A Sermon for DaySpring

by Tiffani Harris

*The Commissioning of the New People of God*

Exodus 19: 19:2-8a and Matthew 9:35-10:8

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Last summer, my family took an epic trip. We went to Yellowstone National Park and Glacier National Park, and then we went up into Canada to experience the Canadian Rockies. We love the outdoors and especially the mountains. Brent and I had been to the Canadian Rockies before, so we looked forward to my family being able to experience the imposing and intimidating majesty of these mountains. I have memories of driving through the glacier fields and being amazed at how tall and overpowering the mountains were. While we were there, we had a short list of must do’s while we were there: the sunrise at Lake Louise, hiking and driving up through the glacier fields looking for waterfalls and wildlife all so the family could experience this same awe and wonder at God’s creation. We had beautiful weather in Glacier, so once we got to Canada and encountered low clouds and rain, lots of rain.

Not to be deterred, we got up early for the sunrise at Lake Louise and the very low clouds, fog and rain obscured everything. So, we tried again the next day, same thing. The following day was the only day we could do the long drive of sightseeing north and for the entire drive we were surrounded by low clouds and fog. We knew they were huge but we never got to see the tops of the mountains. Wildlife and waterfalls were hidden from view behind the fog.

We did not see the big picture.

The children of God have often missed the big picture. We try so hard to understand and see, and yet, we still miss the point. We encounter the people of God in a similar predicament in Exodus. They have cried out to God for deliverance from their enslavement, and God heard them. Yahweh brought them safely through the waters, heard their cries again by providing water and manna for the journey, and they are now camped at the bottom of Mt. Sinai. This is the same mountain in which Moses encountered God in the burning bush years earlier. It was then that Moses heard and heeded the call of God to set God’s people free. At Sinai, God meets his people and tries to help them see the big picture: Casting a vision for them for who He has called them to be. He reminds them of his faithfulness and how he “bore them on eagles’ wings.” He calls them in to a covenantal relationship with him. They are to love God and serve God, not for God’s sake but for the sake of the world.

God calls Israel into a partnership with Him, just as he did Moses. It has come full circle. They are commissioned right there on the Mountain of God, to be a “priestly people, a holy nation.” The people of God agree, replying “What the Lord says we will do.” If the priest is a nation, then the whole world is the parish. God was calling them to minister to the nations. Priests in that time mediated the presence of God to the people. They pronounced blessing, called the people together to be their best selves, taught God’s desires, and met with those who were on the fringes of society, what they called, the unclean. As a priestly kingdom, they were set apart not FROM the world but FOR the world. These who have experienced God’s faithfulness and liberation, the people of God were commissioned to be God’s agents in the world. Yahweh describes just how this will work itself out as he casts a vision before them, that they live in covenantal relationship with God and community. But in the following chapters of Exodus, they quickly lost sight of the big picture.

We are living in a time in which it is challenging to really see with the eyes of faith. You and I can easily come up with a long list of heart breaks, challenges, stress and anxiety that come from living during this turbulent period. It is as if the rug we are standing on has unraveled into a pile of yarn. We cannot see how God, the Great Weaver and Creator might take this pile of old, damaged yarn and use it to weave a new tapestry. I see glimpses that God is at work, even in the midst of this unraveling--when I hear you and Christians from all over asking the questions: What is the invitation from God for me in all of this? What is the invitation of the Church? How am I being called to repent?

The cell in the monastic tradition is the place of spiritual formation, and it exposes our shadows. It is as if IN the cell of quarantine that our personal and our collective shadows have been exposed. It is ugly to encounter our shadow staring right back at us in the mirror every morning. We have all seen our brokenness, our fears, our distractions, and our selfishness. The cell, while it is a hard place, is a good place because it leads us into the saving arms of a loving Father who heals us of our brokenness, binds our wounds, and sets us free from our enslavement to our own self. It is this loving embrace that transforms and strengthens us so that we are ready to be a part of the work and ministry of God to this world. Let us not shy away from examining our own hearts as we face our shadow sides. This is necessary if we are to be who God has called us to be.

What does it mean to be God’s people in the world? This is the question the children of God have struggled with. To demonstrate God’s vision once again, we encounter Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew living this out by healing the blind, curing the sick and noticing the harassed and helpless. Jesus saw and heard – reminding us to pay attention. We see Jesus here, going about the task of creating a new people of God by inviting the disciples and us to be a part of the inbreaking of God’s kingdom. It is a kingdom where those who have been overlooked are seen and where those who have no shepherd are cared for. The Good Shepherd appoints a diverse, unqualified, and wiry group to continue the work he has started. These new disciples will betray him, get it wrong over and over, one is pro-Roman government and another is zealously opposed to it. Yet, Christ still calls them and equips them as they go, sending them as laborers into the harvest. Rarely does Jesus teach his disciples how to pray, but this time he does. He tells them to pray for laborers for the harvest who will help in ministering to the world. Quickly the disciples realize that they are the answer to their own prayers.

If we will see and open our eyes, we will find a ripe harvest and we have been commissioned by God to engage in it. This kingdom work is not just for pastors -- for all of us. We are all ordained by God in our baptisms to be priests, representing God to this world. We have read “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few” many times, and we’ve probably wondered what to make of it thinking that this passage was not for us . . . or that the task is just too big?

There are many reasons why the harvest seems impossible: The disciples were flawed, and so are we. We don’t know where to begin and Jesus isn’t here pointing the way. We are surrounded by polarization – political, religious, racial. . . and yet, the volatility of our society right now is not all that different from Matthew’s ancient Roman society.

The birth of the Messiah who would bring peace to the land was so disruptive that Caesar committed the genocide of children to stop it. When Jesus preached his first sermon in his home church, he proclaimed freedom to the captives and they immediately tried to kill him.

Matthew states that Jesus had compassion on the harassed and helpless crowd. Christ’s personal transformation of our own hearts is what helps us to see and hear with eyes of compassion. The Rev. William Barber is known for saying that the “Gospel is personal and social.” We cannot neglect either. All of the images that Christ uses of the kingdom are small: salt and light, mustard seeds, and yeast. God’s work begins in us, starting small, and leaves the mark of contagious love in its wake. Later in this passage from Matthew, Jesus commissions the disciples and sends them out in a ministry of compassion and healing. They may have had many of the same questions and insecurities that we have, and so Christ promised them that the Holy Spirit will be their guide and strength. This season of Pentecost reminds us that this same Spirit continues to empower the people of God today. Some of you who participated in VBS here may remember “God sightings” – times when we saw glimpses of God through the Holy Spirit at work around us.

I am reminded of a family story that offers a glimpse of how God can use just one family. It is the story of a farmer who lived in one of the poorest counties in the country during the Great Depression. On the banks of an Arkansas river, the Ouachita River, there was a thriving farm with acres and acres of land filled with cotton, grain and corn. The Depression had hit the county hard, and people were struggling. This one farm, however, was making it. Marion, the farmer had lost his first wife and seven children to a blood disorder. He knew what despair felt like and he had compassion on his neighbors whose farms were failing and who were filled with despair.

With his new wife and five children, they worked hard on the farm and had a strong faith in God and checked in on their neighbors. They had nothing to spare and they ate a lot of cornbread and beans. Prices dropped and one by one neighbors began to ask the bank for a loan to help them keep their farms during the lean times. Each time, the banker would reply they had to have a co-signer on the loan. Quickly word got out that this compassionate farmer would co-sign on a loan and put up some of his farm as collateral. Over the course of years, Marion signed on many loans. It began to be a burden for his family as they lost parts of their land when others could not pay their loans back. The once thriving and sprawling farm on the banks of the river dwindled to several acres and a barn. He was remembered for years as the one who tried to save the farms of Polk County. In his old age, he would say that he did not regret helping out his fellow neighbor – as his faith called him to do so. This is what Shane Claiborne calls “evangelism by fascination” – living in such a way that your actions back up your words and draw others to this fascinating faith that we have in Christ.

The church just might need a renewal of this fascination. It may be time for a collective renewal of the heart for the church as well, as we face our own shadows and repent. However, we also need to claim our rich history that Christians have led the way in some of the world’s greatest acts of service, compassion and reform from the civil rights movement to the abolishment of child labor laws and the anti-slavery movement led by William Wilberforce and the many untold stories like that of my great- grandfather. And I know among you, as well, the compassion that we see on playgrounds and in cafeterias among our young people. It’s there. We just have to look for it.

Today, the people of the city of Geel, Belgium, open their homes to those overlooked and suffering from mental illness. They are continuing a tradition begun by the church 700 years ago. The Hope and Healing Center of St. Martin’s Episcopal Church in Houston offers free mental health care, medication, and addiction care for 800 people a week in the city. These are good reminders of how the church can participate in the harvest that is ripe for compassion, for justice, and for healing.

Although turmoil is abundant and we may be standing with unraveled yarn pooling around our feet, a tapestry will be woven again. For in Christ Jesus, we are being transformed into a new people of God with the renewed task of being ministers and priests to this world.

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