

Pentecost 12, Proper 17, Year A, 2014  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It's here again. Psalm one hundred five, the psalm that keeps on giving!  
Four times this year  
we are scheduled to read it,  
four times  
to reflect on what it means  
to give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name;  
to make known his deeds among the peoples.  
to search for the LORD and his strength;  
to continually seek his face.

You might think that by now, the third time through,  
we would have exhausted all that this psalm has to offer us.  
But each time we read it  
we see something different,  
not only because while we always read the first six verses,  
the second part of our reading has varied,  
chosen, it seems, to match up  
with our reading from the Old Testament.  
And so today's psalm  
finishes up the story of Joseph, filling the gap  
between the end of the book of Genesis  
and the beginning of the book of Exodus,  
bringing us to the story  
of the calling of Moses.

The story of Moses  
is one of the great stories  
of the bible.  
We began last week with the background;  
the Israelites living in the land of Egypt  
where they'd gone in the time of Joseph, hundred of years earlier,  
now a threat to the Egyptians  
and pressed into servitude.  
Then the decree that all baby boys should be killed,  
the midwives who saved countless babies,  
and the baby boy placed in a watertight basket  
and left by the river,

watched over by his sister  
until he was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter.

Time passed;  
Pharaoh's daughter hired Moses' mother as his wet-nurse,  
and then, when he was weaned,  
gave him a life of privilege, raised as a royal son.

Almost.

Because he was only  
a foster child,  
not quite belonging in the palace,  
nor in the modest home  
of his birth family.

And the fact he didn't belong  
was made all too clear to him  
when he defended an Israelite,  
the people he belonged to by birth,  
he defended him  
from an Egyptian, the  
people he belonged to by adoption,  
and ended up rejected by his birth people  
and in fear of his adoptive people.

He left the place where he didn't belong,  
and headed east into the desert.  
And married, and was welcomed into a new family,  
and made a new life,  
and finally felt he belonged.  
No longer a miraculously rescued baby,  
no longer a prince of Egypt,  
just a wandering herdsman,  
busy  
caring for his flock.

Until the day  
when he saw the bush.  
Dusty green, low growing,  
just enough shelter from the scorching sun  
for a sheep  
or a man crouched low.  
A blessing  
in this parched land,

a blessing  
until he saw  
the wisp  
of flame.

Fire .  
Essential warmth in the cold nights  
of the desert, but only if you ringed it with stone,  
containing it.  
Deadly  
if it escaped those stones  
and caught on the dry desert grass,  
no water nearby  
to put it out.

And the wisp of flame grew, until the whole bush was on fire.  
But there was no smoke in the air,  
there was  
no ash on his breath.  
Just the hot bright blaze.  
And then a voice.  
"Moses, Moses!"  
"Here I am" he said.  
"Do not come closer. Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on  
which you are standing  
is holy ground. I am," he said, "the God of your father, the God of  
Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."  
And Moses hid, afraid to look at God.

But God didn't seem to notice.  
"I've seen the misery of my people.  
I've come to rescue them, and bring them to the promised land.  
And you  
are the one  
who will do it.

"Me?" said Moses.  
"You've made a mistake.  
I don't belong. No one will listen.  
Not me."

"Yes, you,"  
said God.

And so the conversation continued,  
another twenty four verses  
of Moses' excuses  
and God's firm, patient  
insistence.  
God  
is calling Moses, calling him  
to do God's work.

So why has this psalm been chosen  
to go with this story?  
The obvious connection  
is the mention of Moses,  
but there are five other psalms  
that refer to Moses;  
you'd think that for the sake of variety at the vestry least,  
they would have chosen one of the others.

Perhaps  
it's because of the opening verses of the psalm,  
the story of Moses and the burning bush a reminder  
of one of the marvelous works  
of God.

But I think there's something more.  
This story  
is remarkably personal. In it,  
we get to know something  
of the feelings of Moses,  
whose leadership of the people out of Egypt, through the wilderness  
and to the brink of the promised land  
became foundational for the identity of the people of God.  
Moses didn't  
begin  
like that.  
He was a sheep herder.  
Someone of no  
great  
account.  
And yet God called him, God called him  
to do God's work.  
Moses protested

a lot,  
but in the end,  
when he finally ran out of excuses,  
he did what God  
asks of him.

Afraid, uncertain, not at all confident,  
Moses responded to God's call.  
And perhaps the verses of our psalm  
that speak the most of Moses  
the verses of our psalm  
that Moses himself might have spoken,  
are not the ones about the glory of God's works,  
but the simple advice  
of verse four.  
“Search for the LORD and his strength;  
continually seek his face.”

Remember how it was when Moses came down from Mount Sinai  
with the two stone tablets  
of the ten commandments in his hands?  
And found the people, dancing and celebrating and worshipping  
a calf made of gold.  
And he dropped the stone tablets  
and raged at the people  
and God raged,  
and Moses was ready  
to give up.  
But habit won  
and each day  
he would go into a tent  
pitched just outside  
the camp  
and there he would speak to God  
and God would speak  
to him,  
face  
to face.

“Search for the LORD and his strength;  
continually seek his face.”

That's Moses.

What about us?

One of the differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament is that the Old Testament, for the most part, tells the stories of a few very significant people who make all the difference to the people of God.

But in the New Testament it becomes clear that the work of God is not just done by a few specially chosen people. The work of God belongs to all of us.

God doesn't just choose one person like Moses to do his work. God chooses each and every one of us. All we who are followers of Jesus, who have in baptism turned to Christ, each and every one of us are called to do God's work, each and every one of us are given gifts to do that work.

That's what we heard in our reading from Romans last week, when the apostle Paul wrote, "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us;" its what the vestry reflected on at our summer retreat, from Paul's letter to the Ephesians chapter 4.

"...Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."

And those gifts we are given for Christ's sake include not only prophecy and preaching and evangelism and pastoring and teaching, but encouragement and generosity and giving and compassion and serving and mercy and wisdom and administration and hospitality and simply helping. God gives us these gifts to build up the church, and to build up God's kingdom here on earth.

You might think  
that God hasn't given you any gifts.  
You might think  
that you're just not the right person.  
You might think  
that it's not the right time.  
But God has heard it all.  
Abraham and Sarah  
thought they were too old.  
Jeremiah  
thought he was too young.  
Gideon  
thought he wasn't wealthy enough.  
Moses  
thought he couldn't speak well enough.

God's heard it all.  
But when God calls us, and God calls each and every one of us,  
there's no point in arguing with God,  
As Moses learned  
all too well.

But Moses learned something else. He learned how  
to call on God for help.  
He learned how to search for God,  
he learned how  
to draw on God's strength,  
he learned how to seek God's face.

And God was with him,  
and gave him the strength and the courage  
and the grace  
to use his gifts  
for God's  
glory.

God  
has so much goodness  
to offer us and our world.  
God has so much grace.  
God has so much blessing.  
But unless we are willing to use the gifts that God has given us  
that goodness,

that grace,  
that blessing  
will likely go unrealized.

And so I ask you, as we look towards this new program year,  
and next week, our annual ministry fair,

What gifts  
might God have given you?

How could God  
be using you?