

Sermon, 24 August 2008—Proper 16 & Feast of St. Bartholomew
Exodus 1:8—2:10; Psalm 124; Luke 22:24-30

The 24th of August is the feast day of Bartholomew. He is listed in the three Synoptic Gospels as one of Jesus' disciples, but he appears in no Gospel stories; John doesn't mention him at all. We know nothing about him. In fact, getting listed as one of the twelve disciples seems to be his only achievement. Now, nature does not abhor a vacuum more than the Church does, so various legends rushed into the emptiness around him. He is said to have done his missionary work east of Jerusalem, to have traveled as far as India, and to have been martyred in Armenia. So it seems oddly appropriate that the Gospel appointed for his feast is one in which Jesus tells his followers that the "greatest must become like the youngest and the leader like one who serves."

Where we find that being lived out is in the wonderful infancy narrative of Moses. We begin to listen to the Book of Exodus today, and that book begins with the birth of Moses. With Bartholomew, we are given a name, but no action; in the story of Moses, we are given actions, but few names. We learn the names of Moses' mother and sister later; we never learn the names of the Pharaoh and his daughter. The two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, are commemorated for their shrewd protection of the Jewish mothers, but their part of the story is over before Moses is even born, and they disappear.

Of course, one effect this has is to cloud Moses' origins in a penumbra of legend. His story is familiar to us in many versions: the foundling boy, adopted by strangers, reared alienated from his true home, whose discovery of his true self will mean release of his own suffering people, retrieval of his

lost inheritance, and restoration of his usurped realm. This is, some would say, the story of every human being, all of us who grope for self-knowledge; this is, also, the story of the people of Israel, enslaved in Egypt, uprooted from the land of their ancestors.

The people of Israel and Moses move as mirror images of each other. Moses is taken away from his own people, reared in luxury, but becomes fulfilled as himself when he is restored to them. The children of Abraham are taken from their homeland, reduced to slavery, but become fulfilled as a people when they journey through the desert to return to their home. In both cases, Egypt is alienation, because Moses is no Pharaoh and the Israelites are no slaves. Both these extremes of exaltation and abjection must be left behind because neither is their true identity; in both situations they are misfits and do not belong where they find themselves.

We can trivialize this if we pretend that somehow both Moses and the Israelites would have been better off without this u-turn, with a smoother, more uneventful, life. No doubt they would have been happier if they had never known the need to change themselves. Finding no need to change what we are is probably one definition of happiness. This, though, does not seem to be the story the different writers of the Bible want to tell.

Over and over, the stories of Scripture are about reversals: “God has cast down the mighty from their seats and lifted up the lonely, filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” Over and over the point of these reversals is this: those who undergo them exclaim, “you have laid me in the depths of the pit, in dark places, and in the abyss,” or “you have rescued my life from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from stumbling.” In other words, in the accounts the Bible gives, when human beings find themselves cast down or lifted up, they find God—or rather, they

find the ability to call God “you.” What is found in reversals is both the mystery of the self and the mystery of God.

When my life becomes strange to me, I find myself, I begin to wonder about myself, and I start observing myself: I am not what I thought I was. When my life becomes strange to me, this loss of comfort with myself, of reliance on myself, of confidence in myself, opens me to the question of another observer of myself, one who understands the pattern that my days fall into, who sees the arc of my existence. When our life becomes strange to us, according to the Biblical writers, we human beings become ready to address God: we place ourselves in conversation with the one we believe sees the full span and rhythm of our life. At that moment, God moves from third person to second person. At the deepest curve of our u-shaped life, when we are furthest from our self, we remember our self; we find our self. That recollection of our self is accompanied by no longer speaking of God in third person—“he” or “she” or even “it,” the unknown owner and founder of the company sitting in some remote head office, who has little to do with us, now that we know how to make widgets. Instead, when we stumble upon the question of our self, because we no longer recognize our self in the upheaval of our life, that turmoil of delight or despair, according to the Biblical writers, is also the discovery that we can speak to God in second person—“you.” Both Moses and the people of Israel will learn what it is to be on speaking terms with God at Sinai. There they will truly become themselves, the children of Abraham, the friend of God, who talked with God as he left his home and wandered, pitching tents and setting up altars far and wide across the land promised to his descendants.

You and I both know that not everyone is interested in this double discovery of self and God. Many human beings live contented complacent

lives without that disturbance, without ever falling through the gap between soul and spirit. Scripture, however, is written by and about and for those whose lives crack open, who like Moses find themselves set adrift on a dangerous river, who like Bartholomew find themselves disappearing in response to a call, these women and men who, in what they cannot understand, nevertheless discern the hand of God.

Perhaps this is why the three heroines of Moses' story are unnamed, so that we are led to focus on their life-giving, life-saving, life-restoring actions. They show us how to find the self at a time of danger, when the u-shaped arc of one's life is stretching beyond our grasp.

All three women—Moses' mother, his sister, and the daughter of Pharaoh—are involved in looking, watching, seeing first. The mother sees that the baby is well-formed, healthy, fine. The sister places herself where she can see what will happen to the floating basket holding her brother. The daughter of Pharaoh sees the basket and sees the child, and recognizes that it is a Jewish baby. This observation and attention is what comes first if the self is going to be found. For all three, the value of the child is without question. They see that, and because they see that, all three act.

So this is the first thing: to see, to recognize the irreplaceable treasure of the self, wherever that self is found. It is not hard to understand the mother's prompting of love; it is not surprising that she should love what she sees, the child she has carried and brought to term and birthed. It is not surprising that we should love and value what we ourselves have brought into being. But the sister is also able to come to see the value of her newborn brother. Not every baby is welcome; children often see them as usurpers, siphoning their parents' love away. Moses' sister, we discover later, was not free of feelings of sibling rivalry. So this is a second, and

more difficult, kind of loving attention, to see and prize a rival in love, to see and prize those other parts of our self that we are less interested in, less proud of, but which might be the source of transformation. Even more astonishing is the gaze of the daughter of Pharaoh, who has the courage to look steadily at what is forbidden, and who has the compassion to see its suffering. She takes pity on what has been condemned to death, not because she thinks her father's edict is unjust, but simply because the child is crying, and human grief is enough of a claim on another human being. If we are ever to find our self, patient tender attention to our pain is needed as well.

Each of these women knows that seeing is not sufficient; action is required as well. Each of these women acts in ways that increase the difficulty they are facing and intensify their discomfort. The mother sets her child adrift. The sister brings her rival home. The daughter of Pharaoh adopts the condemned slave. Of course, we recognize these as the right actions, but in the moment of decision, they were difficult steps, even to the point of feeling unnatural. An indecisive protective mother could have tried to hide the child until it was discovered and destroyed. A jealous spoiled sister could have let the child drift out of sight among the crocodiles. A frightened obedient daughter could have instructed her slaves to follow her father's orders and drown the infant. Each one acts to preserve life.

The same actions are required of us if we are ever to find our self. Like the mother, when must we let go of what we cannot control and set our version of what might be adrift, surrendering what we would prefer into the currents of life—if we are to find our self? Like the sister, when must we bring home and nurture day by day the life-giving habits that distract us from our self-indulgent preferences—if we are to find our self? Like the daughter of Pharaoh, when must we defend and adopt what we have been

told to despise and condemn—if we are to find our self? The same is true in our relationships with other selves. When must we release what we would rather have the other person be, so they can find themselves? When must we form partnerships with rivals, exchange partnership for collaboration, so they can find themselves? When must we champion and bring into our own home outcasts and aliens, investing ourselves in fostering them, so they can find themselves?

Of course, in the Biblical account, eighty years will pass before Moses see a bush burning but not consumed and hears the Voice of God, eighty years before he will find himself. It does not matter. In their seeing and acting, these three women stood in the place of God. They ensured that life was drawn out of the water, just as the Spirit of God had swept over the waters of chaos before time, and the Word of God summoned and raised living things out of those depths. Nor are we far, of course, from Jesus' words about leaders becoming servants and the example of Jesus' life. The ability to see, to be attentive to the value of human life, and to act to preserve that value, even in ways that seem to go against what the complacent and self-protecting prize, is what this story invites us to. This is the essence of the gift of the self into the larger purposes of God, into the life of God. May God give us the grace to see and act, and so to follow the example of service given to us in the life of Jesus, and so to increase the praise of the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, One God, this day and always.