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## The Everyday God

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsolm given October 22, 2017*

*Exodus 33:12-23, Matthew 22:15-21, Proper 24A*

There was a Catholic monk named Thomas Merton, from the Trappist order of Cistercians, who died in a tragic accident a month before I was born. He was one of the most prolific and influential Catholic writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and he was especially famous because he was a mystic and contemplative, spending most of his time in silence, but he was also an active opponent of war and violence of every kind. He had become active in interreligious dialogue between Catholic Christianity and Buddhism, and was actually on a trip to Bangkok to promote interreligious monastic dialogue when he died. He was controversial because he didn't limit his vocation or writing as a monk to strictly religious topics. He realized that to be a follower of Jesus meant that he must seek the dignity of every human being, to literally seek and serve Christ in everyone as our baptismal covenant says. And for him, this intrinsically meant to oppose violence of every kind, including racism and nuclear arms and war. What Thomas Merton did so courageously was to live into his commitment to peace in every part of his life. He did not think that it could be possible to separate his private religious beliefs and the public life he had through his connection with other people in his writing. Through his years of silence, and deep listening to God, and seeking closeness with God and union with God, he paradoxically was led back out to an equally deep concern for the the world God so loves.

You see what fueled Thomas Merton's passion for peace was not only an intellectual understanding of peace. It was not merely an ethical commitment to peace. It came from the deep wells of his own repeated encounter with the living God. When he opposed war he said he wasn't accusing others of violence; he said

that he had discovered the pride and violence in his own spirit, which he saw as the cause of war, and he had also discovered the deeper reality of being made in the image of the God he loved. This daily encounter with God in prayer gave him the power to follow Jesus, not just in the cloisters, but through his writings and tremendous impact in the world.

In the today's strange story from Exodus, Moses tells God that if God will not go to the promised land with and among the people of Israel, that they might as well not go at all. Then Moses asks to see God's glory, and there is this otherworldly description of God putting Moses in a cleft in the rock and covering Moses with God's hand until God has passed by, and Moses seeing God's back, because no one can see God's face and live. What in the world is a 21<sup>st</sup> century follower of Jesus to make of this story?

I hope you'll bear with me, but let's review where we are in the great drama of this story. God had liberated the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and then when they were hungry God gave them manna, just enough for every day. Then God gave them guidance about how to live through the ten commandments Moses received in stone tablets on the top of the mountain. Then Moses delayed on the top of that mountain, and the people became restless and made for themselves a golden calf to worship, which they said was the god who brought them out of Egypt, even though God had literally just told them not to make images out of God. Moses prays to God to forgive the people, and then today's story comes, where Moses tells God that unless God will go with them and among them, they might as well not go to the Promised land at all. This is an extraordinary thing to say. They needed a place to live beyond the desert, so they obviously do need to get to some land, promised or not. But Moses tells God they need God's presence, not before them or ahead of them, but among them, literally with them, or the journey will not be worth making. And God agrees to go with them, among them, and then to show God's goodness to Moses.

What is happening here is worth our full attention. What the story is telling us is that liberation from slavery is not enough, that survival in the wilderness is not

enough, that learning about God's ways is not enough. What the people of Israel need, which no image or object associated with God can give them, is the continued experience of the presence of God with them and among them. And this is where that ancient story and today's world come together. I think people in today's world are hungry, not just for head knowledge about God or about a good ethical life, but for an experience which transforms us. In fact I think this is what the "spiritual but not religious" movement is all about – underneath the superficial consumer stuff, I think it's all about a desire to have an experience of the transcendent, of the holy. We all know in our heads what the right thing to do is. The world ought to move in the direction of loving each other, and avoiding violence, and taking care of one another, and seeking justice for all and an end to oppression and all those good things. If knowledge alone could transform us there would not be a Syrian government that goes to war on its citizens, there would not be hordes of Syrian refugees whom no one will welcome, or any of the other problems going on in our world. If knowledge was enough we would already have arrived in what Dr. Martin Luther King called the Beloved Community, that state where there would be no more hunger or poverty or war because the good people of the world would love each other so much that we would not tolerate these things. No, knowing the right thing to do alone isn't enough. We know what Jesus said in today's gospel: he said we ought to give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's. If we think about that even for a second we will realize that of course everything belongs to God, and Jesus is saying that there is no difference between our public and our private life—that our entire life belongs to God and that we need every part of our life to conform to that reality. But knowing and doing are different things. And what gives us the power to have a life like Thomas Merton's, is not knowing about God, but experiencing God walking with us, not just in mountain top experiences, but in everyday life. And if such an experience seems beyond us, we can take assurance that our scriptures describe over and over again a God who wants to be known, who is revealed to us in Jesus, and who knows each of us by name.

The people of St. Stephen's have had some incredible mountaintop experiences. The other day I heard someone describing the amazing pilgrimages Gary Dietz led

the youth groups on for so many years – trips to Israel and Belize and many other places, and she genuinely encountered God and was transformed during those experiences. We have TEC and adult trips to Belize and Iona and retreats and many other wonderful things. But we also need a God who will walk with us every day, when we are moving toward the Promised Land, toward the Beloved Community, but not there yet. We need the power of God, the actual presence of God with us, because liberation and survival and learning are all good but they are not enough. We need a God who is with us when we are struggling to be patient with our kids or to know what to do when we pass someone panhandling on the side of the road or when an uncle tries to engage us in a political conversation we would do anything to avoid.

Instead of living life from the stance of generating our own power to follow Christ's teachings, we need a life of constantly receiving the love and presence of God as a gift. From that posture of receiving, we can be given the power to do extraordinary things as ordinary people throughout time have done. Let us seek to receive and be transformed by the presence of God every day, so that we can truly offer all that we are and have to God. Let us seek to become aware of the God we already encounter every day. Amen.