand that you're in solidarity with many who went before. The expanse of humanity collapses down to the individual. The similar experiences of others are only abstractly and vaguely comforting when your own heart has been broken to pieces or if your own cells are mutating. In those agonizing seasons, it can feel like you are the only one who has ever gone through this kind of pain, this kind of tragedy, this kind of hopelessness. Suffering isolates the sufferer into their own vortex, their singular reality, their own umbrella of struggle. Words to describe our suffering fall short, inevitably making cliché that which is deeply personal. All these factors can compound to make a very lonely journey.

The specific kind of suffering we've endured differs across bodies and space and time and seasons of life. And our insufferable experiences vary vastly. From the enslaved Israelites to the Galileans to those killed by the tower in Siloam to the Antebellum South to those threatened by wildfires to parents who have lost children to those who endure chronic pain to climate refugees to being made a widow to almost dying during childbirth – suffering is a word that points to a host of experiences and realities and difficulties. There are so many shades and hues to this human predicament. And when you step back, looking at the large swath of human history, all the suffering is pure terror.

And at various points along the way, most of us ask: Why? Why me? Why is this my particular story? Why has this happened? It's a question without many answers, but it is still an important question. It reveals the human search to find and make meaning in and through and despite the pain. It reveals our helplessness and our frustration. It underscores the anger and fear that we all face during these riven moments of life.

It is a holy question. It is a question that walks us toward Good Friday. It is a question that is an echo of our Lord's question on the cross: "My God, my God, *why* have you forsaken me?"

Though it can feel like we are alone, in fact, we are far from it. Jesus has always been and always will be with us in our moments of suffering. And if Jesus is with us, the whole Trinity is with us.

In fact, over the course of human history, God has shown up over and over again for us. And in our Old Testament reading from Exodus, we find one such example. The miracle of the burning bush can overshadow the reason for the burning bush. We get so caught up in the astonishment of God appearing to us in the mystical form of a burning bush, that we might have lost track of the content of the revelation. After basic introductions and pleasantries, God says to Moses:

"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, 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. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them."

God takes notice of the Israelites' plight. God sees their misery. God knows their sufferings. God is a witness to their oppression. God becomes a burning bush so that this message, this word of hope is conveyed.

It is worth pausing here. It is worth marinating in the truth that our God sees us, knows us, and has *come down* to deliver us. That this is revealed along with the holy name of God, "I am who I am," is no coincidence. We already know much about the nature of humanity; here, we learn so much about the nature and identity of our God. God is who God is – beyond our comprehension, transcending our world. And yet God takes note of us and has taken every means possible, including the avenue of becoming human himself, to deliver us from our oppression. A God who cannot, will not, and does not stay far away.

It will not make sense only to be told that God is with you and for you and sees you and knows you and understands your suffering and will never abandon you. One cannot be told this and be theoretically assured. One must experience this reality in her soul, in her body, throughout her entire life.

And tracking down God is no small thing, as we all know the rarity of an actual burning bush. But there are more subtle burning bushes everywhere. And God always seems to be trying to get ahold of us. Little fires alight with God's presence, glowing with the radiance of the Spirit's nearness. Messages of hope and strength and solidarity abound.

Where have the little fires been in your life? What messages from God do you cling to?

Have you felt the glowing embers of God's self in the hand of a friend who has flown or driven or traveled long and far to be with you during one of those deep and dark nights?

Did you sense God nudging you toward a nap on a rough day? Did someone whisper to you in a tough time: therapy and theology work together?

Have you seen God's glowing presence as the sun's rays cast a light on your living room floor and the night slowly became dawn?

Have you noticed how God somehow nudges your sister eight states away to call you at the right moment, when you are already on the brink of tears and you just need someone to listen to your sobs? Have you felt the subtle but holy warmth of that encounter?

Have you ever noticed that when the word is preached and the hymns are sung and the Eucharist is received and the room is warm with the body of Christ, there is a transcendent yet intimate heat under your ribs, right near your heart, animating every breath of your being?

God said to Moses and the Israelites: I am who I am. Meaning, "I am a God who sees you, knows you, loves you. And I can't help but be for you and with you." Our God walks with us through those valleys of death and lightens our way in the darkest of nights. Suffer what we may, God will be our companion. God will never leave nor forsake you. God, even in death, will wrap the Spirit of God around you, as he did with Christ in the depths of the tomb, and raise you up to light and life unending. Amen.

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