

May I speak in the Name of the Holy, Living, and Undivided Trinity; one God, now and forever,
Amen.

Good morning. There is so much in these lessons today; so many directions we could go.

I think when I was just starting out as a lay preacher in the late 90s, I preached on these texts, and the verse that spoke to me was Jesus' "take up your cross" forewarning from Matthew, because that's where I was, theologically, at that time. I couldn't ignore it. I'm not sure what, if anything, I might have done with the "get behind me Satan" verse, though.

And then there's the call of Moses in the first lesson, met with the familiar "you can't possibly be asking *me* to do that" resistance we find in the biblical call narratives; or the pastorally reassuring "heap burning coals on their heads" vision from Romans.

Yes, so many from which to choose; honestly, if we think about it, there's probably a good month's worth of Bible Study contained just in these passages alone that we could do together; but alas, we only have about 8 to 10 minutes here this morning to examine them.

And in reflecting on this, I realized I am actually much closer to the end of my preaching career, at this point, than the beginning. If I've preached perhaps 120 times over the course of the past 30 years, I may only have another 10 or 20 sermons to go. So, time and life become much more precious commodities.

Meaning: what is it that I really want to focus on and share with you at this point in my journey, before my time here is completed? What is of primary importance, or consideration?

In today's first lesson, we hear God speak for the first time in the Book of Exodus.

“I have observed the misery of my people; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters; the cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them.”

Any time God says something that many times in a single paragraph of biblical text, we are probably wise to listen and take heed.

We are not alone in our suffering. Our God is a God who hears our suffering. And not only hears, not only listens to, but responds to – our God is a God who liberates, heals, renews, and restores us.

I remember the impact, when it was pointed out to me for the first time, that these are the first words that God speaks in the Book of Exodus; the first thing God says is that He hears, observes, and is moved so deeply by the people’s suffering, that He has come down to respond and do something about it.

And what I was taught is that when something like this happens in scripture, when there’s a “first” and it’s emphasized, then it’s important to take note of what’s going on, because it just might provide an important clue as to what is of first importance to God.

And of course the Exodus account does go on to become the meta-narrative through which virtually the entirety of the remainder of Hebrew Scripture is viewed.

Liberation Theology, and Black Liberation Theology in particular, also utilize this passage as a foundation point for the understanding that scripture tells us God is aligned with those who are suffering, that God hears the suffering of God’s people, and that God liberates the oppressed from their suffering.

In fact, Absalom Jones, the first African American priest in the Episcopal Church, used this text as the basis for his New Year's-day sermon in 1808, on the abolition of the African slave trade in this country. You can look it up!

So, isn't it interesting that we have this passage to consider today, for our fifth Sunday Healing Service.

I will confess, it was a little too much of a synchronicity for me to pass up.

Now, what many or most of you probably don't know is that I've been attending AA meetings for the past 18 months.

It is a central tenet of AA that it is God who relieves us of our suffering, not only as it relates to alcohol, because AA is not only about not drinking, but as it relates to healing in all other dimensions and aspects of our lives and our relationships with others.

So many times, over the past year and a half, I have heard stories of failed attempts to maintain sobriety, or to overcome a character defect, that only come to an end when we finally admit our powerlessness, and surrender our will to God's will, and ask God for help.

So many phrases, like: "we came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us"; and "we made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God"; and that "probably no human power could have relieved" our suffering; but that "God could and would, if He were sought."

The lived experience of AA's is that God responds to our cries, and alleviates our suffering, and what today's passage tells us is that God hears those cries, observes our suffering, and liberates us, heals us, from that suffering.

So that is really the heart of my message this morning; it's a Healing Service, and I want the focus to be on God's healing power, in and through Christ.

What are we carrying with us? What burdens are we unable to overcome on our own? What guilt, shame, or remorse have we been carrying with us, perhaps for years, or even decades, that we would like to let go of?

Because that's what is being offered to us, my friends.

Here, today, in this service of healing, and even more intentionally, through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which can be found on page 447 of the Prayer Book, we are offered the chance to let go of those burdens, and to surrender and make room for God's will in our lives.

Our God is One who hears our cries, and enacts healing in our lives.

That is the lived experience of people in AA, and it is also my lived experience here in the Episcopal Church. Faith has become no longer, merely or strictly, a matter of belief, but a matter of my lived experience.

And, in the case of AA, this has become true for a group of people that largely consider themselves non-religious, with many who come into the program and openly struggle with the notion of surrendering to a God they don't necessarily "believe in."

And today's passage from Exodus connects all those dots for us, doesn't it? Isn't that something?! Isn't that something?!

I have heard the cry of my people.

God hears our suffering, and when we finally surrender to God's will for us, not only are we relieved of that suffering, but we are then enabled to go out in service to Christ, and carry that message to others who are suffering.

That's what's happening here, that's what's being offered, today, in this healing service; and that's the core message I've received and learned in AA.

And that's kind of it. I will confess, I haven't really heard, seen, or come across an AA sermon, that I can recall at least, in all the years I've been attending church. So, it wasn't like there was a template for this or anything for me to draw on or from. AI was not used or consulted in connection with the preparation of this message.

But those verses did jump out at me quite clearly, and I couldn't let them go. So I struggled and persevered and trusted that God would give me the words I needed to transmit this message.

Because this is a message that gets right to the core of our innermost being, our individual need for healing, and knowing that God is acquainted with our suffering.

But it also extends outward, doesn't it?, from the individual, to the collective, to the corporate: to the plight of the ancient Israelites, as we see in this passage; to the liberation and emancipation of peoples who were enslaved, as expressed by Absalom Jones in his sermon over 200 years ago; and right down to the cries of the present-day victims of disease, war, famine, and natural disasters, such as the devastation we have just witnessed this past week in Nepal.

So here's something to consider: even though we are not saying the general Confession today, I am reminded of how we are all tied together. Let's just say it turns out that our present-day culture, consumption, and lifestyle is in part tied to the collapse of that glacier; or if not, I'm sure we can think of other situations where our tax dollars have contributed to suffering in other parts

of the globe; the point is, that we all share, in a corporate sense, in some part of the world's suffering; so that's where I think the words we recite in the form of confession we sometimes use: "the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf", are so relevant. They are a recognition of our interconnectedness and our ongoing corporate and collective need for repentance and forgiveness.

We are not alone in our suffering: neither individually, collectively, corporately, or globally.

When we call or cry out to God, we are heard. That is the promise we hear today.

We don't come here to escape the world's suffering, but rather, to be healed, so that we can go out and face, confront, and hopefully alleviate, some small piece of the world's suffering.

Our faith is not a means of escape from the world; but a healing balm, that restores us and allows us, through Christ, to go out in service to others.

So, even if you don't come forward for a healing prayer today, know that your prayer, your cry, your plea, is heard by God. And yes, I know, I know, sometimes it does seem like it takes God an awful long time to respond – in the case of the Israelites, I believe it was about 400 years, and in the case of the African slave trade, it was several hundred years as well; but our collective lived experience, and that of our forebears, which has been handed down to us, and whose faith we have inherited, is that when we do finally surrender our will, and ask God for healing and restoration, that God does hear us, and that God, in and through Christ, does heal us. Amen.