

[Readings: Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15; Psalm 103; 1 Cor.10: 1-6, 10-12; Lk.13: 1-9]

This is a weird grouping of readings we're invited to consider! We've got a bush that's burning and also not burning. We've got a rock that migrates all around the desert and is the Christ. And we've got a fig tree that doesn't produce figs. What are we to make of this biblical collage?

The characters in these passages are trying to do the same thing: fit the pieces together so they can see what each puzzling series of events is about. First there's Moses. He grew up in a palace raised by Pharaoh's daughter. But he's not an Egyptian, he's Hebrew -- a dangerous thing to be since Hebrews aren't treated so well by Egyptians. Which makes Moses mad enough to kill. Which he does, murdering an Egyptian who's beating a Hebrew slave. Now Moses is a man on the lam.

Flash-forward to Moses 2.0. He's the husband of the daughter of a Midianite priest. But Moses is no Midianite. Nor is he really an Israelite, since he's never been circumcised. Moses sees a bush on fire that's not actually burning. Weird! What's even weirder is that the God of Israel is waiting for him there. God wants Moses to go back to Egypt and set the Israelites free. You've got to be kidding!

Second reading: Paul is writing the Corinthians. They're not Jewish. Paul's not Greek. But Paul is something more than Jewish -- he's an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul tries to explain Moses to the Greeks by way of Jesus. This leads to a very strange metaphor about Christ being the rock from which Israel drank in the desert years. And it followed them around, of course, because what good is a drinking rock if it's not there when you need it?

Then we arrive at the Gospel. Folks are discussing current events with Jesus. Pilate just had some Galileans slain. Hardly newsworthy: the pagan historian Josephus says Galileans were troublemakers, and Pilate had put mobs of them to death before.

Pilate is a ruthless killer. The Galileans who travel south to Jerusalem arrive to make their sacrifices in the Temple. They kill the sacrificial animals and

spill their blood on the altars of sacrifice. But Pilate's guards rush in and massacre them while they are at worship in their house of worship. Sound familiar? That is why Jesus says that the blood of the Galileans mixes with the blood of the animals.

Jesus is a Galilean. The people telling him these things are probably not. Jesus is in Judea. So the reporters are Judeans.

Jesus responds to them by noting that some Judeans were also killed in a tower collapse recently in Jerusalem. He equates the two events: Pilate's coldblooded killing with a random accident. The message: Don't read the will of God into either of these things.

I shudder when I hear someone say after surviving a near accident at work, a near house fire, a near collision with another car, "My Guardian Angel must have been watching over me." What about those who DO suffer the accident at work, or whose house goes down in flames with all their uninsured possessions with it, or who dies in the car crash? Where was THEIR Guardian Angels? Taking a cigarette break? On their day off? On vacation? Don't try to read or control the will of God in the bad things that happen.

Moses was wondering if the whole thing about leading the Israelites to salvation was going to work. There he would be, an unknown appearing out of nowhere claiming God had sent him to lead God's -- and his -- people out of slavery. He needed some credentials. Asking God's name would do it.

One thing you might not know, is that to know someone's name was, in a sense, to have power and control over them. It also meant that you have responsibility over them. When you name your child, you are accepting responsibility for them. You have power and control over them. But God will not be controlled. So God tells Moses "I am who am..."

Moses was the first to hear this new name, which was not a proper name at all but a form of a verb: "to cause to be, to create"; "I am what I am" (Popeye the Sailor Man takes that name!); or "I will be what I will be" (Que sera, sera!). From this moment the "LORD-YHWH" would mean a God who is and always will

be utterly free and powerful to do great things -- like free God's people. God's Holy Name is an action verb! Our God is an action verb!

Moses would find his mission and return to his people -- but though he knew he was in the presence of God, he still had some reluctance -- not the last Israelite prophet to feel that way. So, if even a great figure like Moses could be out of place and struggle to find out what God was calling him to, it can happen to anyone. Come, approach the Lord. Remove your sandals. Stand on holy ground. Come to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Find YOUR holy ground. When you feel adrift or without purpose, how do you find direction? That is YOUR burning bush, your drifting water rock, the will of God for YOU.

How do you feel when someone who's been hurtful, cruel, or morally corrupt gets hit with a hardship that makes them suffer? Our natural tendency is to rejoice because justice has finally been meted out. Karma. What goes around comes around, right? Jesus addresses this in this Sunday's Gospel reading. He wants us to understand that we cannot truthfully say that someone is a "greater sinner," even if that person is doing more damage than anyone else, is more un-Christian than we are, or is blatantly an evil-doer.

I'm thinking of Adolph Hitler. Osama Bin Laden. ISIS. All those folks who entered Christian churches, Islamic mosques and Jewish synagogues to commit murder and mayhem. They don't understand that they can be healed by the Sinless One who conquered evil for their redemption as well as ours. We should feel sorry for them -- this is the gift of mercy. We should mourn with Jesus for the tragedy that continues within their souls -- this is the most precious gift of mercy.

When we don't care enough to grieve over a person's inner destruction, we ourselves are sinning. We are disregarding what Jesus did for them and for us on the cross. We are damaging and potentially endangering our own souls.

All those who have sinned against you are like that fig tree in Jesus' parable. If you have access to them, He wants you to till their soil. He wants you to fertilize their souls with love and with the truth of the Gospel as taught by your actions and, when they're ready, by your words. He wants you to give them a gentle but obvious invitation to grow in the right direction.

Who has been so hurtful to you that you wish God would punish them? Can you feel sorry for them? Can you pray for God to do good for them? In this, you'll find freedom from the anger and pain that has been holding you captive.

Notice that Jesus doesn't want us to keep a diseased, disintegrating tree in the garden forever. After (and only after) we have done everything possible, if the evil-doer does not want to change, the best care we can give to the garden is to cut down the tree. This means walking away or calling in the authorities for intervention and letting the sinner reap what they sow. This, too, is very loving.

When fertilizer won't produce good fruits, a fallen tree becomes mulch and enriches the ground for a new beginning. So, you see, there is hope for all of us! Saints and sinners! AMEN!