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<Exodus 3:1-15; Psalm 26:1-8; Matthew 16:21-28>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

My teacher for Senior English in high school once had us engage in an exercise studying opening lines of literature. Lines such as:

“It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.”

“In a hole in a hill, there lived a hobbit.”

“Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy.”

“The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed.”

My teacher, Mrs. Wehmyer, wanted us to consider and discuss opening sentences and think, really think, about not only what caught our attention but *why* it caught our attention. To consider what was effective or not. To think critically and deliberately about the beginning of a thing, particularly the beginning of a story.

At the time I thought it was a mere homework exercise, and as a high school senior whose eyes were firmly set upon graduation and what would follow graduation, I confess I didn't give it a whole lot of thought. Nevertheless, it remains an exercise that has stuck with me in the decades since, and has come to make more and more sense to me.

It is not lost on me that we are at a beginning point. Given the potential enormity I feel at this moment, it could be enough to make anyone in my position tremble with fear for getting it right. Thankfully, I've come to know all of you enough to put that trepidation aside. Also, we are not the first ones to be in such a situation, and we have the benefit of the stories of our forebears in faith to guide us.

This morning we join the disciples with Jesus. Technically, they are fully in the midst of his ministry, but it is a new beginning of sorts in that Jesus has now turned his eyes toward Jerusalem, and now it is time for the disciples to begin the journey from being students to being teachers themselves. After the crucifixion, the disciples are going to be the agents of the Kingdom of God here in the world; it is time for them to begin thinking in such terms. Jesus wants to prepare them for this, but his teaching is not, perhaps, what we might anticipate or expect.

Jesus does not give a seminar on leadership and dynamic speaking. He does not encourage the disciples to begin taking courses on systems theory or the Enneagram. (By the way, I should say that I have nothing against these courses or learnings, and have benefitted greatly from them myself). But that isn't where Jesus starts this new beginning for the disciples. He doesn't even begin with a discourse on how to protect one's self or offer savvy tips for the new world traveler. In fact, Jesus offers almost the opposite.

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"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me." (NLT)

He tells the disciples, in no uncertain or unequivocal terms that to follow his teachings, to commit to and dedicate one's life to proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God, is going to lead to difficulty, hardship, and perhaps even death. And it cannot be accomplished by holding first and foremost onto one's own desires, perspectives, and life.

Quite the sales' pitch, isn't it?

Peter even tries to hush Jesus, knowing just how uncomfortable are these teachings, but Jesus is having none of that. He needs the disciples to know. And more than that, he knows the disciples need to begin in the right way. They need the right opening sentences. If their story is to be the story of God and the Kingdom of God, then it must begin this way: not with assured success and acclaim, but with a humility to follow God and to trust in God for all needed things. Nothing else will lead to the desired end; only beginning with a reliance on God will get them there.

We find a similar theme this morning in the Exodus reading and the story of Moses. And yet again, we see another opening line: "Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro...he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God."

And Moses encountered there an amazing thing. An awe-some and awe-inspiring thing: A bush that was fully engulfed in flame, and yet was not consumed. Turning aside to see this marvelous thing, Moses hears the voice of God, calling and commanding. Calling him to draw closer and attend. Commanding him to take off his sandals, for he is on holy ground.

This is no mere act of respect or civility. To take off one's sandals is to become vulnerable and open, and in this case of Moses, it is to become vulnerable and open to the very presence of God. Furthermore, it is an act of placing one's self in right relationship before God. Moses offers himself in respect and humility, knowing that he is in the Divine Presence. He is in no other position than to hear and to follow where he is being led. And as we find out, he is about to follow God into a great ordeal, taking him back to the very place he fled in fear just a few verses earlier, to confront the most powerful leader of the known world on behalf of God and for the people of God. He is about to begin one of the greatest stories of all time, and there is only one way in which he can begin: humbly trusting God to lead him.

How we begin is important. There's a reason that the opening sentences of a story are so crucial. Not just because most people make a decision on a story in the first paragraph or two. But because the opening sentences set the tone of the entire story to follow. And we, gathered this morning here in this place to worship God together and to find our spirits refreshed and renewed, we are in the beginning of a new story.

And the tone of this story is one of holy humility.

I want to make clear that humility in this sense is not a sense of embarrassment or humiliation in the eyes of your peers. It is not demeaning or denigrating. Rather, holy humility in this sense is essentially the deliberate desire and work to recognize that I, that we, are not the main characters of the story. God, and the realization of the Kingdom of God, is the primary character. To engage in the practice of holy humility, then, is to place God first, and ourselves secondary. It is to remember that there is more at work and present than just us, and to know where we stand in relation to this main character. And it is, in fact, liberating and life-giving. It is work and ministry-enabling to practice this, seen both in the teachings of Jesus to the disciples and in Moses' response to the presence of God in the burning bush.

As we begin this morning - whether it be for the week to come or the years of ministry to come - as we begin this morning we are invited and reminded to begin in a place of humility. We place ourselves before the divine and recognize that God is God, we are not, and we desire to follow, proclaiming good news as we go along. Whatever else may come, this is our beginning.

But while it is a beginning, we should remember, also, that this is not our story. Rather, we are the beginning of a next chapter in God's story. It is the story God is telling to the world - a story of relationship and compassion, a story of redemption and renewal, a story of a love so magnificent and profound that it can only be known in the living of it. It is a story of Life, and we are a part of it. We begin this chapter of God's story by recalling those who have likewise begun their own chapters in this story throughout the ages.

Jesus reminds the disciples that to live as disciples is a call to faithful humility, placing self and security secondary to others and the Kingdom of God.

Moses is called upon to place all his trust and understanding upon God.

In neither case was anyone given a strategic plan as the starting point. None of them began with a critical mission study. We'll get to those things, but those things are not the beginning. The beginning is the reminder, and the dedication, to place our trust, our understanding, and our future upon the presence of God to lead and guide.

How we begin is important; it sets the tone for everything that will come after. As we hear the reminder to rely, in faithful, holy humility, upon the presence of God, I offer you my own beginning sentence to help us set the tone for what is to come: On that morning in the community of the Clarence church, the call of God spoke to their hearts, and they were glad to hear it. Amen.