

Sermon: "A God Who..."

Exodus 3:1-15

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I recently was speaking with a good friend who is going through something of a mid-life crisis and finds herself in the midst of significant vocational uncertainty. "I just need to find my burning bush to figure out what I should be doing with my life," she said, drawing on imagery from this morning's text. The statement represented her longing to receive a divine message that would indicate she was on the right path toward the life God has intended for her.

Indeed, Moses has become something of a patron saint for the vocationally challenged. His story, one of the most famous among biblical figures, has extraordinary twists and turns along the way to his final status as the great liberator and leader of the people Israel. He gets a remarkable start to life when he is saved by the cunning and devotion of some brave Hebrew and Egyptian women who refuse to participate in Pharaoh's cruel plan to kill Hebrew male infants. Raised in the courts of power, his first attempt to defend his fellow Israelites results in a terrible crime: he murders an Egyptian who is striking a Hebrew laborer. The passage in chapter two goes into great detail describing Moses' actions: he looks left and right to make sure there are no witnesses, then buries the body in the sand. The next day when he breaks up a fight between two Hebrews and asks them why they would turn against each other as fellow kinsfolk, they respond: "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?"

Moses is busted. Not only is his crime widely known, his first attempt to act on behalf of his people ends in abject failure. Realizing the trouble he's in, he flees Egypt and runs into the wilderness. There he meets Jethro, marries his daughter, raises a family, and for 40 years tends sheep in the countryside.

We're not told a lot about Moses' state of mind before the burning bush event. Was he bored? Did he wonder about his old life of power and prestige? Was he concerned about the oppression he knew existed in Egypt? We're only left to speculate about where his thoughts wandered as he covered the familiar hillsides while tending sheep. It is likely that the day started out like the many that preceded it: with family obligations and work responsibilities. When out from the ordinary landscape of his daily life, he witnesses something extraordinary – a bush that is engulfed in flame, but does not burn.

The interchange and dynamics that follow are among the most important, intriguing and well known in the Bible. Reading it, our thoughts go quickly to what it must have been like for Moses to experience this strange occurrence. We identify with Moses, his missteps and adventures; the unlikely moment that changes everything for him. But I'd like to recommend a change of perspective at this point. While we are naturally drawn to Moses and what he experienced on Mt. Horeb – the insights we gain about who this God, our God, is are incredibly rich and edifying for our lives of faith.

In an important article titled “Biblical Leadership”, renowned Jewish scholar, Martin Buber notes that the people who are portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures are notoriously flawed. No attempt is made to glorify their human traits - instead we get detailed accounts of their foibles: David’s infidelity, Aaron’s idol-making, Joseph’s bragging, Jacob’s deceit, Jonah’s stubbornness and bigotry, and the list could go on and on. Buber contends their shortcomings aren’t hidden because the importance of their participation in the divine story is not to become super heroes for our faith, but rather to serve as conduits for our own experience of God. They point us to the greatness of God and God’s steadfastness in dealing with us despite our human failings.

What we learn about God when we shift the spotlight from Moses toward God, is rich and life giving. From the first words in their encounter we gain insight into the nature of God’s divine presence. In verse 4, God summons Moses by name. In verse 5, God warns Moses about the nature of this holy encounter, and in verse 6, God discloses God’s place in the story of the people of Israel by pointing to God’s enduring commitment with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is the God whose Genesis blessings made a barren woman laugh at that which only God could produce, a God who protects outsiders like Joseph, and guards fugitives like Jacob.

The verses that follow contain a series of self-announcements that one scholar has said delivers to Moses (and Israel, and us) all that needs to be known of God. In these verses God reveals an active engagement with God’s people. God says, “I have observed the misery of my people...” “I have heard their cry...” and “I know their suffering...” Further God reveals “I have come down to deliver them” and “bring them up out of Egypt to a good and broad land”.

God sees, hears, and knows. God comes down, delivers and brings God’s people up out of suffering. That last verb is the Hebrew word “nasal” for “to snatch”. Rich, active, engaging verbs. This is not the account of a distant removed monarch, lodged high above the concerns of the world – God KNOWS, through first-hand experience with God’s people.

After this series of potent, descriptive verbs in God’s self-disclosure, we encounter perhaps the most startling and important verb of all: God “sends.” Vs. 10 simply and abruptly states, “So come.” The attention shifts back to Moses’ critical role. Rather than providing some cosmic quick fix, God summons this fragile shepherd, who wasn’t particularly successful that last time he was in Egypt, and sends HIM.

It should be no surprise to read that this shift stunned Moses. Walter Bruggemann, Old Testament Scholar writes, “What had been all pious promise now becomes rigorous demand: “Come.” In one brief utterance, the grand intention of God has become a specific human responsibility, human obligation and human vocation.”

To this, Moses responds with 5 points of resistance, only the first two of which occur in this morning’s text. The first is “why me?” And the second, “what shall I say is the name of the One who sends me?” God responds to these concerns with the promise of God’s presence and the giving of God’s name. The enigmatic name that God offers – the unpronounceable, “Yahweh” - has at its root the verb “to be.” This name, quite frankly, could be the subject of a sermon in and of itself. For now, suffice it to say that God gives us a bit of a riddle: God is that which is being,

the first and last, the ground of all that is. This is no trivial idea or philosophical concept, this is the one true God who's being cannot be manipulated or controlled, whose name cannot even be pronounced. Yet, this ONE has given us a name; has called us into relationship.

Now that this burning bush experience is fleshed out a little bit, I wonder if my friend would really find an encounter with God like Moses' all that helpful? Remember she said, "I wish I could find my burning bush?" Well, to that, I would say, you already have. It wasn't Moses' bush, it is our bush. Our story. A story that reveals as Walter Bruggemann said, "everything we need to know about God." A God who hears. A God who sees. A God who knows. A God who sends weak, inadequate people, and accepts no excuses.

As Christians, we know God to continue in this loving connection with us through the saving love of Christ. Our Gospel record demonstrates that he hears our cries, sees our suffering, knows our affliction and calls us to serve our brothers and sisters. The passage we heard this morning in Romans, illustrates the quality of life we're called to live. The offer to Moses that God will be with him in his awesome calling, is the same offer Jesus extends to his disciples and to us: "And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the ages."

The key, then, isn't wondering what God would say to us if we encountered "our" burning bush, but rather to listen to what God has said to us in Holy Scripture about who God is and who we are called to be.

With this tremendous knowledge, this awesome truth, what are we to do with our one amazing life? I like what Elizabeth Barrett Browning offers as an insight. In a section taken from a larger poem entitled *Aurora Leigh*, she writes: "Earth's crammed with Heaven. And every common bush afire with God. Only he who sees, takes off his shoes. The rest sit 'round and pluck blackberries." Browning is on to something with her rendering of the burning bush story. God's holiness abounds, it is our role to attend carefully to it – to "see." To be attentive - on the lookout, if you will, for the places where God calls us. To recognize that God's holy ground is all around us in our daily experience.

Chances are if you're on the lookout for ways to respond to God's liberating love, you'll find it. Most likely it won't resemble the dramatic work to which Moses was called, but let's not trick ourselves into thinking oppressive regimes or attitudes no longer exist. Let us not abdicate our holy calling to lift the burdens we see in culture and society; limitations and indignities that take away the fullness that God has intended for God's children. A lot of us will think, like Moses did: us? Really? What could we possibly do?

I recently saw a powerful scene in the movie *THE HELP* that portrayed ordinary people engaging courage and commitment to expose injustice. The story involves a privileged white debutant from Mississippi in the 1960's who is trying to write a book about the African American help who serve white families and routinely endure poor working conditions, low wages and de-humanizing racism. She finds two brave women willing to risk the potentially life threatening fall-out from exposing their stories, but no one else has the nerve to come forward. When a terrible injustice is committed against one of the maids in the community, the writer enters her usual location to meet with the two women, and discovers a room full of women who

have finally summoned the courage to participate in the book; to tell their stories. Stories that shined a light on the common practices of prejudice and injustice that needed to be changed... and probably still need to change in today's society.

I had read the book and knew what happened, but was still moved to tears by the filming of that room full of maids. They had been immersed in injustice for years, but it took this particular event to get their attention and draw them to action.

That seems to be how it works, doesn't it? Call it the straw that breaks the camels back, the final blow, the "event – with a capital E" that finally gets our attention and moves us to respond. I know you've had these moments – I've heard them and told some of my own in the halls of these classrooms and over coffee in Bradfield Hall. Times of clarity, when you felt nudged, or pushed, to change course, leave a relationship, start a relationship, pursue a ministry, protest an injustice, support a cause. They are sometimes, but not always big events, sometimes, but not always positive events. I think that's God's spirit, stirring, us calling our name.

I think it's important to remember that things rarely turn out as we had planned when we pay attention to these moments. Like Moses and his first attempt to stand up for the Hebrew people in Egypt, things can go wrong and missteps are common. I can think of a lot of journeys that started toward one goal and ended up in an entirely different place to what was expected. It takes courage and a willing heart, and I would recommend good friends and spiritual counsel, to be ready and attentive to those moments when God stirs us to see that the ground upon which we stand is holy and we are called to make a difference.

It is my prayer that God grants us the vision to see the heaven crammed into our earth; to see the spectacular blessing as well as the injustice that calls us into active discipleship. May God deepen our courage and sharpen our vision that we discover a God who knows us, calls us and promises to be with us today and always, even unto the end of time. Thanks be to God. Amen.