

September 3, 2023: Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Main Idea: When it comes to the divine calls we hear in our lives—the calls that, ultimately, help us to follow Jesus—God is an evergreen encourager and problem-solver who helps us respond the right way.

This passage from Matthew is familiar, dramatic and beloved. It is a call to action; a call to a life of faith; a call to following Jesus. To follow this call, we have to deny ourselves and take up our crosses. But what does denying yourself really mean? Surely a loving God wouldn't want us to neglect the things we need, or suppress the things about ourselves that God created in the first place. (The things that make us us.) And what should we understand taking up a cross to be? Our text from Exodus can actually provide a helpful few answers here. It lays out the story of the Burning Bush, which is also known as the call story of Moses.

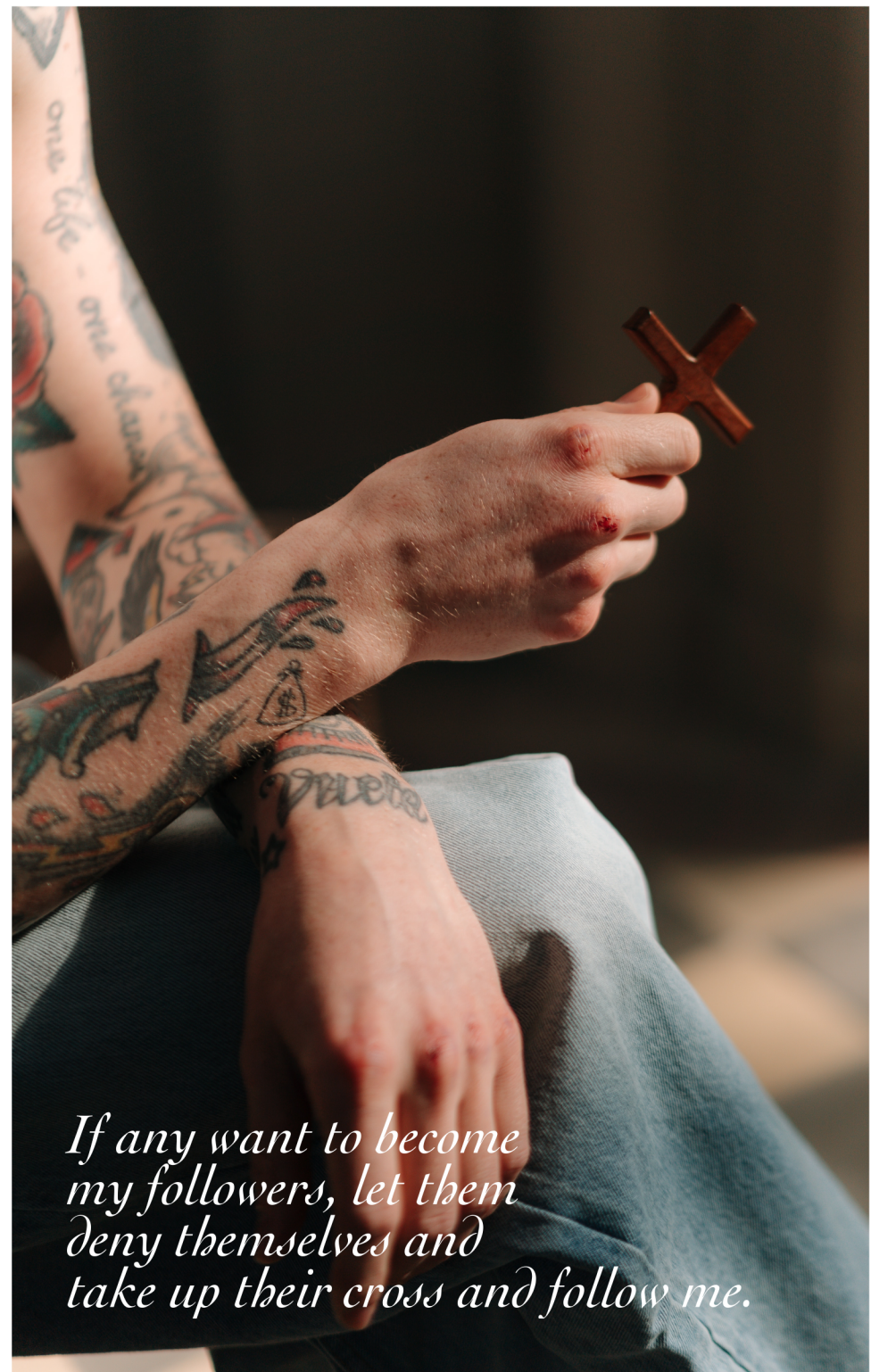
God doesn't ask Moses to deny himself and take up his cross—that would be bizarre and oh so anachronistic! But God does say, “Come. I will send you,” and lays out God's plan to send Moses to Pharaoh in order to liberate Israel. Moses makes excuses for why he's not the right choice. Four times Moses tries to resist God's call for his life (two times beyond the passage included in today's texts). And four times, God removes that resistance by offering solutions to all of the problems that Moses can conjure.

Denying yourself means denying the limiting beliefs that pop into your head and your heart the second you hear something new, as happened with Moses. God's grace is what makes us strong enough to deny our self-sabotage. It roots us in love instead of hate; consolation instead of desolation. God's grace is a radical perspective shift on the world that can make denying ourselves in the proper sense easier than it normally would be.

Closely tied to this is taking up your cross. It doesn't mean that you should seek out suffering—it means that you should seek out opportunities to live your life like those aforementioned limiting beliefs don't exist, opportunities to live your life like you are named and claimed and endlessly loved by the creator of the universe. That's difficult to do. It takes a lot of energy and persistence. And sometimes, it will make you feel alone. Like a martyr. But just like God did with Moses, God will make the ground you are standing on holy. God will meet you with assurance and a divine name and a staff and a team and anything else you need to fulfill the calls that God puts into your every day.

Scripture Summary

Jesus had his mind set on heavenly things so that he could give his life for the sake of the world. He taught his disciples to look upward and live forward.



*If any want to become
my followers, let them
deny themselves and
take up their cross and follow me.*

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GOD'S WORD for Today

First Reading: Exodus 3:1-15

3 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. ²There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶He 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. ⁷Then the Lord 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, ⁸and 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, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." ¹¹But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹²He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." ¹³But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

Psalm: Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45b

Second Reading: Romans 12:9-21

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Gospel: Matthew 16:21-28

²¹From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." ²³But he turned and said to Peter, "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." ²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? ²⁷"For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."