

“The Big Reveal”

Sermon – August 30, 2020 Stone Presbyterian Church

Picture the scene. It’s on a gangway on Cloud City.

Darth Vader has just cut off Luke Skywalker’s right hand.

As Luke struggles to crawl away, Darth Vader says, "Obi-Wan never told you what happened to your father."

Luke responds, "He told me enough! He told me *you* killed him!"

Darth Vader responds—you can say it with me—"No, *I* am your father."

That is one of the well-known examples of a “big reveal”, basically, point in a movie or story with a major twist or a magician who finishes the trick and goes “Ta-dah!”

Today’s scripture passages have their own “big reveals.” Today’s Old

Testament passage from Exodus has Moses out in the wilderness. He’s gone from being a favored adopted child in Pharaoh’s house to fleeing to the neighboring region of Midian.

He finds a woman, marries her, and is keeping the flock of his father-in-law and takes the flock into the wilderness to Mount Horeb.

Then the angel of the Lord appears to Moses in a flame of fire out of a blazing bush that is somehow not consumed.

God calls to him saying, “Moses, Moses!” And he responds with “Here I am.”

God reveals himself saying, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

God says he has seen the suffering of his people and that he is sending Moses to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go.

Now Moses had been respectful and in awe of God, but now he is

backpedaling a bit. He asks essentially, “Why me?” God says, “Don’t worry, I’ll be with you.”

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Then Moses stalls further saying, “But if I say, ‘the God of our ancestors sent me’, they’ll ask, ‘Who dat?’ Who should I say sent me?”

Remember at that time people believe there were many gods, particularly there in Egypt, and the gods had different names and names were thought to be very powerful.

God says to Moses, “Tell the people ‘I AM WHO I AM’; tell them ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

I’m sure Moses was thrilled with that answer; you can be forgiven it sounds to you like an Abbott and Costello routine: “Who sent you?” “I am.”

“I know who you are, but who sent you?” “I am who I am.”

But this name, which we translate from the Hebrew often as “Yahweh” or by some as “Jehovah”, does indicate that the God Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob is not just *a* God—he is *the* God; he is, as some translations say, “I am the one who causes things to pass.” Yahweh is the *one*.

Not that life was easy for Moses after this encounter. Indeed, his life was anything but easy. But God—Yahweh—never said it was going to be easy; he said it was necessary.

God is the one who causes things to pass—through us. And, like Moses, we don’t generally seek the calling; God calls us. And God calls us where we are, not always where we should be. Just like God called out to Moses biding his time in the wilderness, God does not wait for us to find him—he seeks us out.

Like Moses, that doesn’t mean we will be thrilled or even quite comprehend when God comes a-calling, such as in the gospel passage today from Matthew.

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Last week you heard Jesus ask his disciples, “But who do you say I am?” And Simon Peter responds, “You are the messiah! The Son of the living God!”

Jesus is thrilled and says, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

It is the pinnacle of revelation. Everybody is happy and proud. Then today’s passage starts immediately after that with Jesus telling the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed, and on third day be raised.

Peter, who just had that big reveal that Jesus is the messiah, begins to rebuke Jesus—reprimanding *his* rabbi, his teacher—saying, “That’s crazy talk! Stop it!”

Then Jesus turns and says to Peter those well-known words, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

In two verses Peter goes from the highest high to the lowest low. He does so because he knows only in part. He knows Jesus is the messiah, but he was picturing a messiah that every Jew was picturing based on their reading of the scriptures—a conquering king.

The exchange is reminiscent of Jesus temptation in the wilderness by Satan. Remember that Satan literally means “adversary”, someone working against you, and there the temptations were focusing on human needs and not God.

But there Jesus tells, “Away with you, Satan!” and here he says, “Get behind me, Satan!”

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You can hear it as, “Get out of my way!” But there is also an implication of “Get back in line—I thought you could be a leader, but clearly you have more to learn.” Almost like the saying, “Lead, follow, or get out of the way!” And in this case, Jesus isn’t sending Peter off; he’s saying you need to get back on track and follow me.

Peter is a good example that if you think you have it all figured out—you haven’t. That when we think our theology and faith is tight, right, and infallible, it just might be oppressive and death-dealing, as it has by Christians over the centuries including even now.

Jesus then explains what it truly means to follow him, the Messiah, the Anointed One, and it is anything but a triumphal march into Jerusalem. He tells the disciples what are well known words to us, but truly scandalous to them, “If any want to become my followers, 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.”

There was nothing noble in “taking up the cross” any more than if said to you, “take up your hanging noose and let’s go to the gallows.” And it’s hard to see how losing your life help anyone—especially you.

Like with Moses, God didn’t say it would be easy. But he did say he would be with us as we let God work through us.

Because speaking the words “Jesus is the Messiah” requires only the exertion of the mind but living those words is a gift of God. Embodying hope in the Messiah is an act of God’s love.

And *that* is the big reveal. We do not conquer others either physically or metaphorically with our doctrine—we overcome others with love.

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As the epistle lesson today from Paul’s letter to the Romans starts, “Let love be genuine.” Genuine love has a moral orientation toward the good.

When we show love toward someone, we are moving them toward God's goodness. To love someone is not simply to cater to specific likes and dislikes of that person. It is rather to act toward them in ways that help them experience more of God's goodness.

And that can be difficult to do when someone is not lovable. When someone has injured you and your initial reaction is to strike back, but we are called to return good for evil if we are to show them another way.

Returning evil for evil only has the effect of escalating conflict and reinforcing the sense of righteous indignation on both sides. To do good we must humble ourselves and we must love.

As the late Maya Angelou wrote, “I am grateful to have been loved and to be able to love, because that liberates. Love liberates. It doesn’t just hold -- that’s ego. Love liberates. It doesn’t bind.”

In these hyperpolitical and divisive times coupled with the pandemic and the regular stress of life it is definitely easier to say than to do. To take up that cross and go out to love others authentically and genuinely is not easy.

But as Lloyd Ogilvie, the late Presbyterian minister who served as chaplain of the United State Senate at the turn of this century, once said: "We say, 'But, Lord, I cannot.' And God says, 'I'm glad to hear you say that. Through you, *I* can.'" Because “I am.”

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.