

“Of God and Salvation (An Odyssey Through Exodus): The Pathos of God”
 Proper 17A (September 3, 2017)
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>>Spirit of God, open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word--things that comfort and inspire us. Amen<<

The events of the past few weeks in our country from Charlottesville to Houston--not just the pain but especially the heroism and the courage of first responders and clergy and houses of worship and good neighbors--these acts brought to mind for me a comment made by William Sloane Coffin, that great preacher from the Riverside Church in New York, who once said that “civilization is but a slow process of learning to be kind [to each other].”¹ There have been dark days, literally and figuratively, over the past few weeks, but there have been many acts of kindness. I want to begin this morning with two of them, and close in a little bit with several more.

The first story is about Shazia Ashraf.² Journalists Sebastian Murdock and Melissa Jeltson wrote on Wednesday that “Shazia Ashraf watched from a boat as her mattress floated in six feet of water in her Houston home. ... [S]he could see her washer and dryer [under the surface]. Her fridge had ... migrated to the living room. As she pulled away from her flooded home, grateful that she had managed to save her kittens, her immediate thoughts turned to helping others. ... For Ashraf, who is the chairwoman of a committee for the Islamic Society of Greater Houston, that involved helping turn at least five area mosques into shelters. As the storm hit and the flooding ensued, the mosques have been providing cots and food to displaced people who may have otherwise never stepped foot inside. ‘That’s the beautiful thing to see,’ Ashraf [said]. ‘A lot of people ...--myself included--have homes completely flooded but are still trying to organize to help the community. ...’ Ashraf said the mosques serving as shelters are ‘completely stocked with supplies’ including coffee, ‘a hug, a smile--anything that can help.’ ...” Bibi Khan, another volunteer helper, said her group is “adamant that they intend to help anyone in need. ‘There’s no religion, there’s no color,’ [said] Khan ‘We are open to help everyone and anyone.’ ... At one mosque location, Khan said she was overwhelmed at seeing so many non-Muslims taking refuge in the sanctuary. ... [They] didn’t at any point feel different from us,’ [she said,] ‘and it was the most amazing moment we had.’ ... Muslim restaurants in the community have also been providing free food ... , passing out hundreds of meals ‘People have been so generous in getting out there on their private boats and providing meals, providing services, or just comforting someone else,’ Khan said. ... ‘[W]hen the community is hurting, we’re hurting too,’ [said Shazia Ashraf]. We feel and suffer the same, and [it’s important] for us to help and love each other”

The second story is about four bakers at a bakery in Houston.³ Thursday’s *Washington Post* reported that “as Hurricane Harvey approached ... the bakers ... worked overtime, knowing

¹ William Sloane Coffin, *The Collected Sermons: The Riverside Years, Volume I* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 414.

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http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/muslims-opening-their-doors-to-flood-victims-we-feel-and-suffer-the-same_us_59a6e953e4b00795c2a341b9?section=us_religion

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2017/08/31/flooding-trapped-these-mexican-bakers-for-two-days-they-spent-it-baking-for-harvey-victims/?tid=sm_tw&tid=sm_tw&utm_term=.9caa656cf565

people would be eager to stock up on food. By Saturday evening, ... [they] had sold out of just about every piece of bread [Most of the employees were able to get home, but] four bakers ... found themselves trapped ... by rising floodwaters [As hours passed, they grew] restless. ... So they turned to what they knew best: baking. For two days, the trapped bakers churned out hundreds of pieces of bread [using 4400 pounds of flour], filling the shelves again [F]ortunately, [the flood waters] never seeped in, and the store never lost electricity At night, the bakers slept on the ground, on makeshift beds and a large sack of flour. [The store] owner attempted to rescue the workers Sunday but was turned around by police On Monday morning, the owner was finally able to reach the bakery--and was shocked by what he saw. The store's display cases, empty on Saturday, were filled with bread again. ... The bakery posted a picture of ... the trapped bakers, amid their bounty of baked goods, to its Facebook page: 'Some of our bakers got stuck ... ,' [the caption read]. ... They made all this bread to deliver to those in need.' ... 'These people are as sweet as their baking. Thanks!' [said] one Facebook [comment]. ... 'Your act of humanity is what we should all aspire to be and achieve,' [said another]. ... The bread from their two-day marathon baking session was delivered to various shelters, including the ... Convention Center, and a police station"

Preacher William Sloane Coffin said that civilization is the slow process of learning to be kind to one another. These are just a few of the countless stories of kindness we've all heard this week. Stories of "civilization," we might say, in the midst of Houston's tragedy. Stories that remind me of that ancient story from Exodus we heard a moment ago about Moses and the burning bush and the voice of God--a voice the speaks about the loving-*kindness* of God. This is our second Sunday of a multi-week series in Exodus. Last Sunday we looked at the subtle hand of God at work moving history *through* the good deeds of ordinary folk: Hebrew midwives, and Moses' mother and sister, and Pharaoh's daughter. Each in their own way doing good deeds and acts of kindness that saved lives. Today's story from Exodus about Moses and the burning bush is a story about *God's* kindness. It's one of scripture's most well-known stories, right up there with Noah and the Ark, and David and Goliath, the Nativity, and the empty tomb--a small canon of stories that every Sunday Schooler learns, or colors with markers or Crayola crayons in Sunday School coloring books. I remember coloring the burning bush story as a child, but I especially remember watching the stories about Moses each New Year's Eve on network television. One of our New Year's Eve family traditions when I was growing up was watching a grizzling Charlton Heston play Moses in the film *The Ten Commandments*, hiking up Mount Horeb to get a better look at the burning bush, forcefully saying "let my people go" to Pharaoh, and raising his staff to part the Red Sea--a climactic scene I never got to watch until Junior High when my parents let me stay up a little later.

Today's story in Exodus begins with Moses working for his father-in-law as a shepherd. While tending his flock, Moses caught sight of a bush *in which* a fire raged, but the leaves were unharmed. As Moses approached this oddity, he met and spoke with God, in an exchange that almost seems casual: Moses and God talk; they listen to each other; they even argue. There's an ordinariness to this interaction--a humanness. Both characters--Moses and God--see and hear and speak and feel emotion. Moses *sees* the burning bush and turns aside to get a better *look*. God *sees* that Moses has drawn closer and responds by *speaking* words of instruction that Moses is to show respect for the holy ground he's standing on by removing his sandals. Moses *hears* God's voice and obeys--perhaps because it was such an

otherworldly voice--a voice that elsewhere in scripture is described as rushing waters--like that beautiful and haunting depiction in the Disney film *The Prince of Egypt*: part male, part female, part loud and forceful, part windy whisper; perhaps it sounded like a chorus of voices, a plurality like the Hebrew name for God itself, which in this story is plural. Having Moses' full attention, God introduces *himself, herself, themselves* as an old God, a God of ancestors, the God of Sarah and Abraham, Rebekah and Isaac, Rachel and Jacob.

A God whom Moses seems not to know. Moses asks for God's name, and gets in return a strange response: "I am that I am," says God. "I am" is a play on the Hebrew verb "to be." It's an untranslatable phrase that the late Yale professor Brevard Childs said could mean anything from "I cause to be what comes into existence" to "I am the creator" to "I am there, wherever [there] may be" to "It's not your concern [Moses]."⁴ Whichever way God's response gets translated, it's pretty clear that God is being cagey here, as if trying to fend off any attempt to get pinned down or boxed in. God in effect has no, single name. "I just am," says God. Perhaps this is the reason why God has so many different names in the Bible each one focusing on an action with no single one able to completely define or confine who or what God is. In scripture God is a warrior; God is a comforter; God is a peacemaker; God is rescuer; God is ever-present; God is a provider; God is a nurturer; God is a shelter; God is compassionate. God is a mother, a father, a rock, a gentle breeze, a rushing stream, a raging storm. God is felt in earthquakes and waves and warming sun, in storms and forests, in waterfalls, in those special moments of awe when we hear a glorious piece of music or when we see a rainbow or a sunset or when we look up on a clear night and gasp at how small we really are. And God is especially known, experienced, seen, felt in human interaction: in our heroism and our love, our tears, our outrage at injustice, our acts of kindness.

God says to Moses, "I have *known* the sufferings of my people in slavery, and I will set them free." God's *knowing* is not a cognitive knowledge; it's an empathetic knowing, an intimate, felt knowing. God has experienced and felt and suffered with the people of Israel in slavery. And God will work *through* human beings--through Moses--through countless acts of kindness to alleviate this suffering: *through* Muslims opening their mosques in Houston, *through* Houston bakers who used up nearly 5,000 pounds of flour to make bread to feed storm victims. Even through those two self-described "rednecks" who posted a video of themselves using their jacked up monster trucks to pull an Army National Guard vehicle from the water. "God Bless the Redneck Army," they wrote.⁵ God is known, God is seen, God is heard, God is felt *in* the emotions, the actions, the words, the deeds of our fellow human beings. A chorus of voices make up the voice of God. Countless hands make up the hands of God. Or, as the old Celtic Christians once put it in a prayer: God above us; God beneath us; God beside us; God *within* us.

...I began this morning with two stories of kindness. Let me close with a few more. Stephanie McNeal on BuzzFeed published a post this week titled "15 Moments From The Houston Flooding That Will Remind You The World Isn't All Bad."⁶ "Here are just a few of the everyday people who did heroic things in the face of danger and tragedy," she writes. There was a mom in her boat picking up stranded people. There was a furniture store owner

⁴ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (The Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004 [1974]), 62ff.

⁵ http://theresurgent.com/god-bless-the-bubba-brigade/?utm_content=bufferea639&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

⁶ https://www.buzzfeed.com/stephaniemcneal/everyday-heroes?utm_term=.ikQV0KNPv9#.mnZWqwJZvA

named Jim “Mattress Mack” who opened his two stores for people who needed a safe and comfortable place to sleep. There was an ICU nurse named Chelsea Black who worked 72 straight hours to keep patients safe. Her sister called her an “amazing soul.” There was a guy who dressed up as Spiderman to cheer up kids at Houston’s Convention Center. There was a guy from Texas City who drove an hour up to Houston, boat in tow, to, in his words, “save some lives.” There was Victoria White who sang gospel songs to evacuees at the Expo Center. The video of her singing has been viewed more than 8 million times on Facebook. There was Jeff Yuna who picked up stranded carp from the streets and carried them back to their home lake. There was Chance Ward and his son who rescued horses and cattle trapped in floodwaters. There was a group of neighbors who made a human chain to ensure all of them got to safety. There was a member of the Texas National Guard reading stories to stranded children at an evacuation center. There were a bunch of drivers who got out of their cars and formed a human chain to rescue an elderly man from his car. There was a group of people who worked together to save a stranded dog. There was a bar in Austin that loaded up supplies in a truck and drove to Houston to help storm victims. There was a five year old Houston native living in Philadelphia who started a lemonade stand to raise money for people in his hometown. And then, the many stories of first responders doing their jobs--jobs we see as heroic.

...A central pillar of our Christian tradition is that God is completely in touch with our humanity. That God even became a human in the person of Christ. In each of these stories from Houston, I think, we can see God at work--God enfleshed. God as rescuer. God as comforter. God as provider. God as refuge. God as generous, caregiver. God as savior. God as giver. God as tender. God as kind. God in community. I could imagine God saying to Houstonians: “I have seen your sufferings. I *know* and I *feel* your pain. And I am acting *through* your acts of kindness.” God is not some distant king-in-the-sky. God is experienced in the person next to us. Amen.