

Homily by Fr. Dale Lauderville, OSB

Delivered at Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota

March 24, 2019 – Third Sunday in Lent (C)

Each of us has a calling in life. Those of us who are well on in years remember those crucial times when we were at a crossroads and had to choose one way and pretty much bid good-bye to the other way. I recall well my discernment to come to the monastery. My mentors at that time were good listeners who would let me try to reason through my options. At one point, I recall saying: “if only God would just give me a very clear, unmistakable sign.” One of these mentors replied, “most likely you would doubt or question whether the sign was real.” Reason is indispensable in finding our way in life, but it is not sufficient and at times is not as important as a feeling or intuition. What if I had gone back to my mentor and said, “I heard God telling me to take this route?” Or if I were to say in the language of Moses’ experience, “I heard a voice coming from this burning bush that said?” Clearly, my mentor would have directed me to counseling if I were hearing voices.

Why then are we to listen to this passage on the burning bush from the book of Exodus on the third Sunday of Lent? What kind of enlightenment is it giving us if it is not a literal description of an event in the life of Moses? In some way in the quiet experience of shepherding a flock in a remote area of the Sinai desert, Moses became aware that he was being given a mission by a higher power who was concerned about the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Moses had tried on his own earlier to come to the rescue of his kinfolk, but his slaying of a taskmaster meant that he had to flee from Egypt. But it seems that Moses sensed that he could not just let his kinfolk go on in their oppressed situation. As we would expect, he had to struggle mightily to come to undertake such a dangerous mission. The story of the burning bush strongly emphasizes

the divine presence with Moses; it communicates this through the bush that burns but never is consumed. A transcendent power had to be operative here. When Moses listens to his reason, he comes up with a number of objections as to why he should not take this on. Who am I? Humility is realistic and indispensable. But this higher power says that Moses need not act alone, but that this divine help will accompany him. Then Moses says if he goes to Pharaoh and to his Hebrew kin and says this higher power sent him they are going to want to know who this higher power is. They believed that this invisible divine realm had a number of deities, and some of them were tricksters. So who is it that Moses is to tell them. This higher power replies: “tell them that ‘I am who I am’ sent you. This name is very unusual; it is not like the typical Hebrew names such as Samuel which means: “God has heard.” “I am who I am” forms a sentence that is a tautology; it gives no new information. Explanations of the meaning of this divine name have taken on various forms through the centuries, but the clear point is that this Deity, this higher power, transcends all our categories. This reality of this Deity cannot be captured in a name. Moses persists in his objections but hears that he will be given a sign that this unusual experience, this divine epiphany, was not a consequence of his imagination or delusion. This God says: “you will bring the Hebrew slaves back to worship at this holy mountain.” This sign means that Moses has to take a risk; he has to wager that this was indeed a true experience of the divine and that it would eventually bring him to a point in which the passing through the waters of the Reed Sea and the sustenance through manna and the water from the Rock would be events that confirmed the presence of this God who answered to the name Yahweh, or “I am who I am.”

As St. Paul tells the Corinthian community and us, you should learn from the example of Moses. Moses listened to YHWH; he took a risk that YHWH would be with him. YHWH was

true to his word. YHWH is a God who keeps his promises. If in our discernment of our calling and we get to an important crossroad in life and are able to make a case for pursuing a particular route for very concrete human reasons, we are blessed at that point for being able to move forward with less risk. But in our life journey, God calls us at some point to decide for or against him, and probably does this a number of times. But in the pressure that God brings upon us, we recognize that all of our former securities – wealth, intelligence, physical strength or beauty or whatever – these things that have secured our identity are no longer sufficient and to try to pressure these things to produce more will only make things more complicated for us. This time of relinquishment – this letting go of control – is challenging and something that we probably do not fully understand. Just as the Israelites were put to the test in the wilderness, we are put to the test. How deeply do I trust that God is with me and will sustain me? St. Paul exhorts the Corinthians and us to eat that spiritual food and drink that communicates the divine presence around us – that divine cloud that protects and guides us.

Jesus challenges his audience in Galilee to repent: to have a change of heart or of mind. The fundamental reorientation he is calling for is no less than letting go of all contrived securities and placing one's trust in God in the face of all the ups-and-downs of life. We may try to rationalize the mystery of suffering by saying that so and so lost all their belongings because of their sins, or their health went to pieces because they did not take care of themselves. But Jesus wants us to move to a new place in which our own individual or communal security or sense of well-being is not grounded in our own works, as important as they may be. If we truly want to find life that is enduring and continues to give against all odds, then that life must come from divine accompaniment. Christ promises to be with us for all ages. How do I allow Christ to be part of my inmost being?