

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 25A

Deuteronomy 34:1-12  
Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17  
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8  
Matthew 22:34-46

Years ago, I was introduced by a friend to the story *Hinds' Feet on High Places*, by Hannah Hurnard. The novel is a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century allegorical telling of the Christian life, in the tradition of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It follows the journey of a young woman whose name is Much Afraid.

At the beginning of her story, Much Afraid lives in the Valley of Humiliation, with her aunt, Mrs. Dismal Forebodings, her cousins, Gloomy and Spiteful, and the bully Craven Fear. She feels herself to be unsightly and ineloquent. As a result, she feels ashamed.

One day, her family, who mistreats her terribly, informs her that she must marry Craven, and that if she does not do so voluntarily, they are going to force her. Much Afraid reacts to the idea with horror, and she seeks out the Chief Shepherd for help. The Shepherd invites her to set off on a journey to the High Places, where she will be free from Craven Fear forever.

I thought of this story as we read the story of Moses's end today. While Moses, at the end of his life, is called unequalled for mighty deeds and signs and wonders and is commended for his faith in God, he starts his journey with God in not-so-different a place as little Much Afraid. The first time God appears to Moses, in the form of a burning bush, Moses is living in the land of Midian, having fled Egypt as a criminal.

When God tells him that he is to lead God's people out of Egypt, Moses is terrified. He flatly refuses at first, offering excuse after excuse. "God, what if they ask me what your name is?" and "God, what if the people don't believe me?" and "God, I'm not eloquent or well-spoken enough to do this." God counters each excuse in turn, until Moses comes right out and says his true feeling: "Please send someone else." He does not understand why God is asking him, nor does he understand what God is asking him to do.

Over the course of Much Afraid's journey, the Shepherd teaches her practices of love, courage, and faith, planting these virtues in her heart. When she first sets out, she listens to the song of the river, which sings out "From the heights we leap and flow / To the valleys down below. / Always answering to the call / To the lowest place of all." She doesn't understand why, if the High Places are where the Shepherd lives, and where the Shepherd's people are called to be, the river is joyful to be rushing down to the lowest places instead. The Shepherd promises her that she will come to understand in time.

And that promise is indeed fulfilled. At the end of the story, when Much Afraid, who has been given the new name Grace and Glory, finally reaches the High Places, she sees a rushing waterfall, and suddenly comes to understand the song of the river. She was only one of many people who had

been brought to the High Places, so that they could now pour themselves down the waterfall, to nourish and give life to the desolate places below, to share with others the love of the Shepherd.

Much Afraid and Moses, you and I, we are drops of water, standing before a river, before a great waterfall, which is the kingdom of God. In the face of the rushing river, it is easy to feel fearful, to feel insufficient and ineloquent, to feel as if we have nothing to contribute, that we cannot make a change.

But God invites each one of us, whom God loves “as though there were only one to love,” to dive into that river, to join the mission of God, to bring God’s message of hope and love to those who are in need of it.

Importantly, that waterfall – it is neither the beginning of the river, nor is it the end. The work of God started long before us. Even Moses, by the time he was called, was entering a stream that had started many years before, with Jacob and Leah and Rachel, with Sarah and Abraham, with Noah, with Adam and Eve. And we too will leave the river before it reaches its end. The water in the stream is taken out to water plants, to nourish animals, to give rain to the earth, to give life to its people. Moses dies before he reaches the end of the story. So, someday, will we. But in the time that we have, we can be a part of God’s mission on this earth.

God is extending an invitation. That river will continue, whether or not we choose to jump in. God’s will in this world will continue, whether we choose to participate. We can stand on the bank, saying “I am afraid. I’m not eloquent enough, or brave enough, or secure enough. Please send someone else.” But God wants you there. God believes that you have spiritual gifts to offer, and that you can be a part of this work.

This past Friday and Saturday was the Annual Convention of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut. Don and I were your lay delegates from St. Thomas’s, who voted on the various proposals that came before the Diocese. And these past two days, I believe the work of God was accomplished; particularly, through three proposals that I’m proud to report were approved.

First, a resolution to repudiate discriminatory and harmful rhetoric in our country that is being directed towards transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming people, to affirm that they are made in the image of God and members of the body of Christ.

Second, a resolution to approve the funding of a historical analysis to determine the extent to which the wealth of the Episcopal Church was funded by the labor of and sale of enslaved people in our history, and to financially support congregations who are not afraid to ask this question.

And finally, a resolution to commit \$2.5 million dollars of the Diocese’s endowed funds and a percentage of future income towards creating a Reparations Fund to begin to address the Episcopal church’s complicity in the slave trade, and to use that fund to achieve the goals of racial reconciliation, justice, and healing of the wounds caused by chattel slavery and its continuing impact on people of color.

We do not stand at the beginning of this history, nor at the end. There is much more work to be done. But at Convention this year, the Episcopal Church in Connecticut stood and said, “Yes, Lord. We hear your Spirit is moving through this world – let us be a part of it.”

As we meditate on what the Spirit of God is calling each of us towards, and as we celebrate that which God has already accomplished, I want to read a prayer, originally written by the Catholic priest Ken Untener. This prayer reminds us that the kingdom of God is something that is here, but is also yet to come; it is what we continue to strive for, what we continue to hope for, and in that striving and hoping, we make a difference. The Prayer is called: "Prophets of a Future Not Our Own."

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction  
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete,  
which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,  
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,

but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.<sup>1</sup>

Amen.

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October 29, 2023

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prophets-of-a-future-not-our-own>