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## The Third Sunday in Lent

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### Against the Rock of Christ's Faithful Presence, False Security Is Crushed.

How can we be sure that Jesus is with us? Some might decide that good times indicate Jesus is close by and bad times imply he is far away. As long as everything goes well, Jesus must be near. That kind of security leads us nowhere and gives us nothing on which to rely. Whether in good times or bad, whether living with success or disappointment, Jesus is always present with his abiding love and patient forgiveness. We put our trust in Jesus where genuine security is found.

#### Exodus 3:1-15

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup> There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. <sup>3</sup> So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."

<sup>4</sup> When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

<sup>5</sup> "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

<sup>6</sup> Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

<sup>7</sup> The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. <sup>8</sup> So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. <sup>9</sup> And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. <sup>10</sup> So now, go. I am sending 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 God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

<sup>13</sup> Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

<sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.' "

<sup>15</sup> God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.'

"This is my name forever,  
the name you shall call me  
from generation to generation.

#### If I Want to Know God, Where Do I Look?

Ari Goldman is an orthodox Jew who is four months older than I am; he'll turn 73 in September. He teaches at Columbia University in New York City right now, but back in the 1980s he was the religious news editor for the *New York Times*. Goldman had an idea to take a leave of absence from his newspaper to search out all the major religions of the world.

The editors approved, and he enrolled in the Harvard Divinity School. When his study was done, he wrote a book: *The Search for God at Harvard*. It became a best seller; you can still order it on Amazon and you can find book reviews all over the internet. Only one problem. He started his search as an orthodox Jew and that's where his search ended. He's still an orthodox Jew. And so Ari Goldman never did find God, not at Harvard, not anyplace.

Of course, Ari Goldman isn't alone. People have been searching for God almost since the beginning time. A few more clicks on the internet and you can find *12 Steps in Searching for God* and *Seven Steps in Searching for God*. From what I saw, none of the steps will work. I actually found a book entitled *Finding God at Harvard*, but the lady who wrote it, well, she didn't find God, either. It makes you want to laugh, but it's really pretty sad.

The orthodox Jews who lived during Jesus' ministry were pretty sure they had found God. The more laws they obeyed the closer God was. The more blessings they enjoyed the more God loved them. If they failed to obey the laws God was far away. If they suffered and especially if they died a horrible death, God was really far away. That's the point of view Jesus ran into in the Gospel for today. Some people came to Jesus with a story about some other people from Galilee who had been slaughtered by Pontius Pilate in the temple. Jesus knew what they were thinking: **Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than the other Galileans because they suffered this way?** Well, exactly; that's what they were thinking. Jesus mentioned another case: **Those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?** Yup; that's what they thought. You won't find God where tragedy strikes. When tragedy strikes and trouble comes on the scene, God is gone.

You heard how Jesus responded. **I tell you, no!** But I don't want to explain Jesus' quite yet. First I want to explore this idea that so many people have that we can search for God and find God in what we can see with our eyes. That's what Ari Goldman tried to do in his book and what the Jews of Jesus' day tried to do. Sometimes we bang our heads against the same idea. We see trouble in our lives and we guess God is punishing us—he's deserted us. We see blessings in our lives and we figure it's all good with God—he must be here. We look at something with our eyes or we sense something in our brains and we figure we have discovered where God is and where God isn't.

If you lived during the pinnacle era of the empire of Egypt, you would have had to assume that God was not in Egypt. At least God wasn't in Goshen. Goshen in Egypt was where God's chosen people were living. They had come to Egypt because there was a famine in the promised land and then they stuck around. They had lots of babies and made lots of money. The king of Egypt—he was called Pharaoh—got really nervous about this and turned them all into slaves. He had their boy babies slaughtered to keep them from fathering more baby boys and he forced them to build huge buildings (some are still standing today) to kill them off. The Bible tells us that **the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out**. No answer. Nobody could find God in Goshen.

One of those boy babies survived. His name was Moses. Long story short, Moses was adopted by one of the Pharaoh's daughters and grew up in a life of luxury. But he never forgot his roots. One day he killed an Egyptian who was beating a Jew and the next day the Jews laughed at him. So both the Egyptian and the Hebrews were out for him. Moses headed east to the land of Moab. He got married, had a son, and worked for his father-in-law for 40 years. The chosen people seemed pretty unchosen by this time. God was gone and Moses was gone, too. At least that's what your eyes and common sense told you.

That's what happens when our eyes and ears and brains and common sense go looking for God. When health is good, God seems close; when health is bad, God seems gone. When the economy is strong, when peace reigns, when the church grows, God must be there with his blessings. All good. But God seems far away when cancer strikes, or accidents injure or the church shrinks or stock markets crash. Where can God be when a tyrant sends his warplanes to kill babies and pregnant moms and obliterate cities? Nobody makes this stuff up. We see it with our eyes, we hear it with our ears, we feel it in bodies, we grieve over it in our hearts. Even Christians, even we, stop, look, and listen sometimes and wonder where God is. I want to know you, God, we say, but I'm not seeing you.

Listen: God was there in Goshen all along. The Bible says, **God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them**. It was time for God to act, so God went to Moab and found Moses. Moses was out in the wilderness one day tending his

father-in-law's sheep. **There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."** That was strange; he had never seen anything like that before. **When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"** Whoa! First the bush burns without burning and now the bush talks! **And Moses said**—and I doubt he said it with a whole lot of confidence—**"Here I am."** **"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.** A burning bush, a talking bush, and now a holy bush. But more: **Then he said, "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."** **At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.** No kidding! But what came next was the main point: **The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering.** God went into detail and then he said, **So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.**

As you might expect and as any of us could understand, Moses had big questions. This was the biggest: **Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they ask me, What is his name? Then what shall I tell them? God said to Moses, I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.**

In the middle of the wilderness, surrounded by sheep, in a place where he least expected it, from a place he would never have looked, in a bush that wouldn't stop burning, Moses found God. There was might and majesty and mystery here, but there was also love and compassion and grace. The God who came to Moses was the angel of the Lord, the Son of God before his birth. This angel of the Lord was the Anointed of the Lord whom the Lord chose to rescue the world from sin. This Anointed of the Lord would become the Servant of the Lord on whom the Lord would lay the iniquity of us all. This Servant of the Lord would become the resurrected Lord who would conquer death and give life to all who found him. I AM WHO I AM is Christ the Lord who is **the same yesterday, today, and forever.** No one can see God and live, so if we want to know God, we must find him in the voice and words of Jesus.

This is the same point Jesus was making in today's Gospel. Do you really think God is gone when there is tragedy and trouble? Do you really think God shows up only when there is health and wealth? God doesn't go away when believers experience problems and God isn't present when unbelievers are enjoying the good life. Don't trust your common sense, Jesus said. If you want to find God, Jesus said, look for the man who took care of that dying fig tree. When the owner was ready to destroy the tree because it wasn't bearing fruit, the caretaker was willing to dig it and dung it and bring it back to health. That's where we find God. God is in the love of Jesus, a love which is caring and compassionate, a love which is faithful and forgiving, a love which was there and then, is here and now, and will be forever. If we want to know God, we need to hear the voice of Jesus. God is in the gospel.

The angel of the Lord told Moses that he was standing on holy ground. Jesus told his hearers, **Unless you repent, you too will all perish.** The love of Jesus is not something we dare take lightly. We find it in places where we would never dream of looking: in an old book, in simple water, in bread and wine. Jesus comes to us in the gospel, in the good news of his forgiveness. He comes to us here in preaching and teaching, he comes to us in baptism and Holy communion, he comes to us in Bible reading and devotions at home. Don't look for God in what you see around you or what you sense inside you. **If I want to know God, where do I look?** Turn away from sin and believe the good news. You'll find God in the gospel. Amen.