

Exodus 3:1-14
September 15, 2013
FBC Vancouver
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The God Who Comes All the Way Down

[Preparing the congregation for the Walk for Reconciliation on September 22]

**“I have surely seen the affliction of My people...
I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters ...
I know their suffering ...
So I have come down to deliver them.”**

This week, we who live in this city, will witness and participate in a deeply redemptive movement taking place in the life of our nation. The Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada will be holding its hearings here in Vancouver, having already done so in other major cities of Canada. The hearings will take place at the Pacific Coliseum, Wednesday through Saturday, September 18-21. It will be a time of much pain.

Men and women who as children suffered in Indian Residential Schools, will be telling their stories. Stories they would rather not tell, stories we would rather not hear, but stories that must be told and heard in order for healing to take place.

And then, as you have heard, next Sunday, the 22nd, there will be a Walk for Reconciliation. It will begin at 10:00 am. The leadership of our congregation believes that we as an expression of the church in Canada need to join our fellow citizens in the Walk.

Why?

Early this week, Jeremy Bell, Executive Minister of the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada, sent out a letter written by Susan Ferguson, a lawyer, and Moderator of Kitsilano Christian Community Church, a congregation our congregation helped establish.

Susan answers the “why?” question most succinctly.

“For me the walk simple. I am going to walk because so much of the wrong that has been done in the residential schools was done in the name of Jesus Christ. I am going there to be a different face of the church, a different face of Jesus, to people who have hurt by others who said they were acting in Jesus’ name.”

**“I have seen My people’s affliction ...
I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters ...
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So I have come down to deliver.”**

Next Sunday we will hold only one formal Worship Service, at 8:45 to conclude by 9:30, so we can make our way down to the starting point of the Walk. I encourage all of you to be here for the one service, even if you are not joining the Walk.

I have invited two First Nations disciples of Jesus to help lead worship. Wilton Littlechild, a Commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, former MP, and former chief of the Ermineskin Cree nation. I have also invited Joe Dion, a member of our congregation, business leader, and former chief of the Kehewin Cree nation. Both will wear their ceremonial head dresses, and will be offering a blessing to us in a culturally appropriate way. You will not want to miss the service.

Why jerk the Lord's Day Services around to participate in the Walk? When I first heard the Walk would take place on the Sunday following the hearings, I thought, "this is good." When I then heard it would take place at 10:00 am, I thought, "what?" Why plan the event right in the middle of the time Christian churches are worshipping on the Lord's Day? "That is too disruptive." And then I came to see that that is exactly the point.

The pain inflicted on First Nations people in the Residential Schools, was inflicted largely, and sadly, by church people. Part of the healing comes from the church owning the pain. Choosing to disrupt our normal routine on our Holy Day is a powerful way to say, "we are so sorry for the cruel disruption you and your people have experienced. We are just so sorry. Please forgive us. And if you will have us, we are willing to be part of the healing process."

**"I see My people's affliction ...
I hear their cry ...
I know their suffering ...
So I come down to deliver."**

Here is some of what the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (the TRC) says about itself on its website – www.trc.ca – some of which was also in Friday's Vancouver Sun.

What is the TRC?

The TRC is a component of the Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. Its mandate is to gather survivor testimony and government and institutional records and to inform all Canadians about what happened in Indian Residential Schools. The TRC has a five-year mandate.

What does the TRC hope to achieve?

The TRC hopes to guide and inspire Aboriginal peoples and Canadians in a process of reconciliation and renewed relationships that are based on mutual understanding and respect.

What will the TRC do?

The TRC will prepare a comprehensive historical record on the policies and operations of the schools and produce a report that will include recommendations to the Government of Canada concerning the IRS [Indian Residential School] system and its legacy. The Commission will host seven national events in different regions across Canada to promote awareness and public education about the IRS system and its impacts.

A national research center will be established by the end of the TRC mandate that will be a permanent resource for all Canadians. The TRC will support community events designed by individual communities to meet their unique needs. The TRC will support a Commemoration Initiative that will provide funding for activities that honour and pay tribute in a permanent lasting manner to former Indian Residential School students.

**“I see My people’s affliction ...
I hear their cry ...
I know their suffering.
So I come down.”**

A brief overview of this sad chapter of our history and the church’s role in it:

I have listed in the worship folder a number of helpful resources recommended by pastors Jodi Spargur and Mark Buchanan. The two sources I found most informative, and painful, are the one prepared by the TRC, “They Came for the Children,” and the website www.wherethechildren.ca.

In the late 19th century, as America and Canada began to expand westward, the question arose of what to do about the so-called “Indian Territories.” Treaties were negotiated in the Western territories that allowed the Canadian government to increase immigration.

In the beginning stages of these treaty-arrangements, First Nations people asked for schools. They wanted day schools on their own lands, to teach their children English, the language of the immigrants, and to help prepare them to deal with the invading white, Euro-centered society.

Instead of their own schools on their own lands, what they got were the Residential Schools. Sadly, it was thought that the Aboriginal peoples were “savages,” too uncultured, uncivilized, and backward to educate their own. So, sadly, it was determined that the government of Canada would do the educating. This was thought to be necessary to ensure that Aboriginal people were prepared to take their place as functioning citizens of the expanding nation.

The express purpose was to assimilate Indian children into white society. In 1886, a report explicitly stated: there is a need to “force a change in [the Indian’s condition]” and that “it is to the young that we must look for a complete change of condition.” Change the Native way of life by changing the children, who in time would bring the change.

And the way to do that? Take the children out of their lands, out of their families; break the ties between children and their parents and communities. Remove the children, and place them in Residential Schools which were intentionally set up hundreds, sometimes thousands of kilometers from reserve lands. Remove the children from the supposedly “uncivilized” influence of their parents, and indoctrinate them in the supposedly “superior” white culture.

In 1884 it was mandated that all Native children under the age of 16 be removed and placed in Residential Schools. Imagine the pain in the hearts of those kids. Imagine the pain in the hearts of their mothers and fathers.

The design was to bring about this severing from family and culture by teaching the children English, the language of the emerging nation. The idea was not only to help the children function in an English world, but to cut them off from their own heritage. Children were severely punished for speaking their native languages. They were told to only speak English when they did not yet know English! How were they to understand the command?

The stories of how some children were punished are horrific.

Over the years, the children came to feel shame toward their old way of life. They began to feel ashamed of their parents and communities. They lost the ability to speak the language of their people. So whenever any of them did go home for a visit, rare, they could no longer communicate, and looked down on their own people. Yet they did not fit in the new world either.

At the beginning the schools were run by the government. But when it became too expensive, the church was asked to run them. Why? Missionary societies could run them a lot cheaper. Some did a good job; they wanted the best for the children. But others did not; they were not adequately trained, they were not spiritually mature, and they were painfully abusive. Discipline was cruel ... on anyone's scale of values. Corporal punishment, even for the slightest infraction. Solitary confinement. Only being given bread and water. Flogging. And most sadly, sexual abuse.

Given chronic underfunding, the facilities were always in poor shape – freezing temperatures in the winter, sweltering heat in the summer. Wood structures that were fire traps with no fire escapes. Overcrowding made for rapid spread of disease, particularly tuberculosis. Malnutrition was not uncommon. The physical, emotional, sexual abuse led many to suicide.

From the 1830s until the final closure of the last of the Residential School in 1996, 150,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Metis children were removed from their people and forced to attend the schools. Nearly 45% of them died in their exile. Is it any wonder that sorrow runs like deep waters through our First Nations neighbors?

In 1986, the United Church of Canada apologized for its role in the residential schools. In 1991, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate apologized. In 1993, the Anglican Church apologized. In 1994, the Presbyterian Church apologized. And in 2006, the Harper government, on behalf of all of Canada, formally apologized for this injustice and tragedy.

So, where was God in all of this? Where is God in all of this?

It was the question ancient Israel asked about their years of suffering in ancient Egypt. Where is God is all that we are experiencing? It is the question many of us ask.

God begins to answer the question in the text we read this morning. 34 hundred years ago, at a “burning bush” – that did not burn up as it burned! – God spoke to Israel's question. What took place at that “burning bush,” is surpassed in importance only by what took place in the events of Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost.

At the “burning bush” God broke a long silence. For 400 years, the Hebrew people could only recall how God had met their ancestors; how God had spoke to Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, to Jacob and Rachel and Leah. But in the “burning bush” God broke the silence.

On the slope of a mountain where God would speak again, God speaks a word not only for Israel, but for the whole world. The Reality behind the word “God” pulls back the curtain and opens up to us.

And what God reveals changes everything: God is personal. God is a personal being. Not just “the unmoved mover.” Not just “the ground of all being.” Not just “the ultimate integrating principle of life.” The God of the “burning bush” is not defined in terms of abstract thought, but in the language of personal encounter and personal relationship. The God of the “burning bush” is not “an indescribable something,” but a SOMEONE who has a name and offers a personal self description: I AM (so Paul K. Jewett). The God of the “burning bush” is the Living God. Or as some scholars suggest we now put it, the Lively God.

Everything the Lively God reveals from within the “burning bush” is more fully lived out the events of Israel’s subsequent history. And everything the Lively God reveals that day, is fleshed out – literally – in Jesus of Nazareth, God’s Word, God’s Self-revelation made flesh (John 1:14).

Another brief historical overview: Hundreds of years before that “burning bush” day, the Hebrew people, the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, migrated from Palestine to Egypt. How they got there is a fascinating story you can read in Genesis 37-50. They settled on the west bank of the Nile River delta, in an area called Goshen; modern day Cairo is on the south end of Goshen.

Because of Joseph, the great-grandson of Abraham, the Hebrew people enjoyed favour with the Egyptians. However, about 70 years after Joseph’s death (c. 1730 BC), a new people began a gradual conquest of Egypt. They were the Hyksos, Semitic people from Asia. Goshen was one of the first areas they conquered. And they immediately imposed slavery on the Hebrews.

When the Hyksos were driven out, Israel’s lot did not improve. The new ruler, Thutmose I – the “great empire-builder” – was threatened by the presence of such a large foreign population [Larry Richards, *Freedom Road*, 13]. So he kept the Hebrews in slavery. They became the cheap labor force by which to build his empire. Under extremely cruel conditions, the Hebrews were forced to build, from the ground up, the great cities of Pitham and Ramses. The Hebrews were likely the slaves used to build some of Egypt’s pyramids.

Are you ever troubled by the fact that many of the great “wonders of the world” rest upon “man’s inhumanity to man”? The Egyptian economy flourished because of that huge cheap labor force.

Soon Egypt’s economy was so dependent upon Hebrew slavery, that the powers that be had to continue this bondage. Pharaoh kept increasing the burden. But the more he did, the more the people grew both in number and in strength (Exodus 1:12). To counter this growth, Pharaoh ordered Egyptian midwives to murder every newborn Hebrew boy. The midwives were commanded to stand by and watch the Hebrew women give birth. If the child was a girl – let her live. If the child was a boy – kill him, immediately (Exodus 1:16).

But the plan failed, for the midwives “feared God.” In particular, two midwives did not carry out the diabolical plan because they realized they had to answer to a Higher Authority than Pharaoh. They feared the One they could not see more than the one they could see.

How much oppression and injustice could be avoided in our world if we who say we believe in God feared God more than we fear humans? OT scholar Brevard Childs observes: “the frail resources of two women had succeeded in outdoing the crass power of the tyrant” (*Exodus*, 17).

Pharaoh then escalated his genocidal program. All Hebrews boys were to be drowned in the Nile. But, again, the plan was foiled. One day a boy is born. His mother quickly hid him, keeping him out of the sight of the police for three months.

When that was no longer possible, She put him in a basket made of papyrus reeds, and set him afloat along the bank of the Nile. It just so happened (!) that on that day the daughter of Pharaoh was bathing in the river. She sees the basket, and orders it brought to her. She sees the boy, takes pity on him, and adopts him as her own. She names him Moses, which means “I drew him out of the water.”

Unknown to Pharaoh, God was subverting Pharaoh’s unjust rule. God would later subvert all unjust rules through another Boy born in a manger.

Moses grows up in Pharaoh’s home and court. He went through the process of assimilation, learning a way of life different from his people. When he was 40 years old, Moses came face to face with the misery and oppression of the Hebrews (2:11-14). And he tried to do something about it. He lashed out at an Egyptian man who was beating a Hebrew slave, killing the Egyptian. Moses had to flee Egypt for his life, leaving his powerful position as adopted grandson of Pharaoh, and entering into exile.

For the next 40 years, he lives in the desert, pasturing his father-in-law’s sheep, always carrying in his soul the plight of his people. Then one day, while going about his normal routine, the silence was broken. And Moses discovers what he could have never deduced, and what we could never deduce either.

From within the “burning bush” the Living One calls out, “Moses! Moses!” How would you react is that happened to you? You are at your desk typing on your computer, or you are holding your iPhone, when all of a sudden the machine is engulfed in flame but does not burn up, and you hear your name?

As a shepherd, Moses would be blown away. Near-Eastern shepherds know their sheep very well – so well they call them by name. “Moses, Moses.” It meant another Shepherd was calling His sheep by name. Jesus would later say: “... the sheep hear the Shepherd’s voice, He calls his own by name... I Am the Good Shepherd; and I know my own, and My own know Me” (John 10:3,14).

Please, dear God, during this painful week of hearings, call each one who is in pain by name!

Then Moses hears words that change his whole perspective on life: **“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. I have surely seen the affliction of My people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their taskmasters. I know their suffering. So I have come down to deliver them ...”** The words also change our perspective on life.

The Living God is the God who sees. That is something Israel could not have deduced from her circumstances. From the merely human perspective, no one who could help her saw her suffering. It remained hidden behind the glitz of Egypt’s economic prosperity.

“No,” says God, “it has been seen. “I have seen your misery. I have seen the way you have been treated. I see the exploitation. I see the oppression. I see the abuse. I see how you suffer.”

Nothing is hidden. There are no secrets. The Living One sees it all. Life on the reserves ... and life in the great cities. Life on Hastings Street ... and life on the tree lined streets of the suburbs.

“I see ...” That is both good news and bad news; both comforting and disturbing. It all depends upon whether I want to be seen! When I want to live in bondage to my secrets, it is terrifying news. When I want to be freed of my secrets, it is wonderful news! “I have surely seen the affliction of My people.”

You can therefore appreciate why the “burning bush” encounter means so much to people in the developing world. In a meeting of Christian leaders in Bangkok, Exodus 3 was the text for the theme, “Salvation Today.” In a meeting in Nairobi, Exodus 3 was the text for the theme, “Jesus Christ Frees and Unites.”

The Living God sees what is happening in the world. On Native lands. In Syria. In modern day Egypt. In Vancouver. In my world. In your world. God sees.

The Living God is also the God who hears. “I have heard the them crying out because of their slave drivers.”

Again, this is something Israel could never have deduced from her circumstances. From her merely human perspective, her cries only “reached the ceiling,” or simply dissipated into “thin air.” No one heard.

“No,” says the Living One, “your cries have been heard. I have heard them. I have heard them.”

“Then why do You seem not to answer?” we ask. A hard question, which if you are praying through the Psalms you hear the Psalmists ask, again and again. And a question which God answers elsewhere. For now hang on to the words, “I hear.”

All human cries are heard. All week long God will hear the cries of those whose who testify before the Commission. He hears them even now. All week long God will hear the cries of those who inflicted pain, who are racked with guilt and shame, and are afraid to come forward. He hears them even now.

God hears the cries of people in refugee camps. God hears the cries of fathers who cannot find work. God hears the cries of mothers who cannot feed their children. God hears the cries of those who want to be fathers and mothers but for whatever reason cannot. God hears the cries of fathers and mothers who do have jobs and can feed their children, but who are so empty inside, who silently despair in the midst of affluence. “I hear the crying,” says the Living God.

God opens up even more to Moses: **The Living God is the God who feels what He sees and hears.**

“I know their suffering,” says God. The Hebrews word translated “know” is the word ‘yada.’ ‘Yada’ involves a knowing that is more than cognitive. ‘Yada’ is the same word used to describe the knowing of a husband and wife. It is the same word used to describe the intimate union of husband and wife. ‘Yada’ involves an intimate knowing which is visceral and emotional; yes, cognitive and rational; but also visceral and emotional.

“I know their sufferings.” “I FEEL their sufferings.” This is what separates the Judeo-Christian God from all the gods of all the other faiths: God feels the suffering of the world. Four attributes of the Divine One are affirmed by most other religions: God is infinite, God is incomprehensible, God is indivisible, and God is impassible, or, as the Greeks put it, God is a-pathic, non-feeling.

You see, for the Greeks, and those who follow their thinking, if God is to be God, God cannot be affected by anything outside God’s Self. God, if God is to be God, cannot be moved by anything outside God’s self. For that would imply that God can somehow be controlled by external reality. So, for the Greeks, for God to be God, God cannot experience emotions, whether pleasant or painful. Which means, God cannot suffer. The Divine One is im-passible, a-pathetic, non-passionate, un-feeling.

This is the view held by most religions and philosophies of life. Thus, for example, when a Muslim suffers, she suffers for Allah, but not with Allah.

This view has also permeated the thinking of the Christian church. From the 2nd century BC until the 19th century BC, the impassibility of God, the a-pathy of God, was a tenet of orthodoxy. The Living God cannot be moved by the realities of earthy life and still be Divine. Oh, the church theologians spoke of God’s love for the world. But that love was an attribute, not a feeling. The church theologians could not affirm God’s capacity to feel with others, because, again, it implied God could be controlled by others.

It was the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, who was a prisoner of war in World War II, who saw the way forward. He realized that theologians made the mistake of “recognizing only two alternatives. Either, God’s essential incapacity for suffering, or God’s being subject to suffering if God did suffer.” Moltmann said there is a third alternative, namely, “the voluntary laying oneself open to another and allowing oneself to be intimately affected by the other” [*The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 23].

In the “burning bush” encounter, we discover what Israel and we could never deduce. We discover that the Living One CHOOSES to be intimately affected by reality outside God’s Self. God chooses to open God’s Self to the pain of the world.

The great I AM IS infinite. The great I AM IS incomprehensible. The great I AM IS indivisible. And all-powerful, all-knowing, all-wise... the list goes on. But the great I AM is not impassible, not apathetic. “I know My people’s suffering.” “I feel My people’s suffering.”

The Japanese theologian Kazoh Kitamori expresses it most boldly. After the Japanese had gained some emotional distance from the dropping of the atomic bombs, and began to reflect on that horrendous event, Kitamori wrote:

“God enfolds our broken reality. Our reality is utterly and hopelessly broken. And God embraces it all.”

God heals the world’s pain by experiencing it, by making it His own.

We are never alone in our suffering. God is with us in our suffering. God feels with us in our suffering. God feels our suffering. The ground of all being, the very source of life, feels it all. God will feel it all this week.

Moses! I see. I hear. I feel.

Then comes the shocking surprise of the “burning bush” encounter – something Moses would have never dreamed of: **The Living God is the God Who enters our world.**

“So, Moses, I have come down to deliver My people.” What God sees and hears and feels, moves God to come down. And in coming down, to deliver from bondage and free for relationship. God comes down to lift us up into relationship within God’s Self.

This is the central affirmation of the Christian understanding of God: The Lively One enters into the full orb of human existence.

How? According to Exodus 3, through the willing obedience of a human being. After God tells Moses, “I have come down,” God says, “so now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring My people Israel out of Egypt.” God enters into the world’s need and pain, and acts on behalf of the world through an 80 year old shepherd. And would do this again and again in the history of Israel, coming through other human mediators.

BUT all those “coming downs” pointed beyond themselves to a Greater “coming down.” For one day, in Bethlehem of Judea, God did, in the most exact sense of the words, come down. Not now through a mediator, separate from God’s Self, but by becoming the human who would willingly obey. Little did Moses know how literally God means the “burning bush” speech.

“I have seen, I have heard, I feel. So I come down to deliver.”

All the way down. In Jesus. As Jesus. Who, as one of us, clearly sees, and hears, and feels the world’s pain.

But this is what I want to stress, and what is so important to keep before us this week. God sees and hears and feels not because God came down in Jesus. God came down in Jesus because God sees and hears and feels.

Once more. The gospel of the “burning bush”: “I see what you are going through. I hear your cry. I feel your anguish and pain. So I come down to bring you into relationship with Me.”

And that is why I want to join the Walk for Reconciliation next Sunday. That is why we are inviting the whole church to join the Walk. We want to walk the reality of God’s Self-revelation to the world.

But before we do, I invite you this morning to embrace the “burning bush” encounter for yourself. Where do you personally need “the coming down” of the Living God? What are you facing where you need to hear God’s “I see, I hear, I feel, I come”?

Let us pray.