St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
August 30, 2026

Readings:
https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp17_RCL.html

I spent the past week in what we call Faculty Days getting ready for the start of the fall semester at our wonderful St. Thomas's Day School. We will open on Wednesday with 120 students filling these very pews and seats and we're all excited. I'll begin my year in the classroom with Grade 4, as I did last year. I have no idea what the year will bring, of course, but I do remember vivdly my first day last year, when all of this was brand new to me. I walked in the 4th Grade classroom, stood in front of the class and said, "Hi everyone. I'm Chaplain Alan and I'm excited for our year together exploring religion, God, what lies beyond us, what's bigger than us." I didn't know what to expect, but all eyes were on me and they looked ready for more. And so I asked "What *is* religion? Why do we have religion? What's it's purpose?" Lots of hands immediately shot up. Nick said, "They bring us together!" Anna said "They connect us to God!" There was a brief pause and then Rory said "They cause conflict and war." OK, wow. These kids are 9, just for a reminder. I thanked everyone for their responses and decided to ask a quick follow-up. "Rory, I hear what you're saying, but do you really think those conflicts and wars are about *religion*?" He looked a bit confused, so I said "You know, beliefs, ideas, worship styles? Or are they maybe more about power?" He looked at me, thought for a minute, nodded his head, and said, "You make a good point."

And we were off. And it was a wonderful year. The entire experience reminded me of something we all know is true, something Jesus himself affirmed more than once. Children are naturally spiritual. They are open. They love to explore and think big and consider every possibility and zoom out and see what we can't see and go places we've never gone. When I told them about meditation, they loved jumping on their tables, crossing their legs, closing their eyes, chanting, imagining, opening themselves, listening, connecting. In fact, it was sometimes hard to move on to the next subject. When I brought them in here to our sanctuary, they would have happily talked about each one of these windows for the entire class, seeing the stories, entering into them, imagining what's being said and what each one might mean.

My friends, very simply, today is a day for doing what *they* do so well. It's a day that invites *us* into the same place of openness, expansiveness, imagining, considering, inviting. And it begins with an extraordinary narrative, one of the most luminous and gorgeous passages in all of scripture. It's one of those one wants to read over and over to savor every detail. Moses has been a shepherd for forty years, in exile from the Egyptian royal court where he'd grown up. We find him doing what shepherds do, tending the flock. But then we're asked to open our minds and zoom out, to consider another dimension. Moses leads his flock *beyond* the wilderness. The direct translation is *behind* the wilderness. It's a threshold into something mystical. And indeed Moses enters that thin space and experiences none other than *God* in flame of fire. God speaks to Moses, telling him that Moses now stands on holy ground. And what does Moses do? He turns aside, he hides his face, he removes the sandals from his feet. He responds in awe and wonder before this great sight, as

he puts it; he stands reverently knowing that the one speaking to him from the burning bush is entirely other, utterly holy.

This holy, transcendent one speaks with authority, yes, and yet with such tenderness as well; with compassion for the cry of the people in their suffering, with steadfastness and with the promise of companionship for Moses. "I will be with you," God says as Moses is commissioned to liberate God's people, to renew God's mission. None of this could have happened, none of it would have been possible if Moses hadn't been able to cross over into this experience, into this moment; to consider that what he heard and saw might have been something more than a passing vision caused by heat or even perhaps by the monotony of forty years in the desert performing a vital yet repetitive and lonely task. Moses was able to consider a God who might come close and speak a word, beckon, negotiate, all sorts of very human things while also acknowledging a God who lay beyond all such categories, a God before whom he stood in respectful silence, removing his sandals; a God who is beyond name other than I AM, the lifeforce, the essense itself. Moses was able to consider, imagine all of that, to zoom out, to permit the possibility, to open himself. And thus a new chapter, a wondrous new chapter, in the love story of God and God's people could be written.

This is the God that stands before Peter as well. We all get why this is hard for Peter. He knows Jesus as teacher, as mentor, as companion, as friend. He has real trouble zooming out, imagining, crossing over, considering the fullness of just who this might be who is speaking to him of death and new life, of divine things. *Of course he does*. His intent is to respond reassuringly to his friend. "We won't let you suffer. We won't let you die. God forbid any of this would happen," he insists. And then just as an earlier voice spoke out of the flame of fire, just as an earlier voice spoke with solemnity and with ultimate authority, a voice speaks again, pointing out and beyond and behind. Peter couldn't see the realm Jesus has tried to open up for him, a world of angels and glory, of a life that death can't extinguish, a life of the Kingdom and yes, of Satan and all that is not of the Kingdom. Jesus quickly takes him there, beyond, behind, and us too, reminding us that this divine one that we know so well, who sits with us as he did the lost in his own time who craved his company, his touch, his healing presence, is also the one *beyond name*, beyond knowing, one before whom we too take off our sandals and stand in awe and reverent, hushed wonder.

To put this all very simply, my friends, these vivid stories remind us that we're invited today and every day to behold the God we know *and can never know*; the God who comes near and who is always beyond; the God who becomes one with us *and* who is always utterly and completely other. The invitation today is something wonderful indeed: it's the invitation to know God in God's fullness and to rest in a holy joy knowing that the God who is wholly other, who advocates for us in another realm entirely, taking on even Satan, is precisely that same God we *can* know, who invites us to the table, who broils a piece of fish for us and says "Peace be with you."

And this is finally our call in this place; this is the beauty of what we do here, of the formation we come to this sanctuary for week after week as the organ thunders and the sound of voices swells only to yield to our moment of quiet, of nearness and peace at the table, beholding each other, every age, and extending our hands simply to say *Amen* as that same God fills us each; the God who is beyond, and who is among, and who is within. We come as they do, the youngest among us, to open ourselves as they do, to zoom out, to consider and imagine and listen and ask and

perhaps even for a moment to behold, to see, to hear — to stand as Moses and Peter did before the one who invites us each beyond all categories, beyond all limitation, beyond all fear, into a holy and transfiguring and eternal *Yes*. Thanks be to God. Amen.