

“A Sabbath campfire”

Exodus 3:1-10

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Third sermon in Jubilee Journey

Moses met God out in the Midian desert. They sat down and had a campfire together. It was a spectacular campfire. For starters, the fire never died down. The fire never burned out. The fire burned brightly and never dimmed. That is for starters. At the campfire God revealed himself in a way never done before. God said, “I am who I am.” That name left a mark in the heart of Moses. That name left a mark in the heart of all the Israelites. That name left a mark on Jesus, who used that very expression over and over again in the Gospel of John...I am the bread of life...I am the Good Shepherd...I am the Way and the Truth and the Life...I am the Resurrection and the Life. At that campfire God did a couple of miracles. At that campfire God called Moses in no uncertain terms...even when Moses hemmed and hawed and finally pleaded for God to send someone else. And at that campfire God said something definitive. At that campfire God said something that defined who God is. To a people groaning under the weight of oppression and the cruel burden of slavery, God said, “I have seen your suffering. I have heard your cries. I am concerned. I have come down to help.” Just like the bush that burned and burned but was never consumed, the embers of that campfire were never meant to die out. The embers of that campfire were meant to burn bright in the heart and the soul of the Israelites...forever.

God's intention to keep the embers of that campfire burning bright in the heart and the soul of the Israelites is made clear by God commanding the people to come back to that very campfire on a regular basis. In fact, God commanded Israel to come back to that campfire on a weekly basis. God commanded Israel to come back to that campfire every time they remembered and observed the Sabbath.

In Deuteronomy 5:12-15, God gives Israel the Sabbath command for a second time. In Deuteronomy, when God commands the people to remember and observe the Sabbath, he bases that remembrance and observance in the events that took place when the people were set free from their slavery. "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand, an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day." (Deuteronomy 5:17)

Every Sabbath day Israel was supposed to gather at the campfire where the embers still burned bright. At that campfire Israel was called to remember all God had done, from the promises of deliverance to the plagues that prompted the deliverance to the actual path of salvation that took them through the Red Sea on dry land and propelled them into the wilderness where God provided bread from heaven, manna, for their entire 40 year journey through the wilderness. Observe the Sabbath day. Come to the campfire. Hear me tell you again as I told Moses on that day long ago, as I told Moses by the burning bush, as I told Moses by the campfire, hear me tell you again, "I have seen

your suffering. I have heard your cries. I am concerned. I have come down to help.” Remember that you were slaves and I set you free. In that sense, Sabbath is a command to remember how precious Israel is in the sight of God, that Israel has been chosen by God, and showered by God with his kindness, his concern, and his compassion. Wouldn't you want to come to a campfire like that on a regular basis? Wouldn't you like to come to a campfire like that on a weekly basis? Wouldn't your heart yearn to be seated at that campfire as God conveyed to you just how precious your life is?

It seems the only hitch in this whole campfire scenario, is that the people of Israel were not meant to come to the campfire alone. The Sabbath command as it is given in Deuteronomy has God saying, “You come to my campfire, and bring with you all those under your care. Bring your children. Bring your whole family. Bring your animals. Bring you servants, your male and your female servants. And don't forget the alien, the stranger. Bring them with you.” Bring all of those under your care to the campfire, because I also want them to know that I am the God who delivers the oppressed, the God who watches over the vulnerable, the God who cares for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the alien. I want everyone to know what you know, that I am the God who sees the suffering of humanity, the God who hears the cries of humanity, the God who cares for humanity, for all humanity, and the God who comes down to help humanity, the God who helps all of humanity. By linking observance of the Sabbath with watching out and including those under care of the Israelites, it is almost as if God said, “I want *you* to see the

suffering of others. I want *you* to hear the cries of others. I want *you* to care for others. And I want *you* to come down and help others.”

I wish the campfire had been around during the days of Cain and Abel, those two sons of Adam and Eve. They had no campfire to go to in those days. And when Cain got jealous and struck down his brother, when Cain murdered his brother, he asked a question that seems so wrong to us. Cain asked, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” You could only ask a question like that if you had never been to the campfire we’re talking about this morning. The embers of this campfire are meant to be embers that keep burning bright. These embers glow with a deep concern for others. At this campfire we say in no uncertain terms, “I am my brother’s keeper.” Just as I am the keeper of my sons and daughters...just as I am the keeper of my servants, both male and female...just as I am a keeper of the aliens, the strangers, the weak, and the vulnerable.” Those who bask in the glow of this campfire embrace with passion and purpose the call to be my brother’s keeper.

My guess is Jesus was very familiar with this campfire. My guess is that Jesus attended this campfire often, on a regular basis, even on a weekly basis. We know from the Gospel stories that Jesus observed the Sabbath. Time and again mention is made that Jesus was observing the Sabbath, either attending synagogue or some other form of observance. But more than just observing the Sabbath, Jesus took those words of God into his own heart. Jesus saw the suffering of others. Jesus heard the cries. Jesus was concerned. And time and time and time again Jesus came

down to help. Jesus might not have carried the embers of that campfire with him, but there was a passion that burned within him. When Jesus saw the leper he said, “I am my brother’s keeper.” When Jesus saw a paralyzed man Jesus said, “I am my brother’s keeper.” When Jesus saw a tax collector, and then a raucous party of other tax collectors and sinners, Jesus said, “I am my brother’s keeper.” When he saw 5,000 who were hungry, when he saw disciples who were afraid, when he heard Peter’s cry for help, whenever he saw, whenever he heard, he was always concerned. And in so many beautiful and blessed ways he came down to help. Jesus knew about this campfire. Jesus knew what it meant to observe the Sabbath. Jesus knew what it was to be his brother’s keeper.

Listen to this passage from Luke. “On another Sabbath Jesus went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, ‘Get up and stand in front of everyone.’ So the man got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, ‘I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?’ He looked around at them all, then said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He did so, and his hand was completely restored. But the Pharisees and teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.” Those old Pharisees and teachers of the law had been so busy trying to make Sabbath a set of rules and regulations they forgot to attend

the campfire meeting. Here on the Sabbath was a man with a shriveled hand, but they did not see his pain. They did not hear his cry. They were not concerned. And they never lifted a hand to help him. But Jesus had been to the campfire. Jesus saw. Jesus heard. Jesus was concerned. And Jesus helped.

Just out of curiosity, I wonder if Jesus invited all the people he helped to join him at the campfire? I can just see that motley crew, ones who were lepers, ones who were lame, ones who were tax collectors, ones who were sinners, ones who had been beaten down and whose lives were broken, ones who had lived a life as outsiders, as strangers, as aliens, as exiles, but ones who all had one thing in common, they were all ones whom Jesus saw, heard, cared for, and cured. They were all ones Jesus had helped. What a campfire that must have been. And then Jesus, who most definitely said, “As I have loved you, so you should love one another,” it seems Jesus might well have said, “As I saw your pain, as I heard your cries, as I was concerned for you, and as I came down to help you, now you see, now you hear, now you have concern, and now you...you...each one of you...as individuals...as a body...as a community...now you help others. In other words, now you be your brother’s keeper.”

I have been talking for the last few weeks about a big event in the bible called the Year of Jubilee. Jubilee is a year when the people of God were to take the idea that they were their brother’s keeper and let that idea expand and explode so that it touched every part of life. No one was to be left out. No one was to be forgotten. No one was to be

excluded. Everyone...every single person would have the gift of knowing they had the inalienable right of belonging. Jubilee was a time when there might have been a huge and dramatic call and response that echoes through the land. The tribes would shout together the age-old question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" And with a response that shakes the shackles of slavery and brings light to the darkest dungeons they would respond, "YES! I AM MY BROTHER'S KEEPER!" That's a roar that would cause some mighty rejoicing.

It seems to me a campfire would be a good setting to make some plans for Jubilee. With folks whose lives have been blessed by God, with folks whose lives have been touched by the love of Jesus, with folks who had experienced the transforming power of the God who sees and hears and cares and comes to help, you might start to have some pretty deep conversations. "Where have we seen people who are suffering? Whose cries have we heard? How can we show our concern? How can we help?"

One of my favorite campfire stories is the one about a woman named Ruth, found in the Old Testament book that bears her name. Ruth was not an Israelite. Ruth was a Moabite. I don't know who invited Ruth to the campfire, but the Sabbath does tell the people of God to include the foreigner. Maybe when Ruth married a man who was an Israelite, she started coming to the campfire. All I know is I am pretty certain Ruth knew the campfire story about the God who sees and hears, the God who cares and who comes to help. I'm pretty sure she knew the campfire story, because that is exactly what she did. When Ruth's mother-

in-law decided to leave Moab, where she had lived as an exile and where she had lost all that was dear, where she had lost her husband and her two sons, Ruth saw her mother-in-law Naomi and said, “I am my brother’s keeper.” Or something like that. Ruth said to Naomi, “Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God.” Ruth saw Naomi’s pain. Ruth heard Naomi’s cries. Ruth heard Naomi’s heartbroken cries filled with bitterness. Ruth was concerned. And Ruth came to help. Ruth went back to Bethlehem with Naomi.

I would like to have that whole cast of characters from the book of Ruth at my campfire to help plan Jubilee. Naomi’s tears of bitterness turned to tears of joy when God blessed her with a grandson. A man named Boaz felt the glow of the campfire and he acted as a kinsman redeemer, marrying Ruth. Chapter by chapter and verse by verse the book of Ruth is a stirring example of what it means to see, to hear, to care, and to come and help. Chapter by chapter and verse by verse the book of Ruth is a stirring example of what it means to say, “I am my brother’s keeper.” And Ruth and Naomi were not even brothers. They were women. But they were women whose lives were fueled by the passion that comes from the embers of the campfire that burned brightly so many years ago when God said to Moses, “I have seen the suffering of my people. I have heard their cries. I am concerned. And so I have come to help.”

Speaking of Ruth, there is a campfire story that holds a special place in the life of the Eberly family. A couple

named Mr. and Mrs. Asay spent regular time by the campfire. Their faith was on fire. The ember burned bright in their lives. And sometime in the late 1950s when a young couple with three little children were making a move from southern California to the central San Joaquin Valley, Mr. and Mrs. Asay saw the need of that family, heard the cry of that family, was concerned for that family, and found a way to help that family. My dad had just graduated with a teaching degree and he got a job in Hanford, California. Unfortunately, he could not afford a place for his young family in Hanford, California. I guess Hanford did not have any affordable housing. Mr. and Mrs. Asay lived in Tulare, about a thirty-minute drive from Hanford. I don't know how the Asays heard about the Eberlys, but somewhere along the line the Asays offered the young Eberly family a little two bedroom house on their huge dairy farm as a place to stay while they got their feet on the ground. That act of hospitality, that act of loving your neighbor, that act of saying, "I am my brother's keeper" led to a lifelong friendship between the Eberlys and the Asays.

I was thinking back on the Asays this week and how they observed the Sabbath by noticing one family at a time of need. Something came to my mind I never thought of before. Many a Sunday afternoon, after we had been to church in Hanford, after my mom had served us our Sabbath meal of pot roast and baked potatoes, my dad would load us all in our station wagon and we would take a Sabbath day's drive to Tulare. We would go and visit the Asays. I get tears in my eyes thinking that on that Sabbath day's drive to our lifelong friends, maybe my dad in his own way was making a trip to the campfire. I do know this.

Whenever we left the Asay home, I always left with a glow in my heart.

And when I come to the campfire, a campfire that is surrounded with a whole band of brothers and sisters who have been transformed by the God who sees and hears and cares and comes to help, I always think of people like the Asays. Now my whole life the Asays have only been Mr. and Mrs. Asay. No matter how often they encouraged me as an adult to call them by their names, I just couldn't. Actually, I wouldn't. They were and always will be Mr. and Mrs. Asay. But today at the campfire, I can't but help but feel it is a special touch of God's grace that the Asays did have first names. Mr. Asay had a first name. It was Allan. Mrs. Asay also had a first name. And there could not be a better first name for her than the one she was given, for it captures the role she played in our life. Mrs. Asays first name was Ruth.

With the prayer that we might each have someone like Ruth in our lives, and with complete confidence that we have all had someone like Jesus in our life, and with a burning bush serving as a campfire where we remember our God is the one who sees and hears, whose concern is genuine and whose help brings hope to all, may we join with the faithful chorus that echoes down through the ages, the chorus that hears the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" and roars back with a passion and purpose that burns within us, "YES! YES, I AM MY BROTHER'S KEEPER!"