

God comes down

Exodus 2.23-3:15

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Where is God when things seem to go wrong in our lives? When the body hurts; the mind has no peace; when you see problems in the family and what to do about it. God can seem so far.

Where is God when we experience major problems in our church; when a whole nation elects bad leadership; when a hurricane floods our lands; when we feel people have misused us.

1. God sees and hears our misery

There are times when the people of God are in deep need. Israel was in deep need when it labored in Egypt for hundreds of years and when the slave masters demanded more and more and when they even tried to destroy the Israelites by killing the boys that were born. They were mistreated, abused, 2nd class citizens. And in that situation they cried out.

I find it hard to read this story and not think of the American black leader Martin Luther King (1929-1968). He cried it out on behalf of the black people in the USA, when they marched on Washington in 1963. At the Lincoln Memorial he cried out:



“[Today], the Negro still is not free. [...] The life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. [We live] on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. [We] find [ourselves] an exile in [our] own land. [But when] we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:
Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”

That was the cry of Israel in Egypt; the people of God were devastated and cried it out. And we sometimes are, or we feel, devastated. Being the people of God does not guarantee that we have an easy life.

But God is not far away, even when it may feel like that. We see this in the story of the Israelites in Egypt.

2. God acts to save

The people groaned. And they cried out for help. And we see then, that their cry came up to God. When we cry to God, he hears and he takes action when his people suffer. Look at all the active verbs related to God in the passage we read: God heard, He remembered, He saw, He knew, He appeared, He came.

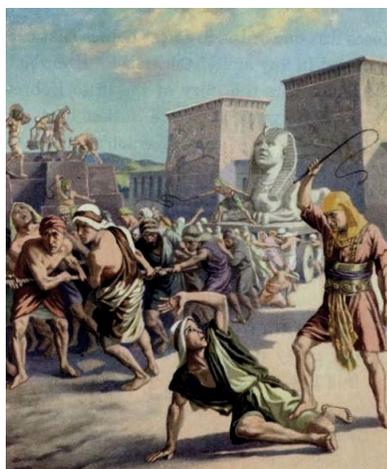
Isaiah describes, in chapter 63, how God saves Israel from Egypt. We read there (vs 9) that “in all their affliction, [God] was afflicted.” If we have afflictions of whatever sort, God feels that pain. This is good to remember in times when we wonder why God does not act. It does not mean He is far away. He is never far away..

St Paul was also knowledgeable about this. In 2 Corinthians 1.3-4, he praises God, the “God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions.”

Maybe you think, well yes, that is true for saints, or for very excellent Christians... but not for me.

But did God come to comfort Israel because those people were so good? Not at all. Why did Moses have to ask God for his name? Because the Israelites had no clue about God. They had adopted the gods of Egypt.

The Israelites ‘cried out’, but did they cry out to the Lord, our God? I do not think so. Remember how they built a cow, of gold, to worship this, just after they had left Egypt? This was the Egyptian bull-god Apis.



400 years in Egypt had taken their toll on the people of God. They had lost their own God, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and they had adopted the gods of Egypt.

And for God, it was much harder to get Egypt out of the heart of the Israelites, then to get Israel out of Egypt.

But God had made a covenant with their forefathers; with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Even though these were three imperfect people, God wanted to be known as their God. And because He had made promises to them, He now came to save their posterity, their tribes.

The basis of God’s saving acts is his faithfulness to his covenant: He calls himself God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This covenant is about Gods desire to bless Abraham’s family and through him all the nations of the world.

God initially mostly blessed the family of Abraham and those who obeyed him in the nation of Israel. God’s blessing was eventually also extended to all nations through Jesus Christ. He is the perfect son of Abraham who fulfills all the promises of God.

Through Him the blessings of God have come to the nations. By faith in Him we are part of the family of God.

Our Lord Jesus Christ even played an important role in how God liberated Israel by the hands of Moses. He was always present with his people – even then! Many Church Fathers see, for instance, in the burning bush an image of Jesus Christ. God reveals himself as fire in the guise of a lowly shrub, just as Jesus Christ would later reveal God's glory while being in a lowly human body.

And when in the story of Moses we read that God says: “I have come down to bring them out of that land”, it reminds us of how God in the most majestic way came down, in the incarnation. When God became man to save us from our sins and to bring us into his promised land.

You have been baptized. You have been made part of the people of God. Your baptism is your covenantal sign; and in our eucharist we participate each week in the meal of the covenant.

You may not be perfect at all, but nonetheless - you are part of his people. You belong to him. He has come down in Jesus to be with you in all the events of life, the good and the bad. He is with you as your comforter. And in eucharist he comes to you every time to be God with you.

3. Relating to God

When the less-than-perfect Israelites cried even though they did not address God in the proper way - the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people.” My people, he calls them. God does not let them go. How comforting this is.

Because we are ‘his people’, he comes to save in times of need. He is our owner and takes good care of those whom He owns. Being a Christian means being part of a family – the family with whom God has a covenant.

But God does not relate to us as one big family only: he also wants to relate to each of us personally. Look at the very personal, intimate talk of Moses with God! Moses desires to know God personally – he wants to know His name.

St Jose Escriva (1902-1975, founder of Opus Dei), in *Christ is Passing by*, p. 174, writes about this:

We ought to be seriously committed to dealing with God. We cannot take refuge in the anonymous crowd. If interior life does not involve personal encounter with God, it doesn't exist. It's as simple as that. There are few things more at odds with Christianity than superficiality. [...] God seeks us out, one by one. And we ought to answer him, one by one: 'Here I am, Lord, because you have called me.'

When Moses insists to know the name of God, because he does not know God well, God basically does not seem to give a name: It is as if God is irritated and says, ‘why

do you want a name, just accept that “I am who I am”. That is in fact not a name, but a description.

Why does God not want to be ‘named’? Maybe because in those days, people thought they could manipulate their gods with magical rites, and have power over them? But that only worked if you had a name to work with. Our God is far above this, and cannot be manipulated to help us.

And actually, He does not need to be manipulated to help us. Because his proximity to us, the fact that He is so close to you, is not a random act of God - it is his nature. It is who He is.

It is as if God says to Moses: ‘Who cares about my name.

I am God! The only one! All things that exist, exist because of me!’



Church Father Hilary of Poitiers (300-368) wrote:

I was filled with admiration at such a clear definition of God, which spoke of the incomprehensible nature in language most suitable to our human understanding. It is known that there is nothing more characteristic of God than to be.” (*On the Trinity* 1.5)

And St Ambrose of Milan (337-404AD) said something similar:

This is the true name of God: always to exist. (*Letter 55* (8).8)

The name ‘I am who I am’ must be seen in the context of the need of Israel. Israel cries out, and God reveals himself as the one who is eternally present. This shows his character of covenantal care. God is who He is, always near to us, to sustain us and to bless us.

And just as God was once known as the God of the covenant with Abraham and his family, he is now known as our God. After the coming of his Son, Jesus Christ, we know him as the Father of Jesus Christ. And as He is the Father of Jesus Christ, He is also the Father of the people of Jesus Christ. Of us who worship here today in this church.

Conclusion

God wants to take care of us, of our needs, because we are his people. Because we are part of the family of Jesus Christ. With our needs, we may come to him, and He always listens.

Because He saved Israel from its misery in Egypt, we know that if we cry out, our voice reaches God. He hears, He sees, and He is present with you. Sometimes He changes things dramatically, and sometimes his presence is just enough.

His name 'I am who I am' reveals his power and his character. His name - that is his deepest character - guarantees that He is powerful to help, and that He is willing to help.

So let us trust in his power and goodness to sustain us – He wants to support you, for the simple reason that you belong to him.

+ Amen