

When I first suggested we use the Narrative Lectionary for the fall, I intended to use a new-ish worship resource. Had I looked closer, I might have had a better idea of what we were getting ourselves into. As we’ve progressed from week to week, I find that these stories, which we’ve been told many times, stories that we’ve been told since we were children, stories that we teach to our children in Sunday School, have become fraught with challenges, tough bits, difficult bits, and downright thorny bits.

As I reflected with Mary Anne this week, one of the gifts of the Narrative Lectionary is that we read and hear a lot of scripture on a given morning. I think this is good, I think we need to hear more scripture in our lives. The downside of this is that there is a lot of scripture to cover, most of the time too much. And there are a lot threads to be pulled on.

This week, we hear the story of Moses and the Burning Bush, and there are a lot of directions we could go. I want to tug on two different threads today.

On the cusp of the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, as well as being about a week or so out from the 2nd anniversary of the beginning of the current conflict in Gaza between Israel and Palestine, we could easily latch onto God's promise to the Israelites. This promise has been misused as a way of justifying the colonization of unseeded lands. I’m thinking particularly of the the Doctrine of Discovery and how it’s been used in the past, and the present, how the current atmosphere of Christian Nationalism, Christian Zionism and the Zionist movement are using this promise to annex territory in the name of God.

This promise has been distilled and used as a way to support God leading God’s people into their own land, irrespective of who was there first, by any means necessary.

In the case of the Doctrine of Discovery, the promise from the Church was that if you entered a place and there were no ‘Christians’ there before you, whatever that meant, you could then claim the land in the name of the church. It would be yours to own, yours to settle; yours to colonize. And in the last decade, we have become painfully aware of the destructive, traumatizing history the Church participated in that has left a wake of generational harm and trauma in the lives of our Indigenous Neighbours. Something we are coming to terms understanding as cultural genocide.

In the case of Christian Nationalism, Christian Zionism, and the Zionist movement, this promise is used in a much more explicit way. Simply saying, God gave us this land, it’s ours, we are taking it back, it was promised to us. This has been used not just by the State of Israel, but by it’s many supporters, to justify actions like annexation of lands, destruction of Palestinian homes, development and construction of illegal Israeli settlements, suspicious military incursions, secret arrests of adults and children in the middle of the night, illegal detainment, coerced confessions, abuse of prisoners, inhumane treatment of refugees, and the forced starvation of a whole people, something that South Africa argued was genocide.

So what are we to do with this? What are we to do with God’s promise? First, we need to separate the promise that is quoted by politicians and settlers, and revisit the promise that God shared with Moses and Abraham. We need to re-understand it, because how God understands this, I think, is different from how humankind understands this promise.

God's promise is very clear: I am going to free you from your enslavement to the Egyptians, and to take you from this place, and I am going to bring you to another place. And what is this place? It's a place of milk and honey, of richness and sweetness, a place of nourishment and decadence. We are going to leave the harassment of the Egyptians, and go to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites." (3:17)

That's it. At least at this point in the story, God doesn't talk about conquering, God doesn't talk about violence, or warfare. God doesn't talk about colonizing. God just says, 'I'm going to lead you there.'

Humans hear conquering, Humans hear colonizing, Humans hear taking over and taking for ourselves. I imagine that God might have had something else in mind.

If I remember God's promise to Abraham, it was that Abraham and his kin were going to bless and be a blessing. I fail to see how we can bless and be a blessing at the end of a sword. And so I wonder, if God wants God's people to bless and be a blessing, then I imagine that when God promises to take God's people to this new land, it's to bless and be a blessing...without a sword. Only...we've missed the mark, haven't we? God intended God's people to be a blessing to others. God's people, instead, understand that promise to mean that we get something by divine right? And I think there is a gap there. The church, historically, has struggled with this. God intends God's good story, the story of Jesus and his love, to be shared to free, liberate, and bless people; the church has used it to control, colonize, and coerce. I think for us to be able to hold God's promise of leading the Hebrew people to a new land, we must also hold onto the earlier promise of God's people blessing and being a blessing, and together these inform how we can hold this promise, while at the same time, repudiating how it's been used in the past and how it is being used presently.

But this isn't what I was really compelled to speak on today. I didn't want to spend all my time talking about God's promise and the 21st-century misreadings of God's promise. I wanted to talk about something else entirely.

The core of our scripture today, chapters 3 & 4 of Exodus, are focused on Moses' interaction with God in the burning bush. It's a lengthy conversation, 8 times Moses challenges God, "but what if..." he says over and over, and over and over, and 8 times God shifts plans, God, adapting to Moses' uncertainty, his lack of confidence, his reluctance to confront and challenge the powers that be. What strikes me in this story is how Moses, like Abraham before him, has this real, present encounter with the living God.

A few weeks ago, as I was meeting a colleague of mine, they commented that "everybody wants an encounter and an experience of God," And I think they're correct. Possibly one of the biggest envies I carry is that people in the Old Testament have these apparent, very obvious encounters with God and the Divine. I would love that. And I suspect I'm not the only one.

Wouldn't we each love to have an encounter with God, the way Moses did? An encounter where we can ask questions of God, where we can challenge God, where we can ask the many 'whys' we carry with us? I feel that Moses is fortunate in that from this burning bush moment on, God is nearer and present to Moses in a way that we don't often get to see in other places in scripture.

Admittedly, we do live in a different time than those in our scriptures did. It feels, sometimes, that the divine is further away, or maybe even it feels like the divine has gone on holiday. Maybe it's just that our skepticism, or cynicism, has shuttered the windows through which we

have usually looked for the divine in the past. As author Richard Beck in his novel *"Hunting Magic Eels: Recovering an Enchanted Faith in a Skeptical Age"* writes, "We don't expect to bump into God around the water cooler or doing the dishes. We might *believe* in God, but we don't expect to *encounter* God."¹

At the time of its writing, the early books of the bible, the Hebrew Torah, had a different worldview than we do today. For them, the divine was around and present. Quoting Orthodox priest, Stephen Freeman, Beck writes:

"Christians [today] live like atheists...because we think we're living in a two-story universe. In this two-story universe, the cosmos is a house with two floors....'We live here on earth, the first floor, where things are simply things and everything operates according to normal, natural laws, while God lives in heaven, upstairs, and is largely removed from the story in which we live. To effect anything here, God must interrupt the laws of nature and perform a miracle.' For us to see or hear from God, God has to come downstairs to visit us...What we need to recover,..., is a one-story vision of the universe...In a one-story view of the universe, God and humanity are all living on the same floor. We're roommates with God and expect to see each other all the time."²

And I wonder, how might we reclaim this posture of *expecting* God? How might we reclaim the idea that we might bump into God in any moment?

I had a friend out west who, while we were planning worship one week, simply asked, "Are we expecting God in our worship this week?" Which was a fantastic framing for what we were trying to do. In each and every worship service, do we come with an attitude or posture which is expecting God to 'show up'? I think this is a key shift for us as a church. Worship is first and foremost, at least for me, for God. We come to worship God, and so it makes good sense to me that when we gather to worship, we do so, *expecting* our guest of honour to be here, don't we? I think to notice our roommate, God, with us, like the way Moses did, starts with us *expecting* God to be present with us in our worship, and then, we can begin to expect God to be with us all the time. Like I've said before, what we do here is practice life. We practice *expecting* to meet God here, so that we can *expect* to meet God out there.

When we expect to meet God, we're more likely to encounter God, if only because we're looking for God. Sometimes it's a matter of, as the German phrase goes, "Tomaten auf den Augen haben," as we joke in our house, removing the tomatoes from our eyes. We likely won't notice what we don't want to notice. And sometimes it's a matter of shifting our attitude or posture.

And perhaps this is where we circle back to where we started with God's promises. Throughout the Old Testament, we have God making promises, covenants with God's people. And they carried this expectation that God would follow through and keep those promises. And God did fulfill those promises, maybe not in our time, but certainly in God's time.

Last week, I was downstairs with our Jr. Sunday School class, planning some of our Advent worship. And they so aptly noticed that when promises are made, they're made with a spirit of trust, trust the other person to follow through. They noticed this in the Old Testament story, that the people lived in a long trust that God would fulfill the Advent promise of Jesus.

¹ Beck, Richard. 2021. *Hunting Magic Eels : Recovering an Enchanted Faith in a Skeptical Age*. First paperback edition. Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books. pg. 103.

² Ibid. pgs. 103-104.

I'll extend their thought a little further. Just before Jesus ascended to heaven, Jesus made a promise to his followers that "I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age." This was Jesus' promise to his followers then, and to his followers now. They trusted Jesus, and this trust emboldened them in all that they did, and it shaped the way that they saw the world.

Moses lived with an expectation of meeting God. The Hebrews lived with the expectation that God would do something and free them from bondage. The disciples and apostles lived with the expectation that Jesus was with them each day. And this last promise continues for us, so, how about for us today? How do you live with a similar expectation of God showing up?

Amen