

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 9/3/2023 (Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 105 1-6, 23-26, 45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28) *Elizabeth Felicetti*

I'm intimidated, showing up to preach after seven and a half months of not preaching. Months without being surrounded by commentaries, without weekly Bible study, months that I mostly spent in a chair staring out the window, petting Pepper from time to time and obsessing over what I was going to eat next and whether my body would actually absorb any nutrients. I want to preach something Jesus-centered that assures you about our future together while also being realistic. All that while faithfully following the scriptures of the day without reading anything into them that isn't there.

The readings are all bursting with fruit this morning. Burning bush. Rejoicing in hope, being patient in suffering, persevering in prayer. And Jesus telling his beloved, loyal friend Peter to "Get behind me, Satan."

And our psalm: continually seek God's face. That image kept leaping out at me the past month, as I lingered over these readings and imagined being back up here facing you all after such a long time away. Sometimes challenges make it hard for us to find God's face. I had some trouble in the past few months seeking God's face. I felt like I encountered stumbling block after stumbling block. I was only supposed to be gone until April, and then June, and then July, but more and more stuff kept happening. My health is still uncertain. I find it hard to seek God's face watching you all on a screen. I went to other churches and sometimes felt I found God in a sermon or in the sacrament, but it wasn't the same. Sometimes I was mad at God.

Do you come here to St. David's to seek God's face?

Moses wasn't seeking God's face when he encountered the burning bush. He was keeping Jethro's flock in the wilderness when he saw the strange sight—a bush that burned but was not consumed. He approached it to investigate, and then, according to today's Exodus passage, "God saw that Moses had turned aside to see," and God called out.

While I am drawn to the line "seek God's face," I am comforted by this story with its idea that God seeks *us*. Seeks me. Watches me to see if I notice the signs that God sends. When I was too annoyed to seek God's face sometimes, God still seemed to send me signs of love. Especially through all of you: stacks of cards. Coffee hour cookies. Encouraging messages when I most needed them.

God seeks us even when we aren't seeking God. While we may not always believe it, God never abandons us.

Sometimes we can seek God by following biblical injunctions like the ones in today's epistle from Paul to the early church in Rome. I especially resonate with rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Hope is sometimes hard to cling to, and if most people told me to "be patient in suffering" I'd get annoyed; but I trust Paul and those early Christians. They suffered differently than I do, in ways I can't imagine. They understood suffering. They aren't saying ignore it or rise above it, but "be patient." Not *my* strong suit, but something to strive for. Persevere in prayer is something I can do, even when I feel like I can't find God. Every morning

I listen to Morning Prayer on an app, and the liturgy and scripture perseveres in me when I can't come up with my own words. Our book of common prayer is a gift for prayer perseverance.

This morning's Gospel reminds us that sometimes when seeking God, we will face a stinging rebuke. When Jesus talked about his own great suffering, Peter took him aside. He didn't want this for his friend, his Messiah. Jesus told him "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." Can you imagine how poor Peter must have felt? Peter didn't have any epistles back then. He hadn't yet learned to "be patient in suffering," and he certainly didn't want Jesus to suffer. It didn't seem like something a strong leader should do. But God in Jesus was willing to suffer and die, to lay down his life. And because Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, Jesus recognized Peter's vision of a suffering-free ministry as a stumbling block and rejected this temptation.

Where do you see yourselves in these readings this morning?

Do you turn aside from the direction you're going to see signs that God may have sent? Maybe they aren't as dramatic as a blazing bush. I often see God in the actions of children, or in the beauty of birds and butterflies, or watching people care for someone they love. I've been so blessed to have people I love take care of me for the past many months. What about you? What signs might you be missing?

Sometimes I hear the epistles as lists of rules instead of as the *love letters* that they are. Paul *loved* those Romans in the church to whom he was writing, and I believe that if they did feed their enemies and offer them something to drink, they would be seeking God. They might even become the sign that someone else could use to find God.

I hate how much I identify with Peter. Like him, I want to do everything right. I want to be Jesus' best friend, but I'm clumsy and awkward and always mess up and say the exact wrong thing. I hope that I will persevere like Peter did and stick around even after I mess up, because while Jesus pointedly tells Peter that he's wrong, and while Peter will go on to deny Jesus three times, Jesus keeps loving Peter. God through Jesus seeks Peter out after resurrection and offers chance after chance, and Peter goes on to do faithful work in the world.

Can you seek God today? If not, can you be open to letting God seek you? How will you respond to your mistakes?