

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Anne Slakey
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**The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Sacramento, California**

Today we have Jesus and Moses, the pre-eminent figures in the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible. They are both working on understanding and following their call. So that's where we'll be today, with vocation and holiness, and then, we'll conclude with a surprise guest.

Let's start with Jesus, who is just beginning to teach his disciples the hard truth at the heart of his call as Messiah. "He must undergo great suffering...and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Peter takes Jesus aside to say that this should never happen. When people talk about Jesus' response, they focus on how the Rock of the Church is now being called Satan, Tempter. To me the force of Jesus' response is not about Peter, it's about how strong the Temptation is for him to live a life free of suffering, secure in his power as Messiah. That is not the path Jesus must follow.

Instead, Jesus tells his followers that they, too, must take up their cross and follow him. This is often quoted at people who are trying to discern their vocation, and I don't just mean to Holy Orders. I had a variant of it quoted to me as a child, and that was "Offer it up." To me that meant "Stop complaining". Does this mean Jesus wants us to suffer? God will help us bear it if suffering comes our way, but God does not will suffering for us, even if it seems to be built into the world as presently constituted. The second part of this teaching rang true as I tried to understand and follow God's call. "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." On our way to God, we have to let God show us what life really is. He wants us to have life and have it abundantly. On my way to Holy Orders, there were things I had to let go. I had to give up the dream of being a college professor like my Father. At the time it was hard, a kind of death, but I can affirm, as Jesus promised, that God helped me find my life. That is vocation, being willing to let go, being willing to let parts of ourselves die, being willing to let God show us who we are and what we are to do. As Jesus did.

And as Moses did, or is beginning to do today. He is out in the desert because he tried to respond to the call to serve his Israelite brothers in the wrong way. When he saw an Egyptian abusing them, he killed him, and was forced to flee. Now, years later, he has a family and is tending sheep. God reaches out to

him in the sign of the burning bush. I've been unfortunate enough to have to drive through a forest fire and a brush fire, so for me, the very thought of the burning bush is terrifying. Fire can spread so quickly through dry vegetation, yet here is a fire that stays in one place, and does not destroy the bush that feeds it. God speaks to Moses from the fire, and Moses responds "Here I am." God tells Moses "I am the God of your Fathers," and then says he has heard the call of "His people", note the possessive. He knows their sufferings; he will deliver them. But God needs a human agent, someone who will act for him, and that someone is Moses.

Next comes a part of call we don't often hear discussed. In my picture of taking up the cross and following, I assumed one followed silently. Moses follows God, questioning and complaining all the way. In effect, he asks God, are you sure you've got the right person? After God assures him, Moses dares to ask for God's name, and gets a response that is deeply meaningful and incomprehensible at the same time. There are several different possible translations, depending on the tense of the verb. I AM WHO I AM, or, I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE, or I AM WHO CAUSES TO BE. God then reiterates what he said earlier, that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the fathers.

What I learn from Moses about vocation is that God is passionate and compassionate about his people, but he needs a human agent to speak for him. The human agent is not erased by God's will, instead, in this real relationship, we can question, converse, learn, grow, and even refuse.

Which brings me to our surprise guest, because she makes the point that there are many ways to follow God, spread love and kindness, and even change the world. Did you know that, in a recent poll, Dolly Parton was by far the person in public life that people most admired? Sometimes the majority is wrong, but I don't think they are in this case. The thing that got me thinking about her was an article that claimed her essential quality, the quality people responded to, was holiness. That's right, holiness.

On the face of it, that seems strange. Just think of the way she dressed! Elaborate, over the top, showing off every curve. She famously admitted that her clothes were modelled on "the town tramp", she just thought they were pretty. As a teenager, she was scolded for her clothes by her grandfather, a Pentecostal preacher. But Dolly had absorbed Jesus' teaching about having fellowship with tax collectors and sinners, and "Judge not, lest ye be judged." When people came at her with judgement or comments about her physique, she turned it aside with humor and grace. She dressed how she wanted. She was not afraid of her own

sexuality, or anyone else's, for that matter. She was an advocate for the LGBTQ community, saying Do Not Judge, God loves everyone.

She was definitely gifted by God with an angelic voice, high, pure and true. Her voice is so unique that I think her musicianship gets overlooked. She developed what God gave her. She made a lot of money, and has given lots of it away. Her Imagination Library changes children's lives with the gift of reading. The program is so successful the state of Missouri has banned it. She changed the economics of her home county in Tennessee with jobs and enterprise. She funded Covid Research. I could go on.

I think the thing that most makes me say, "Holiness, yes, I can see that," is her best known song, I Will Always Love You. She wrote it not for an old lover, but for a Boss who had become a tyrant, Porter Wagoner. He gave her the big break, she had worked for years on his TV show and released many hit duets with him. But he could be controlling and demeaning, and she wanted to be in charge of her own career. He was refusing to let her quit. Instead of being bitter or angry, she wrote this song. It was her way of saying, I'm grateful for our time together, but I'm leaving because its best for us both. To me, that's grace, that's forgiveness, that's love. After that, he let her go.

I'd never thought of it before, but when I listen to her, and look at her life, I do see Holiness. I read she was a woman of prayer and strong faith. I definitely see the fruits and gifts of the Spirit, Music, of course, also Love, Joy, Kindness, Gentleness and Self Control. Underneath all the fluff and giggles, she was a disciplined musician and a disciplined person.

I don't despair because I can't sing like Dolly, or part the Red Sea like Moses, I'm not them, they're not me. I can see abundant life in them, and I know its there for me. We can find holiness in many unlikely places. Its a reminder that God is calling us all to meet him at the burning bush, to take off our shoes, and to lose our life in order to find it.