

Knowing And Going – Judy Cox

Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45b; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

“Who is God in this text?” my preaching prof used to ask. “Consider that first! Only then can you go on to consider the other essential question, ‘Who are we in this text?’”

So to that end I want to back up and add these words at the end of Exodus 2 that preface today’s passage (with thanks to Robert Alter’s translation): *... the king of Egypt died, and the Israelites groaned from the bondage and cried out, and their plea went up to God from the bondage. And God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the Israelites, and God knew.*

We the listening audience learn, even before Moses himself, that God is actively aware of this pickle the Israelites are in. The stage is set, with God hearing, remembering, seeing and knowing; we expect that God will act!

Six years ago this May an EF5, a whole new category of tornado, destroyed a swath of central Oklahoma. With sinking hearts we had followed the detailed storm coverage, stunned at the devastation left in a 75-mile strip that included towns just to our west. At first we complied with the authorities’ asking us all to stay away—gawkers are the last straw for those overwhelmed by such trauma. But then we heard that our friends’ Piedmont home had been one of those wiped out. As that news sank in, up close and personal, it radically changed our ordinary week (“ordinary” for spring in Oklahoma!). Slowly we moved from intellectual understanding to emotional awareness, realizing we needed to go—to be present to help.

This is an ordinary day for Moses. He is out doing his ordinary things, shepherding his sheep in the desert. And then, like God in the narrator’s preface, Moses demonstrates awareness. He sees what he thinks is a bush burning, without being consumed. He sees—he notices!—the impact sinks in!—then he actively engages, interrupting his plans, turning aside to see more closely. At that point God speaks, and calls Moses by name; seeing that Moses’ attention is focused, God begins a conversation. Here Moses learns what we’ve already heard, and so get to hear twice over: that God sees, God hears, and God knows.

The Hebrew Scriptures often use “hear” and “see” figuratively, like this. They seem to mean perceiving intellectually, a more abstract awareness than physical sense perception. God is aware of the Israelites’ affliction. But the Hebrew verb “know” doesn’t allow for any such intellectual, abstract awareness!

Habla Español, anyone? Maybe you, too, love the way Spanish distinguishes kinds of knowing. Its word “conocer” means to know something experientially or relationally—we “know” a person, or a city—while “saber” indicates a more intellectual ‘knowing about.’ The Hebrew verb for “know” includes all this experiential and relational of “conocer” ... and even more! “Conocer” on steroids!

So we could expand our English translation to “intimately-know-by-personal-experience”. (That could be a little clunky...) Jacob did not “know” the Lord was in that place until his dream. God “knew” Abraham feared God, when he did not withhold Isaac. Often this same verb carries sexual overtones, as with Adam “knowing” Eve earlier in Genesis. One translator uses our English “embrace” to catch the uber-relationality of this Hebrew verb.

As all this sinks in, we realize just how radical a witness our text bears, twice, regarding God’s knowing. God knows, up close and personal, through personal engagement with Creation, NOT merely understands in the abstract, from a distance.

In the preface at the end of chapter 2 the object of the verb is left hanging, concluding: *And God saw the Israelites, and God knew*. In the conversation with Moses God specifies the object of that knowing. It should take our breath away, given the force of that verb! *I know their pain*. In our NRSV, *I know their sufferings*.

In that Oklahoma May, we “saw” what had happened as we learned of the tornado’s devastation; as we heard about our friends’ loss it sank in and we felt the emotional implications, we began to “know” and move into action. We fully “knew” when we were out in Piedmont with them, hugging them, and then standing (along with dozens of others) alongside them in the wearisome labor and grief of cleanup across the next weeks.

God knows—intimately enters into—is personally engaged with and embraces us in our sufferings! More than any human friend can realize, God realizes that we cannot be left alone in our pain. The whole sweep of Scripture shows this, God coming to us, closer and closer. And much more powerfully than any human friend, God is with us and acts on our behalf. Listen again to our text: immediately God says ... *and I have come down to deliver them ... and to bring them up*.

Is the God of the old covenant remote and uncaring, only vaguely resembling the God of the new? That charge has been made often. “NO!” this text insists; in both testaments God cares so much that God enters into our pain and suffering and acts with and for us! I love the way our lectionary texts today work together, emphasizing the steadfast love of the Great I AM who comes to us.

In our gospel passage Jesus has already begun to clash with the Jewish religious leaders. Here he lets his disciples in on his insight: this opposition will only escalate. Ahead lies the inevitability of his own *great suffering*, suffering to the extreme outcome of death. Jesus knows this path ahead is that of the cross, and steadfastly walks it anyway. His Messiahship, to Peter’s dismay, will be one of suffering and death. What wondrous love is this, o my soul?!? This God Who in the person of Jesus comes to us in our suffering and in our death, participating for and with us, will encounter both suffering and death “for us and for our salvation,” as the Nicene Creed says. And he will conquer both in that encounter, redeeming and liberating us.

Alas, today’s scriptures won’t let us sit on that triumphal note. We’d love to stop there, celebrating God’s redeeming presence with us, delivering us from the power of suffering and

death for “happily ever after.” Don’t we all love being the object, those to whom God comes in our suffering? But is that all of who we are in this text?

Hear again the call Jesus that extends in the next verses to any of us who want to follow him: ... *let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?*

Yes, God does hear and come to those who suffer. Jesus, who most fully reveals God’s own self to us, enters the suffering of creation as a human, and walks the path of the cross, to suffering and death. And he calls us his followers to walk that same path, the path of the cross.

Last month I had the privilege of viewing the solar eclipse; we traveled into the “path of totality,” where the sun was entirely covered. What a difference that journey made, as in that “path of totality” we experienced both astonishing darkness, and incredible beauty! The “path of totality” applies even more deeply to this path of the cross. It requires the totality of who we are—our lives—and takes us to the darkness of our own suffering and death; it also leads us to enter into the darkness of the suffering of others, to come alongside as God in Christ comes to us...and there too we encounter incredible beauty.

In this week when we’re all stunned by the destruction from Hurricane Harvey, my illustration about our friends the tornado victims might seem, well, six years out of date! But you need to hear the rest of their story. Our very thoughtful friend, with a journalist’s microphone stuck in his face, looked around the wreckage, then observed, “Some people call a tornado an ‘act of God’. But the ‘act of God’ is all these people coming out to help.” In this path of totality, the path of the cross, we are called to “come out to help.”

Last week Ben challenged us to accept the full implication of our own physical death for Christ’s sake, and not dodge by just making it metaphorical. And that’s a real danger, an easy way to let ourselves off the hook! But we dodge more than literally dying for Christ, don’t we?! As professor/theologian Mitchell Reddish observes, “To ‘take up one’s cross’ ... may include, but is not restricted to, martyrdom. The condemned criminal who carried the horizontal bar of the cross to the site of crucifixion would have been subjected to taunts, humiliation, rejection and shame [on the way to] death. The disciple who ‘takes up the cross’ is one who is willing to surrender pride, ego, status, comfort, and even life for the sake of the kingdom of God.”

Spiritually, we are called to death to self: *We have died, and our life is hidden with Christ in God* (Colossians 3). Physically, literally, we are head toward our own body’s death, which may indeed be the death of martyrdom for the sake of the gospel. Can we face what it means, in the in-between time which none of us can measure, to take up one’s cross as being “subjected to taunts, humiliation, rejection and shame”?

Let’s not hide behind generalities. Let’s turn to our Romans text for help with what this means in practice. Paul especially fleshes out for us this denying ourselves by coming alongside others.

It means love, genuine love—still a too-easy generality? What about this?—turning from our ego-serving goals of prestige and public kudos for another kind of competition entirely, a competition to show the most honor to someone else? That’s completely counter to the way of our world—if we don’t promote ourselves, who will? Can we turn from that attitude for Jesus’ sake, and the good of the other, and accept with humility the likely outcome of less attention to us?

*Hold fast to what is good*—instead of hanging on to whatever we can get? Maybe using that “whatever” to *contribute to the needs of the saints*? That’s difficult, perhaps, living generously instead of anxiously guarding our comfort, but probably not dangerous. But won’t *extending hospitality to strangers* put my life at risk if I don’t make sure they’re extremely vetted first? Yes, it may—and they may die for lack of our help during the slow self-protective process of that vetting. *Rejoicing with those who rejoice* and *weeping with those who weep* may sound at first like easy empathy; it requires getting to know others, sharing life in mutual vulnerability, to gain the privilege of knowing that they are weeping at all.

*Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly* (in Matthew’s wording that would be *the least of these*). Even in grade school recess we know what that means: hang out with the kids no one else wants to play with—and then you’ll be lumped in with them, not liked either! School recess rules as the arena for taunts, humiliation, rejection and shame; that dynamic doesn’t change as we age, we just learn subtlety! Who are those being taunted, or demeaningly ignored, on the “playgrounds” of our lives? Do we avoid them, or go to them? DO we let the social patterns and hierarchies of this world suck us in, or can we walk another path?

Hardest of all, perhaps, is the countercultural command to bless, rather than curse, those who persecute and oppose us. We don’t get to take vengeance, verbally or physically. Both judgment and vengeance are in God’s hands, Who can be trusted to carry out justice as perhaps we can’t. We ARE to work actively to *overcome evil* but only with the “weapons” of *good*! We are to thwart evil, to undermine it, and maybe especially to expose it, by the much more effective strategy of doing good to the enemy. This is not passive, giving up and lying down so evil wins, but conquering (and maybe, sometimes, converting) the enemies through skillfully, intentionally doing good to them—listening to them—giving them the respect due every child of God, whether they return it or not.

In this world that approach will likely bring taunts, humiliation, rejection and shame. We have Jesus’ promise that it will also mean not losing our life, but truly finding it; in this path of totality we will experience not only darkness, but incredible beauty!

So our texts today have taken us in a wide arc, a movement. We see, across all of Scripture, God knowing our suffering and coming to us, embracing us—most fully revealed in Jesus, suffering with and for us—and the call on us who follow him on this path likewise to be with and alongside others who suffer, even when it means our own suffering. Lord, have mercy, for without you we cannot do this!

I close with this “Collect for Friday”, which we hear weekly in Morning Prayer: “Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”