

## Sermon Archive 164

Sunday 3 September, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Exodus 3: 1-15

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



*With blackest moss the flower-plots  
Were thickly crusted, one and all:  
The rusted nails fell from the knots  
That held the pear to the gable-wall.  
The broken sheds look'd sad and strange:  
Unlifted was the clinking latch;  
Weeded and worn the ancient thatch  
Upon the lonely moated grange.*

*Tennyson*

The people, the person, the perceiving, the promise provoked.

-ooOoo-

### **The People.**

Historians will note that civilizations come and go - empires always go through that pattern of flourishing, plateauing, declining, then falling. No culture, no politics, no way of life lasts forever. Over every hopeful new government, over every solid old throne, over every institution that seems so permanent, the old Persian adage is whispered: "this too shall pass". And indeed, for this particular people, it all had passed. It had become for them, a kind of Dark Ages - an era of the light having gone out - a time when the bold things, the proud things, the hopeful things, were no more.

In the olden times there'd been a sense of promise, of favour - like this was God's own, like the pantry was full of milk and honey. Our forebears lived with an old fashioned, and now we'd say naïve, sense of hopefulness. Houses for everyone, security (if not prosperity) for everyone, dignity in work for everyone; firm social structures giving order to life, a healthy sense of things being under control, of civilization having foundations. I wonder where all that went. Because now we're treated like commodities. There's no dignity in the way we

speaking or are spoken to. We're treated like slaves, like refugees, like collateral material lost to some wasteful war. If there was a time of culture, a season of art and beauty, and science and hope, it is no more. Decline came out to kiss us; fall caught us in an unwelcome embrace; and some kind of innocence was lost. I wonder, was it our fault? Was it because our prosperity led to decadence, and we fell asleep on the job of being decent? Or was it just an inevitable truth of history? Some will point to various critical junctures along the way: the rise of that particular leader, the loss of that particular value. The passing of that particular legislation, the acceptance of that particular social agenda. Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. Or maybe none of us is to blame. Maybe it's just how things go within that great cycle of decline and fall. And the rude reality of how things are within that turning wheel of history, is that the light has gone out. We've become slaves in a strange place, people of the moss-covered covenant, the faded hope. God had chosen us, that's all done now. Life ceased to be a hope; somewhere it became a burden instead. "The people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and cried for help."

### **The Person.**

Once upon a time he was really well connected - moving at high levels, a kind of prince of industry, if you like. Bi-lingual, educated, physically strong, a brightness to his face. Yes, with all this he was a bit fiery in temperament, as often the ambitious are. You don't get anywhere by lingering back, never making a ripple. I wonder whether he used to dream - you know, those slightly unrealistic dreams of youth about all the things you'll do, and all the world you'll change, and all the adulation you'll get. It's not arrogance; it's hope. It's enthusiasm about life, and positiveness about self. It's feeling like your narrative arc is on the up. It's all the things we'd love for our young ones. Hope!

But now, as it is for the people, so it is for Moses: a kind of Dark Ages. We find him sitting on a hillside beyond the wilderness. He's exiled himself there, run away from the bright lights shining on the prince of industry. The sheep he's watching aren't even his own; they belong to his father in law. His job has got the feeling of an act of charity. Some older man, maybe only for the sake of his daughter, has found some menial kind of task for the ne'er do well son in law. This is a life that's crashed and ground to a halt. When the immensely talented end up watching sheep, when the amazing human potential ends up on a hillside in the middle of nowhere, something's died. Again, is it anyone's fault?

Was tragedy's fatal flaw planted somewhere in the personality? Anger? Sense of entitlement? Spoiled brat getting natural come-uppance. Or is it just capricious fate? The gods beating and breaking the beautiful man - simply because they can?

If the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ever made a promise to him, that now is covered in moss, decaying in the damp of the garden, gone. The light has gone out, and life is going nowhere.

### **The Perceiving.**

In the middle of nowhere, in direct view (or maybe in the *indirect* view) of a man whose life has fallen asleep, God puts a flame into a bush. Into Moses' attention, a moving, flickering, maybe alarming thing is slipped. Flames in dry places can do damage - so maybe God's appealing to Moses' sense of alarm. Could that be a way to wake up the sleeping life? Not sure, but this flame is a wee bit weird - in that it's not consuming the bush the way we'd normally expect it to. Odd! Maybe God's not appealing to Moses' sense of alarm. Maybe God's speaking to his curiosity. Could God stimulate dialogue with humanity by poking our sense of curiosity? How's your curiosity? Have you wondered lately about whether the world needs to be the way it is? Have you wondered what you might be able to do within a community that had woken up? Have you looked at the stars and wondered what humanity is? Have you thought about people breaking bread in the name of Jesus, and wondered about the God who sustains? Have you allowed yourself to be curious about the life that you have been given to live? Perhaps this is where God speaks to us. For Moses and the people, there has been a sense of the light going out. Now a flame is set within a bush. The forgotten dialogue is re-initiated. The covenant covered in moss meets a warming. He's told to take his shoes off, because this is sacred. It is special. And far away from this wilderness nowhere, in the realm of the real but dark, the apparently forgotten people are crying out.

### **The Promise provoked.**

If any advancement is to be made for the people, if any rescue is to be staged for the man whose gifts have fallen to sleep, Moses is going to have to allow the God of fire to move him. Moses is going to have to take his shoes off - signifying that the planet on which he stands is holy ground.

Moses is going to have to accept that the world doesn't belong to the falling cultures and declining civilizations (the governments, the thrones, the kings whose crowns are rusting), but belongs rather to the God who inhabits our experience. Dare we believe that every bush is burning?

If any advancement is to be made for the people, if any rescue is to be staged for the man who's fallen asleep, Moses, also, is going to have to learn to say "Here I am". I am willing to engage with the God who calls - calls us by our curiosity, by our sense of "what if" or "why not?"

If any advancement is to be made for the people, if any rescue is to be staged for the man who's fallen asleep, Moses also is going to have to overcome his inclination to say "who am I to be involved in the agenda of God?" Are we qualified? Are we brave? Are we willing to return to the real world in which we are vulnerable but could be effective? Are we willing to hear the cry of the people? Are we willing to let the hearing of that cry be to us a motivation greater than our fear - to listen to the world the way we believe God listens? "I have heard their cry . . . Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them . . ." Moses needs to become a person of that deliverance.

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To a world that's falling asleep, allowing the dissipation of the life it received through the loving promises of God, God gives a burning bush. God puts a flame into the view of those who worship. Cultures and civilizations **will** come and go. People **will** cry out from their predicament. But to a people fallen asleep, a flame is given.                    A moment of quiet.

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