

# IN SEARCH OF REFUGE - A HOME IN THE DESERT

## Epiphany

Exodus 3:1-8

A Sermon Preached by  
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University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington 98125  
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### CENTRAL FOCUS:

That God liberates through the compassionate practices of seeing, hearing, and knowing.  
And so it is with us.

### Pastor Todd Smiedendorf – Bible Introduction

*This morning we hear from the book of Exodus, written in a time of existential uncertainty for the Jewish nation and people. Looking back into the mists of cultural and religious memory, into events that may have happened many centuries before, ancient Jews seemingly composed Exodus to stir up national identity and feeling. In the story we have this morning, the ancient generation of Joseph and the Pharaoh whom he served and who welcomed the Hebrews from Palestine have died.*

*A new Pharaoh has arisen, one who did not know Joseph and who no longer considered the Hebrews to be friends. As Pharaoh perceived their population growing, his worry and paranoia grew until he instructed the Hebrew midwives to kill all the male Hebrew babies in a fanatical and futile effort to calm his fears and reduce their population.*

*The midwives did not cooperate. And into this time of threat was born a male baby that was put into the reeds in the river to be safe from harm. In Hebrew, the name Moses sounds like the word for reeds. The Pharaoh's daughter found Moses and raised him as her own. He grew and was liked in Pharaoh's house.*

*Yet, when he was older, he encountered an Egyptian beating on a Hebrew and he killed the Egyptian, trying then to hide his crime. When it seemed he might be found out and Pharaoh sought him, he escaped from Egypt to a wilder, more desert-like place where he began a new life, as a shepherd.*

### Scripture – Read by Liturgists

As we seek to respond to your word and will, and encourage one another in the growth of our minds and spirits, let us hear this morning's scripture from Exodus chapter 3, verses 1-8.

#### **Exodus 3:1-8<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

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<sup>1</sup> The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

## IN SEARCH OF REFUGE - A HOME IN THE DESERT

<sup>2</sup> There the angel of God appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." <sup>4</sup> When God saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>5</sup> Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground?" <sup>6</sup> God said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

<sup>7</sup> Then God said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, <sup>8</sup> and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

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Pastor Todd Smiedendorf

Good Morning. *[Good morning.]*

**Let's do some truth telling:** I'm a little nervous. *[Amen.]* Let's hope it's just the right amount.<sup>2</sup>

Pray with me

Spirit,  
Breath of everything,  
Great Spirit,  
Mystery,  
May the words of my mouth  
And the meditations of our hearts and minds  
Be moving your spirit that leads to liberation, to justice and peace.  
- Amen

**Let's do some more truth telling.**

**How many of you moved last week in worship as invited after the passing of the peace?** *[Show of hands by congregation.]* Not bad, people. Not bad! That practice is meant to connect us – practice in the body can be very helpful – meant to connect us with the reality of moving which is a part of seeking refuge – our focus during this Epiphany time after Christmas – you remember Christmas, don't you?

And in our story this morning, Moses has moved. He has sought refuge in the desert, in the wilderness. And, in our story, Moses also moves away from the sheep he is moving with, to see a strange and wild sight: a burning bush that is not consumed by the flame. It's an image of paradox, a

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<sup>2</sup> This was Pastor Todd's first sermon as Bridge Minister at UCUC.

## IN SEARCH OF REFUGE - A HOME IN THE DESERT

seeming impossibility, a wonder. It's a clear sign that we are moving into liminal space, a special kind of God space, you know, that part of the movie when the background music begins to play.

I wonder how many times in our lives we miss this kind of wondrous happening. So many times in my life, I have looked back and thought that something true, important, and wondrous was right in front of me and I didn't see it.

Indeed, the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning said

Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God,  
But only the one who sees takes off their shoes;  
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.<sup>3</sup>

But Moses didn't miss this happening. He took his shoes off and said "Here I Am."

**Beautiful:** That oft repeated response of faith to life: Here I am.

**Yet, lest we misunderstand, Moses is not the main character of this story nor this book. God is.** The one known as Yahweh here. The Great I am is the actor who really moves the story. This story being one of the great summations of all the early books of Israel's lineage history: God acting to liberate and bring the people out of bondage into freedom and Divine relationship, to give them a law and a land. Now, it could be inspiring to know and trust just that much, that there is a power that can liberate those who are in bondage, who are oppressed, who are burdened. And those parts of us that are in bondage, oppressed, or burdened. That could be enough.

**And yet there is more, more for us in this story than just a general acknowledgment of God as a Liberator.**

Before coming here to interview for this position as your Bridge Minister, I was last in Seattle a few years ago for a preaching conference and heard Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence, a seminary Professor of Preaching in Georgia, talk of the importance of the verbs in a story. It's yet another way to see what is important and true, another way to be in the living conversation with our sacred stories. And in our story this morning, paraphrasing here:

The Divine Mystery says  
I have seen,  
I have heard,  
I know.

**Seeing. Hearing. Knowing.**

This is the expression of active Divine energy in this story.

This is not classroom seeing, hearing, and knowing, or that of the casual type with a car radio or a television. This is the kind of seeing, hearing, and knowing that leaves a mark, that makes a connection, that moves us.

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<sup>3</sup> From the novel in verse form, *Aurora Leigh*, Book 7, lines 812-826, 1857, by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

# IN SEARCH OF REFUGE - A HOME IN THE DESERT

**This depth of seeing, hearing, and knowing, is compassion.** Not pity, but compassion. Seeing, hearing, knowing at this level are practices of compassion. You see,

**God is a liberator because God is compassionate.**

**Or, you might say, through the path of compassion is liberation.**

**Remember in Jesus' sermon on the Mount**, in Matthew chapter 5, a good translation of a later part of that chapter could be "therefore be compassionate, as God is compassionate."

Like Moses and that burning bush, we are not merely to pass by or to casually notice or even to merely marvel or admire or wonder at the sight of God's compassion. Isn't God wonderful! We are to draw close to it, to take off our shoes and say "yes" to its invitation to be its agent, its channel. That's the admiration God wants.

Draw Close.

See.

Hear.

Know.

**After the July 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man** who killed young teenager Trayvon Martin, Alicia Garza was distraught. It could have been her brother. It could have been her. She wrote a message of compassionate love to black people that became an inspiration for the Black Lives Matter movement. And about a year and a half ago, I heard Alicia share this story at a conference in Denver. What touched me most was not her formidable grace and wisdom, but her heart, her love, her compassion.

*She – [Alicia] – saw the pain, she heard the pain, she knew the pain. In herself and in others.*

**Compassion is God's path to liberation and these are its practices.**

In their book, *A General Theory of Love*, researchers Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon note that mammals [you and me], related to the necessity of successfully raising their young, developed this incredible capacity to imprint, to bond parent and offspring, and to cry out when that bond is under threat.<sup>4</sup> Mammal babies cry out so that mammal caregivers can respond.

**And when we trace – the is interesting people – and when we trace the language roots of that which we translate in Scripture as compassion** back to its Hebrew roots, we find a Hebrew word for the womb. For the womb. It's as if God, like a caring Mother, hearing the cry of the life she has birthed comes to help. God sees, hears, and knows like that – in the womb, deep inside. And like that loving Divine Parent, we are asked to see, to hear, and to know like *that*, knowing in ourselves, in our bones, in our guts, in our womb, the cries (as well as the joys) of others and of all Creation. It's a big ask and it's the Call.

**In our University Church covenant** that we will speak together in a few moments, we say that we will be with each other in the pain (and in the joy), that we will promote God's reign of justice and peace, and that we will reject the false gods of society and proclaim God's Good News. To do that, my friends, we will have to see, to hear, and know with the depth of compassion.

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<sup>4</sup> Published by Random House in 2000.

## IN SEARCH OF REFUGE - A HOME IN THE DESERT

**Our Church Council and pastors are reading a book now** titled *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People To Talk About Racism*.<sup>5</sup> This is not being read out of accusation or guilt. Let me say that again: This is not being read out of accusation or guilt. This is being done as an *aspiration* to liberation and as a practice of *compassion*, for ourselves and for others. The reading is an attempt to see, to hear, and to know – to know the pain and the forms of bondage that cause that pain. This is an attempt to see through what is false, to hear what is really true, and to know a way out of our contemporary Egypt known as the system of white supremacy. Because the culture of white supremacy is a societal illusion, a false god, that keeps us from truly seeing, from truly hearing, and from truly knowing the experience, the cries of so much of humanity. That system does not want to be seen or discovered. It will take a depth of compassion to get through that illusion. I am grateful for the call to read it.

**And when I came here to interview**, upon walking through the building, I was confronted by the great red wall. It's something. But when I was interviewing, there were pictures – it was covered with images of Creation, its beautiful creatures and its cries of pain. I am grateful for the confrontation and the challenge to go deeper into the compassion that can move me and us to a new place, move us to compassionate action. So, thank you, Sacred Earth Matters team, for calling all of us to see, to hear, and to know deeper.

**The sacred compassionate seeing, hearing, and knowing** to which God calls us is *not* to call us out, to use the pointing (or the flipping) of the finger, but to call us *in*. I love that image that you have on all of your stuff. You guys have sweatshirts and stationery and stuff. You know what image I'm talking about? - It's everywhere! It's good for your branding, people. Very consistent.



That's what I'm talking about.

It's not to call people out that's compassion:

it's to call people in,  
into Life with a capital "L".

Deeper.

Come in.

Let's go deeper together.

This kind of compassion is to move us toward a new place that will move us to a new place where we will encounter like Moses a new vision that is hard to comprehend from our old way of seeing. We keep some of our old ways for sure, but there are old ways that will keep us from seeing.

This is a call to a new way of hearing, so that as Dr. King kind of said, and we will hear shortly, our jangling discord might become a symphony of solidarity. It is a call to a deeper knowing that can move us through the wilderness of illusion, intolerance, and injustice to the promised land of inclusion, community, and *joyful justice*.

*You know, justice can be joyful.*

*Did you know that? – Amen*

*It is not a heavy handed affair sometimes.*

*It is a dance of joy. That's part of our resistance.*

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<sup>5</sup> By Robin De Angelo, 2018, Beacon Press.

## IN SEARCH OF REFUGE - A HOME IN THE DESERT

So, my friends, if we are to be a people of God (or if that is not meaningful to you, a people of Love capital "L"), if we are to live into our covenant that we speak, if we are to honor the countless women and men who have come before and after the Rev. Dr. King, and who also lived and died seeking refuge in that promised land,

then we must risk ...

then we must risk ...

then we must risk and

practice a deep seeing, hearing, and knowing that moves us to take off our shoes and stand on the Holy Ground of compassion. It's the heavenly dream that we are called to make an earthly reality.

And let the people say AMEN.

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew 02/28/2019 from <https://universityucc.org/sermons> then to "More Podcasts" and SoundCloud as needed.