

August 30, 2026—The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. James Wyatt

Back to Basics

I have to say, it's a pretty cool thing to come back from three weeks of vacation, well rested and refreshed, sit down to look at the lectionary and find four passages that bring me back to the basics. It's sort of like God saying, "OK, I know you've been away, so here's what we've been talking about." It's a bit like a recap at the start of a new TV season—here's the important details you'll want to bear in mind as we continue the story in the weeks and months ahead. And that's a nice way, too, to start our fall together—let's go back to basics, the foundational material for what's ahead of us.

We start off with the burning bush, as God appeared to Moses on Mount Horeb, speaking through tongues of flame that didn't consume what they rested upon. This is where we really meet the God who is at once immanent and transcendent, simultaneously pervading the cosmos and separate from it, both present right here with us and incomprehensibly beyond us. Here Moses encounters the God of his ancestors, a God of covenant relationship and steadfast faithfulness, a God who observes our misery and hears our cries for help—who is at the same time the creator of the cosmos, the unknowable "I AM," the One Who Is, or what theologians sometimes call the Ground of Being. This is a God who makes ordinary bushes and desert ground holy, a God whom we meet in unexpected places and through everyday things. And this God promises Moses, and promises us, "I will be with you." This God does wonderful things for God's people.

And our Psalm this morning is all about how we respond to the wonderful things God does: we give God thanks, we sing God's praise. And we remember and tell the stories of what God has done for us and for our ancestors. And that's not because God is some kind of malignant narcissist who needs us to puff up the divine ego or anything like that. No. It's because cultivating gratitude reminds us that all the riches of the earth are gifts from God meant for all of us to share, not for any of us to hoard. It reminds us that we are our siblings' keepers, we have a responsibility to be as generous with others as God has been with us. The story of God's deeds of power in freeing the Israelites from Egypt has always served as a reminder of our obligation to treat immigrants in our own land with hospitality and generosity, because that's our ancestors' story too.

And Paul's message, as he draws near the end of his long letter to the church in Rome, is along the same lines: because of what God has done for us in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, this is how we ought to live—which I am sorely tempted to sum up as "Do what Dolly Parton would do!" Love one another. Let love be genuine, live in harmony with one another, live peaceably with all, feed the hungry, extend hospitality to strangers, and overcome evil with good. "All things," Paul says a few verses back, are "from God and through God and to God," (Romans 11:36) and God's gracious generosity to us should elicit the same kind of generosity in us, in love and kindness to others.

And then we come to our Gospel lesson—which I think is fair to say is pretty much the heart of the Gospel. Right after Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, and Jesus proclaimed Peter blessed, promising that he would build his church on that rock (which is what "Peter" means), "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering... and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter"—good old Peter, the rock on whom Jesus said he would build his church—"took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' " I love how, in the space of six verses, Peter goes from great insight to great folly, from the rock on which the church is built to a stumbling block under Jesus' feet, from "blessed are you" to "get behind me, Satan!" When Jesus asks "who do you say I am," Peter's a good student—he raises his hand and gives the right answer, and Jesus commends him for it. But when Jesus shows them who he really is—that he must undergo great suffering, and be rejected, and be

killed, and after three days rise again—Peter's the student who raises his hand again and says, "Well, actually, I'm pretty sure you're wrong—according to Scripture, the Messiah's going to retake the throne of Israel, free us from the oppression of Rome, and rule on earth for ever!" Peter somehow thinks it's a good idea to explain the idea of the Messiah to the Messiah himself.

Because here's the thing: given everything I've been saying this morning, about God's love for us, God's covenant relationship with God's people, about God's promise to be with us and do marvelous things for us, it is sometimes easy to forget that the heart of the whole Christian story is a Messiah who suffers and dies. But we forget that at our peril. When we do, we might turn God into Santa Claus, and find ourselves believing that God gives health and wealth and prosperity as a reward for good behavior—which must then mean that illness and poverty are the result of sin. That's the heresy of the so-called prosperity gospel. Or we might turn God into Caesar, imagining that the risen, triumphant Christ calls us to claim political power and exert the violence of Empire to bring the world under his feet. We might imagine that America is God's chosen nation and try to impose a narrow vision of God's law onto our government. That's the heresy of so-called Christian nationalism. Both of these false gospels are a little too much like Peter—clinging to the idea that the Messiah is all about worldly power and wealth, a king just like earthly kings. Both of these false gospels set their minds on human things, and not on divine things. And both of them have failed to heed Jesus' call: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Taking up our cross and walking in the way of the crucified Messiah means declaring our allegiance to the kin-dom of God, where the last are first and the greatest of all are servants of all. It means striving for justice and equality and peace, building community on the kinship of our common humanity, and taking a stand against the evils of Empire.

To be clear, none of that negates what I said about our reading from Exodus and our Psalm and that lovely passage from Romans. Rather, the Gospel is what fulfills those other passages. Our loving God, who spoke to Moses from the burning bush, the God who is both present with us and infinitely beyond us, this God meets us in ordinary things and unexpected places. This God is deeply invested in us and all humanity, a God of covenant promises who acts in the world to bring that kin-dom of justice and equality to fruition. And we give our thanks and praise to God because of it, as the Psalm says.

So may we go forth from here and do our part to bring that kin-dom to life: by loving one another with mutual affection, by rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep, by living in harmony with one another, feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty, and showing hospitality to strangers. And may we, with God's help, overcome evil with good.

Amen.