

August 30, 2026
Proper 17A
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalms 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

In the Name of God: the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.

Today, we hear two stories of revelation, of invitation, of call. And we have two familiar figures, Moses and Peter, who can't quite figure out what's going on. But, who among us doesn't want all the answers before we start something new? Questions can stop us in our tracks.

In one of his famous "letters to a young poet," writer Rainer Maria Rilke encouraged his protégé to sit with what they don't know, and trust that the questions themselves have great value. "Be patient," Rilke wrote, "toward all that is unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue.

Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now.

Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

The question for us today is how do we live the questions? Particularly, the questions of faith?

First, we remember Moses and the burning bush. Moses, you recall, was a Hebrew infant who had been rescued from death and raised in Pharaoh’s court. As an adult, seeing an Egyptian wronging a Hebrew, Moses *defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian* (Acts 7:24). When Moses realized that others had witnessed the murder, he fled to the wilderness. And it is there, in Midian, that we find him today, tending his father-in-law’s flock. He has taken the flock “beyond the wilderness” and finds himself at Horeb, the mountain of God.

When Moses has his first conversation with God through the burning bush, God tells Moses there’s a job for him back in Egypt. And Moses balks. God assures him, “Don’t worry, I’ll be there with you.” Not convinced, Moses presses, “but if I’m going to go back to Egypt where, by the way, I’m wanted for murder, to bring the Israelites out, why in the world should they listen to me? Who

am I that you should send me? And, by the way, just exactly who are you, and what do I tell them your name is?"

Now God had already said, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Shouldn't that be enough? Apparently, not for Moses, and in a striking and unique revelation, God says, "I AM THAT I AM."

God mentions nothing about being the creator of the universe, or about being the God any particular acreage, or about possessing any specific attribute or accomplishment. What God gives to Moses wasn't really an answer but, simply, a statement of being. I AM. Period.

God's revelation, God's invitation, God's call, requires Moses to imagine possibilities that were beyond his own experience; to be satisfied with not having all the answers; to live the questions. And, underlying all these things is God's assurance, "I will be with you." We don't have to know all the answers, because God is with us.

In Matthew's account today, we enter the scene exactly where we left it last week. Jesus had asked that big question, "who do you say that I am." And Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." Do you remember what Jesus said next? "Say nothing to anyone."

In today's reading, we begin to see why he said that. It's quite likely that Peter and the others understood the Messiah to be a military leader who would organise the overthrow of Roman rule, and let Israel resume its rightful place.

Jesus, on the other hand, had a very different idea of who the Messiah was: "he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Peter says, "no, no, no, no. no, that can't be true" and receives a verbal slap down from Jesus...Satan. Stumbling block. Ouch.

In his eagerness and anxiety, Peter thought that he had this whole Messiah thing figured out. But Peter's confession signals the beginning of his exploration of Jesus' identity, not its end.

As soon as Peter thinks he has the answer figured out Jesus shuts him down. I can imagine Jesus challenging what Peter thinks he knows, nudging him back to the starting line: Yes, I am the Messiah. But no, you have no idea what “Messiah” means. In fact, you’re not ready yet to know what “Messiah” means; you can barely tolerate my talking about it. There’s so much more for you to learn, Peter. So many more answers for you to grow into. Be patient. Don’t force the locked doors. Try to love what is unsolved. Keep living the questions.¹

The problem with Peter’s answer about what a Messiah should be is not that it’s unreasonable; the problem is that it doesn’t change anything. We, like Peter, usually want more of what the world already offers – security, status, power. Or we look to deny our mortality through the acquisition of possessions or the addiction to an endless list of activities and substances.

¹ Many thanks for the thoughts of Debie Thomas <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1939-living-the-question>

But Jesus didn't come to comfort us with a little more of what we already have. Jesus came to free us. And the first step towards freedom is realizing that, too often, we have settled for things that are not life-giving.

We tell ourselves that we have all the answers, so it's difficult to hear God's voice promising something different. We don't want to entertain questions because, deep down, we fear that we might have to surrender what we think we already know, to lay down our own answers, to die to self.

Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai puts it this way:

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place

where the ruined
house once stood.²

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There's a reason we call this point the crux of the argument. It's the crossroads, the place where choices need to be made. Today, Jesus invites us to take up our cross and follow him. The two parts of this invitation are inseparable. Jesus does not tell us to take up our cross and head down some unlit path on our own. He invites us to follow him.

This means that we don't need to know all the answers because, wherever we go, Jesus has gone before us. Whatever difficulties we experience, Jesus has faced them first. And, my dear friends, do not forget the third part of Jesus' description of the Messiah. Yes, there is suffering and yes, there is death. But, there is also, always, resurrection.

² "The Place Where We Are Right" from *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, by Yehuda Amichai, translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell, with a New Foreword by C.K. Williams, © 1986, 1996, 2013 by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell. Published by the University of California Press.

This is why our funeral services contain this affirmation from the Book of Job. *As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the earth... I myself shall see, and my eyes behold One who is my friend and not a stranger* (Job 19:25-27).

What does “take up your cross and deny yourself” look like for us? This is the very question that we must learn to love, trying things out until we live into a revelation that will, in turn, raise more questions. Maybe it’s just following Jesus’ lead and, to the best of our ability, attempt to make decisions and act in ways that reflect God’s love for and acceptance of us and others; God’s desire for abundant life for all creation.

“Deny yourself” is not the same as “forget all about yourself” and certainly not “debase yourself.” By making the connection between “us” and “all people” we begin to realize that God is in it for everyone, not just for us, not just for me.

Maybe, then, this is the beginning of an answer of what denying yourself looks like – seeing that you and I are part of something larger; recognizing that there is, in fact, no meaningful “you” or “me” apart from “us.”

What might it mean for you to live for “us”? Giving someone with different opinions a chance rather than writing them off? Forgiving someone who has hurt you rather than seeking retribution? Opening your hands to share God’s gifts rather than clenching? Seeking joy in the service of others? Saying yes to the uncertainties of God’s call rather than trying to plan every little step? Laying down something that numbs your heart, or takes up all your spirit space, or deafens you to the voice of God?

On Wednesday, I’m travelling to Minneapolis to attend a conference entitled *Full and Equal: 50 Years in Pursuit of a Promise*. In September 1976, General Convention, meeting in Minneapolis, adopted Resolution A069: “Resolved, That it is the sense of this General Convention that homosexual persons are children of God who have a full and equal claim with all other persons upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral concern and care of the Church.”

A great deal has changed in the Episcopal Church over the last half-century. My being able to stand here with you is a small example.

Resolution A069 was a legislative and moral victory for many, but it was not “the answer,” not the end of a road. It was the first step of a new journey of questions that we are still called on to ask in discerning who “us” is; to follow Jesus’ call to spread the good news of the gospel, to embrace and serve all God’s children.

Living the questions of faith requires accepting that we, like Peter, will not always get it right, that it will be OK to stumble and fall. The places of our certainty and rectitude are often hard and trampled, where flowers cannot grow. Taking up our cross and following Jesus allows doubts AND loves to dig up the world like a mole, a plow, revealing more questions to live and love.

If you listen, you will hear Jesus’ invitation to you. In any of the ways that you might take up your cross, know that you will never be alone, that Jesus has been, is now, and always will be walking with you, with all of us, on the path to true life.

*Take up your cross, let not its weight fill your weak spirit with alarm; Christ’s strength shall bear your spirit up, and brace your heart, and nerve your arm.*³ Amen.

³ #675 from *The Hymnal* 1982. Words: Charles William Everest (1814-1877).