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Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
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There was a time in my life — it was 20 years ago, when all I could see were long lines of dark and hungry people walking in large groups through the dust; no food, no home, no safety. The thick column of these people never seemed to end. Just when I thought it would, I would realize I could see only so far because they were coming over the rise of a hill. They kept on coming. The near genocide of Tutsis in Rwanda was the springboard of my dreams, my prayers, my seemingly endless wondering how this could be. I had clipped a small photo from a news article and it sat in my office where I saw it whenever I entered. In it three very skinny boys leaned against a fence topped with barbed wire. They had reached some destination, but they had no food. What will become of God's children? What was I to do?

There is a time in my life that is now, and once again I am haunted by the image of children with no place to rest their heads; they arrive having walked through the dust; no food, no home, no safety. The images I see on the news is of children in buses, disoriented, fearful and of adults heckling the buses, shouting that they must not stay. "There is no room in the Inn!"

What will become of God's children? What am I to do?

Moses, hunted murderer of an Egyptian, content in his escaped life, minding the flock of his father-in-law was approached by God through a weird burning bush. In that meeting of the faithful Hebrew and the one loving and living God, Moses was given a charge, a preposterous charge, to lead God's beloved ones from slavery to freedom.

Jesus, our living and loving Lord, in his life transformed the lives of his followers beginning with his disciples. Last week we heard Peter proclaim the truth of all he had experienced with Jesus when he said "You are the Messiah! The Son of the Living God!" Along with the strength of his proclamation I would have loved to hear the tone of that exchange, Peter's voice I imagine filled as much with surprise as conviction: "Did I really say that? Yes!"

Yet today we hear the sadly incomplete understanding Peter had of the cost of transformation. All he could think of was keeping his Messiah safe. Easy to understand, but Jesus upbraids Peter and holds fast to the life God has given him. To follow me you must lose, leave behind, that life of assumptions and actions based on a former order; you must move to an understanding based on God's understanding, God's priorities, God's demands.

Saul of Tarsus, on his way to Damascus intent on following his orders to hunt down and kill this pesky Jewish preacher, Jesus of Nazareth, was struck down and robbed of his sight. He lost his life as he knew it and gained a new one when his sight was restored and he could see the new reality God was bringing forth in the only son, Jesus. The cross Paul picked up, his new life, was spent proclaiming the new life of the new community formed in God's love through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Moses, Peter, Paul, all persons of faith transformed by their moment in front of a burning bush, in front of the man who is also God, in front of a light so sudden and blinding it can throw you to the ground.

Here's the truth. There are still burning bushes. The name of the God who enlisted Moses is "I am who I am, or I will be what I will be;" God's name we are told, for all generations. All generations. That includes our generation. We are not exempt.

Within the last two weeks I saw a woman interviewed on the news. She is a lawyer in Denver. Once every six weeks, I think that was the time, she travels to a border area in Arizona to use her legal talents to be with those who have come, to assure them they do have rights to due process even though that means that many will indeed have to return to their countries. Those children and their plight became her burning bush and she was able to respond with the time and talent she has, talent well suited to some of the needs of this great need presented by the children, children who have walked through the dust, with no food, no home, no safety.

I have neither that talent nor the energy of the woman I saw. I do not know yet what my part in this time of need may be. But I do know my faith compels me to be arrested by the burning bush of these children, God's children, in need.

I share with you now a large part of an essay written recently by Stephanie Paulsell who teaches ministry at Harvard Divinity School. I share it because she draws clearly the line that leads from the children to our need as people of faith to respond. I apologize up front for the geography of the example; she lives and teaches in Massachusetts, but I have heard Illinois and Iowa officials reacting to this emergency of children's need.

She does not have an answer, a prescription that will clear all this up. Neither do I. But she shows us the path from our faith to the plight of the children. I quote from her essay:

"It's rare that a politician says something memorable. Governor Deval Patrick of Massachusetts said something that I haven't been able to forget when he proposed our state offer shelter to a thousand children who crossed into the United States to escape violence and poverty in their home countries. Massachusetts once sheltered refugees from Hurricane Katrina in military barracks on Cape Cod; Governor Patrick has proposed that the state offer the same shelter to children arriving at the border.

The governor's proposal received a mixed response: some people called his office to offer books, toys, and time to help care for the children. Others, including some residents of the communities in which the governor proposed housing the children, strongly opposed the idea. We don't want illegal immigrants in our communities, they said. We moved to Cape Cod to get away from problems like these. Send those children back where they came from.

Accompanied by local leaders of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities, the governor held a press conference to explain why he wanted to bring the children to Massachusetts, and he cast his decision as a response to the demands of faith. He quoted lines from the Hebrew Bible in which God commands us to welcome the stranger as we have been welcomed. He reminded us that in 1939 the United States failed to shelter Jewish children from Europe, to our lasting shame. And then, his voice breaking, he said, "I don't know what good there is in faith, if we can't or won't turn to it in times of human need."

There is no disputing that this is a time of human need. The reporting on why the children are fleeing their home countries has been so sparse. But my sister, who spent years getting children released from detention centers on the southern border of our country, tells me that children who make the dangerous journey north risk their lives to escape kidnapping, rape, hunger, forced conscription into gangs, sex trafficking, murder, slavery, and poverty. Their

situation is as grave as is possible to imagine, terrible enough for those who love them to send them north in hopes that they can reach the border. To say that these children have broken the law and should be “sent home” obscures the consequences of deportation.

What good is there in faith, the governor asked, if we can’t and won’t turn to it in moments of human need?”

Paulsell the teacher continues, “In summer school, we were reading stories in which religious faith was depicted as a force powerful enough to turn our lives inside and out and set us on unexpected paths: the stories of Abraham and Moses... By contrast, the recent developments made religious faith sound frail and fragile, something that required protection and exemption, a border that needed patrolling.

Is this what it means to “turn to faith” – gathering in the like-minded and barring the door against all else? Or is turning to faith a riskier move outward, a crossing of borders, an opening of doors? As the governor seemed to say, we need faith not to confirm our prejudices – we can manage that all by ourselves – but to move beyond them. In order to do what faith requires, we need faith in each other, faith in God, and faith in the visions of beloved community that our religious traditions have passed down from generation to generation.

Faith is not fragile. It is a power to be released.

It’s risky for the governor to urge us to turn to our faith, because once we begin turning there’s no telling how far our faith will ask us to go. We may find that our faith urges us beyond temporary care toward advocacy.

Some opponents of the governor’s plan argued that we shouldn’t care for undocumented children before we care for our own. Yes, there are children in our communities who are also facing danger. But if we turn to our faith, we might learn that honoring the human dignity of children is not a zero-sum game in which caring for one child makes it impossible to care for another. We can care for all of these children, but we will have to change our lives and our world.

Our faith does not exempt us. It makes a claim on us and asks us to turn.”
[from Christian Century, September 3, 2014]

This burning bush makes a claim on us. As people of faith, as people who follow Jesus, as people who try to live in Christian community, we know we must let this terrible scourge be alive in our lives, alive and claiming our attention.

I close with a prayer written by Marian Wright Edelman, Founder and president of the Children’s Defense Fund, with an addition of my own.

We pray for children
 who sneak popsicles before supper,
 who erase holes in math workbooks,
 who can never find their shoes.
 And we pray for those
 who stare at photographers from behind barged wire,
 who can’t bound down the street in a new pair of sneakers,
 who never “counted potatoes,”

who were born in places we wouldn't be caught dead,
 who never go to the circus,
 who live in an X-rated world.

We pray for children
 who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions,
 who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money.

And we pray for those
 who never get dessert,
 who have no safe blanket to drag behind them,
 who watch their parents watch them die,
 who can't find any bread to steal,
 who don't have any rooms to clean up,
 whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser,
 and whose monsters are real.

We pray for children
 who spend all their allowance before Tuesday,
 who throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick at their food,
 who like ghost stories,
 who shove dirty clothes under the bed and never rinse out the tub,
 who get visits from the tooth fairy,
 who don't like to be kissed in front of the carpool,
 who squirm in church or temple and scream in the phone,
 whose tears we sometimes laugh at and whose smiles can make us cry.

And we pray for children
 who want to be carried and for those who must,
 for those we never give up on and for those who don't get a second chance,
 for those who rest well and for those who walk through the dust, no safe place to rest.

[Marian Wright Edelman, Guide my Feet, Beacon Press, 1995]

And we know by God's grace
 until all the children are fed
 we are all profoundly hungry.
 Amen

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c

Romans 12:9-21

Matthew 16:21-28

