I come to you today from Seattle where Tine and I have come to be with old friends as we gather to acknowledge and honor the life of their daughter Olivia who died several weeks ago at the age of 27. It is a sad moment in this already somber time and it certainly influences my reflections on today’s Scriptures, each of which reveal a different quality of that often incomprehensible force we call “God”.

“I am who I am” God announced to Moses. It is a statement that seems to leave no room for intervention, no space for us to wiggle or influence events. Often that feels so true. Yet the God of the Hebrew Bible is fickle. There are plenty of stories that begin with “this-is-the-way-it-is” statements that a clever debater could overcome. Indeed, Moses did often. My friends here who have lost their daughter did not encounter that face though. Each of us finds ways of dealing with the reality of this ambiguous quality of God every day. I am told by those who have had to experience it, that there are no days worse than those that come in the aftermath of losing a child. The negotiation has failed. In moments such as these, it is easy to see how one can lose faith; at least for a while.

In today’s Exodus story, God was giving Moses good news, reassuring news. This is the kind of news we all like to hear from God; it is so much easier to accept. As Mark Asman reminded us in his sermon last week, stories like these were created to help members of the community to understand (and I suspect) to rationalize their histories. The stories had historical qualities but at least for the writers, this was not ancient history. It is so reassuring to have the stamp of God’s approval, albeit documented after the fact, after the Israelites had come and taken “a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey”.

Everything preordained by “I am who I am”. That sidestepped any ethical quandaries and left everyone feeling great (everyone except the Canaanites, Hittites and the rest). We all like that kind of divine news but sometimes “I am who I am” delivers news we are not prepared to hear, news that tears our hearts out. Then the possibility that this “I am who I am” is a “loving God” seems simply absurd. In those moments, the fallback position of “faith” can feel like a pretty feeble port for weathering such a storm!

Yet, “people of faith” is how we Christians identify ourselves. Somehow, we have found a way to live with this “I am who I am” most of the time but it is often an uneasy peace. The theologian Karl Barth, called this uneasiness “the Great Disturbance”. He wrote that “human behavior must inevitably be disturbed by the thought of God”. Every conversation about God leaves us confused, after all, we are human beings living

1 Barth, Karl: The Epistle to the Romans, Sixth Edition, Oxford University Press, London 1933. P 424
in this world with each of our daily crises, our ongoing struggles and the rest. Barth wrote that, “It is in the actual tension and movement of human life, in the actual being and having and the doing of [human beings] that our existential concepts and formulations emerge. And it is precisely here that they emerge in their abstract [and these concepts] contrast with everything human and everything in this world”². Barth’s point is that everything we try to understand about God is so alien to our daily lives. We are sure to be left with questions most of the time.

We must remember this when we read words like those which Paul wrote to the Romans as “ethics lessons” in today’s excerpt from the Epistle to the Romans. Paul’s words need to be understood in the context of this “Great Disturbance” which characterizes the heart of any relationship between human being and God. That means that as clear and as unambiguous as these paragraphs may appear on first blush—almost simplistic truisms—the reality is much more challenging!

Last Sunday, Mark Asman’s sermon also offered insights to guide our actions in these difficult, polarized times. His words are equally relevant today as we reflect on Paul’s lessons. Mark spoke of real issues like racial justice and climate change. Barth too, when reflecting on how subsequent generations of Christians should read Paul’s words advised that there was no better source than a newspaper if one hoped to understand his meaning.

By this he surely meant that newspapers present real, “this moment” issues; conflicts where we find ourselves cheering for this point or jeering at that. Situations that so easily demonize the other, situations where the “agape” – the love of Paul’s letter which demands of us an acceptance of “the other”, is nowhere to be found. And sadly, this is the reality for all of us most of the time. Indeed, Barth noted that the ethics lesson Paul was teaching, perhaps the central tenet of all “Christian ethics”, demands we persistently ask questions even as we are refused clear answers to those same questions. **The only thing faith allows us to be certain of is that there is an answer.**

Hence the command to “not be wiser than you are”, a message these days we see being ignored far too often by so many who call themselves Christians; those people who are so certain they know what is best for everyone, dismissing all whom they deem inferior, less devout than themselves. Barth referred to those who fall into that trap as being subject to the “curse of the Titans”. The Titans being the Gods of Greek mythology who predated the Olympian Gods and who fell from power, in part because of their excessive pride and vanity. Does Jerry Falwell Jr. come to mind for any of you?

If the Exodus reading presents the God of “this is just the way it is” – “I am who I am”, and Paul focuses on the “Great Disturbance” that is so central to our lifelong struggle to live guided by a code of “Christian ethics”, our Gospel reading from Matthew offers us yet another conundrum: What did Jesus mean when he said “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

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² Ibid: P 425
For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it”?

Over the centuries, texts like this one have motivated all sorts of different behaviors. A few moved into caves and lived unwashed for decades, eating the odd bug or rodent supported by the belief that the only true path to eternal life required ultimate deprivation in this one. Others, like my own favorite saint Mother Theresa, devoted her life to the poorest of the poor, getting up early and spending eighteen-hour days carrying for the poorest of the poor despite going decades with no feeling that God heard a single one of the countless prayers she directed multiple times every day to Heaven.

Then there are the rest of us who I suspect try hardest not to think about words like this too much since it is easy to think that when compared with people like Theresa, we all fall so short. Are the rest of just inadequate Christians? My wife Tine is a great teacher and tells me that it is always a challenge when she has an exceptional student in her class- a student like Theresa is likely to make the rest of us feel like we come up short. Well, if God measures with “the curve” and there is a Theresa in the class, I am happy to be one of those earning a “C”.

As Christians we are called to have faith that there is an answer and find some way to make peace with that. Theresa would go decades without an answer, some of us will too. Most of us will not manage that as well as Theresa did and that is why she was canonized. She got up every day with a clear knowledge of what God expected of her, a knowledge she trusted despite the absence of an answer to her prayers. We may need to figure out what it means to “take up our cross” in each of our lives and then trust in our instincts, just as Theresa had to trust hers in those decades of one-way communication with God. The returned calls are not guaranteed and there is no shame in a “C”.

Returning again to our purpose here in Seattle, I want to share with you the sentence that first etched itself in my soul as I prepared this homily. Before reading any of the texts, I had communicated with Elizabeth to coordinate the preaching schedule. The service for Olivia was originally scheduled for next Sunday. I had asked Elizabeth if she could assign me today so I would not be “double-booked”. Then, my friends needed to move up the service date by one week. Given the power of Zoom, there was a way to do both. With all that settled, I took a look at the texts: Here are the first words that connected with me: It was the final sentence (verse 28) of Matthew’s Gospel: “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Such a powerful reference to Resurrection. Yet this explanation makes it a tough verse for those who insist that Resurrection can only apply after some “end times”. Generations of literal readers of Scripture have predicted that “the end” is just around the corner. It seems to never arrive on schedule- not even for Jesus. Maybe that is a clue that there might be another interpretation?
Some days ago, when speaking with my friend about how he was working through his grief, I shared a story from my own life. My father had just died (at about the age I am now). His funeral was held at All-Saints-By-the-Sea, the Church my grandparents attended when both of them were alive. Following the service, the reception was held at the home of an old family friend on the bluff above Hendry’s Beach. There as the sun was setting over the ocean, I felt my father’s presence come to me. It was in the form that I can now identify as his “spirit body” – language that suits me after so much Bible in recent years. It was the most peaceful thing and his presence melted my heart. Tears of both grief and joy filled my eyes. The sun dipped below the horizon, then the spirit was gone. My tears were gone too. I felt better. I told my friend this story and suggested to him that Olivia might find her way to him just like my father found me.

Some days later, my friend called me with a story. He had gone to a high place in the mountains in Idaho, all alone and he found himself talking with his daughter. At some point, he looked up to the sky and this is what he saw: [show photo]. As surely as that sunset captured my father’s spirit body, this cloud captured Olivia’s. They communed for a while and he departed with more peace.

Resurrection, like Christian ethics will always be a topic that leaves us in this world with uncertainties; so many questions. Just like the death of a child, just like so many things in this life that “I am who I am” leaves unanswered for us. In this life, we may never be granted more than the knowledge that God calls us to never cease to ask the questions and be open to the possibility that we may be surprised when every now and then, there is an answer. For my friends who lost their daughter, one answer has come as a joyful surprise. This is the discovery of their ongoing connection with their beloved daughter, alive in her spirit body. Yes, some alive today will see the “son of man coming to his kingdom” if they allow themselves the faith to do so.

Amen.

Exodus 3:1-15
Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up.” When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the
Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” He said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.” But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

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

1 Give thanks to the LORD and call upon his Name; *  
   make known his deeds among the peoples.  
2 Sing to him, sing praises to him, *  
   and speak of all his marvelous works.  
3 Glory in his holy Name; *  
   let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.  
4 Search for the LORD and his strength; *  
   continually seek his face.  
5 Remember the marvels he has done, *  
   his wonders and the judgments of his mouth,  
6 O offspring of Abraham his servant, *  
   O children of Jacob his chosen.  
23Israel came into Egypt, *  
   and Jacob became a sojourner in the land of Ham.  
24The LORD made his people exceedingly fruitful; *  
   he made them stronger than their enemies;  
25Whose heart he turned, so that they hated his people, *  
   and dealt unjustly with his servants.  
26He sent Moses his servant, *  
   and Aaron whom he had chosen.  
45Hallelujah!

**Romans 12:9-21**

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as
it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

**Matthew 16:21-28**

Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”