

Sermon for Proper 17, Aug 31, Faith as spiral

Women, at an earlier age than men, often understand that faith is more a spiral than a straight line. It's strange that men, and sometimes women, often turn faith into something like American football, driving forward in a straight line. Faith is really more like soccer, in which we advance going a bit forward then back then sideways and forward again- more a spiral, going around three steps forward and two steps back. A spiral goes somewhere, though it's not always clear just where. We wait for an opening, with God beckoning.

Moses was living in his daily circle of events, going round and round, nowhere in particular, tending his flock of sheep, when in his side vision he saw a bush burn ...and burn...and keep burning. "Hmmm," he said, turning toward the bush, attentive to the presence. Yahweh, the Hebrew word for the holy presence, is the sound of breathing: Yah-weh. "Moses, Moses," he heard himself addressed..."Here am I" he said. Now he was fully engaged. "Here am I" is the response of the prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah. Mary would make the same response centuries later. "Here am I... let it be with me according to your word." Faith begins with our being addressed by a presence drawing us beyond our routines. Both Moses and Mary had their doubts. The fire would need to go on burning to draw them forward.



Then there's Peter, in the gospel, good old Peter who always takes two steps back for every three forward. Peter, you may remember, had just confessed Jesus as Lord- and Jesus had said, "You are Peter, petra, the rock on whom the church will be built." Then Jesus says he must go into the conflict in Jerusalem, and suffer the slings of church and empire. He foresees the cross. And Peter, who earlier wanted to sit on Jesus' right hand, says, "No, No, not you Lord. God forbid, it's meant to be up, up and away." A step back for Peter. He doesn't get it.. Jesus says, anyone who wants to become my follower, take up your cross and follow; those who lose their life for my sake will find it. Before the new life is the letting go, and letting God.

By dying to self, Jesus means in modern terms, letting go of the ego structure that has the world revolving around me, or my group. We quite naturally build such a

world. It's necessary for initial survival. As helpless infants we need a bevy of adults circling around us. And even as adults we need our families, tribes, clans, and support groups. But entering the full realm of God means letting go of ourselves at the center.

Step outside on a summer night, preferably a moonless night, and behold the stars. We used to think they turned in their spheres *around us*. The big dipper, and the sun, we thought, rotated around us. Of course, it's we that are turning.

The spiral of faith brings us with the help of others to who truly are. Here am I, we can say with Moses and Mary. "Here am I." We do well to remember a word from the Rabbi Zusha. Zusha lay crying on his deathbed. "Rebbe Zusha," his students asked, "Why are you so sad? After all the mitvahs and good deeds you have done, surely you will have a great reward." "I'm afraid," said Zusha, "because when I get to heaven, God is not going to ask why you were not more like Moses? Or why were you not like King David? He's going to ask, why were you not more like Zusha. What will I say?"

God wants to bring us to our true selves, who we are in relation to God in our time and place. We'll begin a practice this fall called Walking the Neighborhood. In pairs or small groups we'll walk, and listen, and engage with our immediate environment- whether it be at home, work, or this street on which we worship. We will ask, where is God in our engagements? Whom do I behold, and by whom am I beheld? We expect this journey will be a spiral. It may take more than a few weeks to know where we are headed, by whom we are addressed. We'll keep regular times of prayer and observation. Our goal is to be attentive to the bush that keeps on burning, whom we know as the Christ.