

Proper 17A – August 31, 2014
Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Here we are on the day before Labor Day. Celebrating Labor Day is not only about taking time to honor the contributions of workers and the value of human labor. It also gives us the opportunity to recognize the importance of “taking time,” i.e., rest and restoration. There’s more than a little sadness to what Labor Day signifies to many of us, namely the end of summer and summer vacation—if you had the chance to take one. But before lamenting the end of August and praising rest, let’s consider the story from our first reading, of Moses at the burning bush. The place where Moses met God squarely and discovered his real self and real calling was at the scene of a burning bush by Mount Horeb. Yet the psychological, spiritual and societal *place* for Moses to have had this encounter was an interior wilderness of great turmoil and questioning. Moses’ fellow Israelites were in bondage under Egyptian slave masters, and were in misery. Moses himself was in exile for having rescued a fellow Israelite from an Egyptian which resulted in the Egyptian’s death. The need to be reunited with his people and to be involved with their plight weighed heavy on him. He had questions that were *burning* in his heart, questions which concerned his whole being. What am I doing here tending sheep when my people are held in slavery? But who am I that God would want me as a part of God’s liberating purpose—aren’t I actually just an outlaw, an exile from the once-privileged household of the Pharaoh, now a known killer, a mere shepherd now? Or maybe I *am* the one to lead my people out of slavery—yes! But wait a minute—I can hardly speak in public!—how could I ever pull off something like that?

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner comments that as Moses stood before the burning bush he basically faced a simple test. You see, it takes longer than a casual or quick glance at a burning object to see that it is or is not being consumed by the fire; so God wanted to find out whether or not Moses could be patient enough and pay attention to something for more than a brief moment. When Moses did, *then* God spoke. That became the opportunity for God to intrude on Moses’ wish for a private life as a shepherd. The call then came for him to come to his real self—a man of compassion, and one with a role of public responsibility to be with his people held captive in Egypt.

The trick is to pay attention to what is going on around you, and inside yourself, long enough to behold the miracle of God calling you to your real self, without missing this by dashing to the next thing, or checking the next phone message or text, or responding to the last e-mail. There is another world—God’s world—the most real of worlds—right here within this busy and distracted one, which we can encounter *when* we pay enough attention. Moses came to his real self and his true calling—and it began with sustained attention directed toward both a burning bush *and* the questions that were burning in his heart.¹

Moses is a reminder that the life you save is the life you lose. As Frederick Buechner put it, “The life you clutch, hoard, guard, and play safe with [or run away from] is in the end a life worth little to anybody including yourself, [and is a life that we often cannot give to

others without strings attached;] and only [an attentive] life given away for love's sake is a life [most] worth living."ⁱⁱ As he learned from his experiences and encounters, Moses was eventually able to express his love for God and others in a way that his ambitions, his fears, his ego and pride, status and comfort were no longer at the center. Instead, God became his true center. He ended up forgetting or letting go of some parts of himself and giving of his true self in such a way that there should have been less of him than there was to start with. Yet, paradoxically, there ended up being more, because now it was real and authentic, his true nature.ⁱⁱⁱ

With that in mind, let's reflect for a moment on summer and summer vacations, and on Labor Day, as occasions for rest and restoration, to renew ourselves for God's service. Today, the global market operates on a relentless "24/7" schedule—all the time. For many around the world and right here at home, notions of leisure and weekly days of rest are little more than attempts at survival and burnout recovery. For some, a day of rest is an enjoyable and regular experience, but for others it is simply not a possibility.

Yet, as William Sloane Coffin pointed out, according to the biblical story of creation, if on the seventh day God needed to rest—and God hallows the day only on which God does nothing at all but rest—then there must be more to resting than meets the eye. If on the seventh day God needed to rest—you can count on it—so do we.^{iv} With so much change in personal, social, economic and political life—and so many "driven from behind" ways of existence, we are called with a divine urgency to "rest in the Lord," and to make it a "holy habit." Our sputtering hearts, our distracted minds, our dragging feet, from time to time they all need to receive anew a sense of physical and spiritual well-being that comes from rest. It's dangerous theology to think we can improve on God. As a matter of fact, there is something prideful about our reluctance to rest more often—this part of the reflection is getting real personal, at least for me! Sometimes it is more blessed to receive in rest than to give in work—at least it takes more humility.

So God rested after six days of wild creativity according to the story. I imagine God also took stock. God had a lot to think about, and so do we. Taking stock...here are just a few questions we might reflect on, to take stock with: Am I being who I'm really meant to be, and doing what I really need to do? What burning question do I need to pay attention to, to hear God's voice? Can I face into God's call to me, as did Moses? How goes my and our relationship with God? And, is our church—all of us together—doing all we can to be an instrument of Christ's healing, love, and justice?^v

In these difficult economic times, we all need to understand and respond compassionately with those on forced vacations due to unemployment. Those in this parish family who have faced this know full well that unemployment or underemployment (or being overworked) can bring on a real identity crisis—which to some degree is always a spiritual crisis—and a whole set of burning questions. The harder this hits a person, the church needs to say loud and clear that whether on public assistance or off, with or without health benefits and unemployment compensation, lousy wages or none at all, each person is God's beloved and precious son or daughter, and don't let these realities tell you differently.^{vi} Again, as Bill Coffin pointed out, what is so wonderful about our relationship

with God is not only what God gives in terms of hope and strength, challenge and courage, purpose and power; but also what God never takes away. Put differently, it's a wonderful thing to be loved by someone who is never in competition with you, someone who wants only your well-being. God is that someone, the only one in your life who will never compete with you.^{vii} That's why it is so restful to be with God, and why God is so readily found in rest. So, pay attention: "Be still, and know that I am God," says the 46th Psalm. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying burdens, and I will give you rest," says Jesus.^{viii} And St. Augustine prayed, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee..."

And finally, although God rested on the seventh day, there is certainly no indication that that was what God had in mind to do forever. As Coffin put it, it certainly wasn't long before rescuing the human race from itself became a full-time job. (God has had many problems, but unemployment has not been one of them.)^{ix} And saving the human race and this Earth, our fragile home—quite literally—is our job, too, as instruments of God's ongoing and most urgent tasks. Success is far from guaranteed in this job of repair and restoration, but if we can't be optimistic, we can be persistent. As Jesus said, "Take *my* yoke upon you, and learn from me...and you will find rest for your souls."^x And so, if we rest with God we can also return to labor with God until we, like our beloved Father Moran (whom we will honor in our memorial garden service this morning), in the words of St. Paul, "have fought the good fight...finished the race...kept the faith"^{xi}—and when with all the saints "who from their labors rest" we, too, with Fr. Moran will be made partakers of God's eternal kingdom.

ⁱ Moving ahead 1200 years to our gospel reading, there's Simon Bar-Jona who, when he confessed to Jesus "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," Jesus responds by giving him a new name which, in fact, is a pun, as I mentioned last week. "You are Peter," Jesus says—the Greek is *Petros*, or in Jesus' original Aramaic the word is *Cephas*—literally meaning a "rock." And Jesus adds, "and on this *petra*, meaning "bedrock"—the bedrock of this revelation that I am the Messiah, the Christ—I will build my Church." But what kind of Messiah, what kind of Deliverer has Peter in mind? For when Jesus then tells his disciples that the consequences of his liberating salvation will involve Jesus' own death, Peter gets very upset. Peter and many others had hoped for a Divine Deliverer who would achieve victory and vindication for the conquered people of Israel, bypassing any Roman cross. But Jesus makes it clear that he is not fitting into other peoples' presuppositions. When Peter and the rest had received the revelation of God's Messiah in Jesus, it was more than their limited imaginations could apprehend. Such a revelation was like saying God is on the other side of the door and Jesus is the keyhole. Here Peter, you take the keys of that Kingdom; but before you can unlock the door you will be blinded by the light coming through the keyhole; or maybe you'll forget which is the right key; or maybe you'll just forget where you put your keys like so many of the rest of us!

Let's look at Peter, the Rock—this stumbling, impetuous, very earnest, intense and at times fear-driven disciple of Jesus. Recall it was Peter who in a showboat kind of way attempted to walk on the sea and began to sink. Recall it was Peter who in the presence of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus at the Transfiguration, thinking the last days had arrived, impulsively suggested building three booths on the mountain. Again it was Peter who, just before the crucifixion, denied knowing Jesus three times. In today's story in Matthew it doesn't take long for Peter to change from the Rock to a stumbling block, as we see Peter getting Jesus angry by insisting Jesus was wrong in predicting his final confrontation with the authorities.

To be fair, it was also Peter who, a little later, assumed the leadership of the fledgling church and who, after Pentecost, risked his life on a number of occasions, speaking publicly of his belief in Jesus. It was also Peter, the Rock, whose strength and courage helped the young church direct its mission in *and beyond* the

Jewish community. Opposed at first to the baptism of Gentiles, Peter had the humility to admit a change of heart, and then baptized the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household (see Acts, Ch. 10), even though he continued to struggle with his own Jewish conservatism (as we see in Paul's letter to the Galatians when Paul rebuked Peter for giving way to the demands of Jewish Christians to disassociate himself from table fellowship with Gentiles – See Galatians 2:11-14). Peter eventually found his way to Rome where, in later writings, he was spoken of as having become the first Bishop of Rome—the Pope. He was executed during the reign of Nero.

As we observe Peter struggle with himself, his life reminds us that Jesus did not come to save the godly and pure and strong but to save humankind – all of us - in all our failing and falling and dying. So, Simon Peter was neither just the bumbling disciple nor the first pope of Rome. Rather, through the grace and mercy of God, he became himself, a leader among others in the church. In the 30 or so years after his sojourn with Jesus, Peter's leadership was marked by a humility that let other leaders such as James in Jerusalem and Paul with the Gentiles come to the fore. Peter's leadership became most real when, as Jesus predicted, Peter the leader would eventually *be led* where he did not wish to go, taking up a cross he would have rather avoided. What is "the cross" which Jesus speaks of in our gospel? The cross is what we may encounter when we give ourselves fully enough to others that we may have an experience that feels like a crucifixion. The cross is something we may encounter when we leave the comfort zones of our predictable self-images and self-absorptions—as we join with Christ to create a changed situation in peoples' lives and in the world. The cross is the place of truth for Jesus and for those who join his mission of repairing the world and restoring humanity in right relationship. The cross is the ultimate test of being a disciple of the unexpected Jesus often hidden under the features of the suffering servant, and in our day, found in the distressing disguise of our neighbor in pain, the homeless, the unemployed, victims of blatant or more subtle forms of "hunger, fear, injustice or oppression." In rediscovering our true selves and real purpose, we can give ourselves fully and freely for love's sake. That is the life worth living.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (London: Collins, 1973), p. 28.

ⁱⁱⁱ The experience of following the Lord even unto his own martyrdom enabled Peter at last to really be himself, as he took up the very cross he had earlier denied Jesus would encounter. So, like Peter, let's get real, knowing that the One who calls us to "take up our cross" is the One who goes with us to the cross—and beyond. The converse of "the life you save is the life you lose" is "those who lose their life for my sake will find it." This implies that, like Moses in our first reading and Peter in our gospel, we, too, are on a path of discovering both a purposeful life which we might willingly lose, and our authentic self which we can freely give to God and others.

^{iv} William Sloane Coffin, *Living the Truth in a World of Illusions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 103-106

^v What more can be done to assist people to find meaningful work or involvements that fulfill them and contribute to the common good?

^{vi} Coffin, *Ibid.*

^{vii} Coffin, *Ibid.*

^{viii} Matthew 11:28

^{ix} Coffin, *Ibid.*

^x Matthew 11:29

^{xi} 2 Timothy 4:7