

## Moses, The Burning Bush, and Becoming Who You Are

Sermon on Exodus 2:1-10

St. Mark's Episcopal Church in the Bowery, New York City

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Let me start just by laying my cards out on the table: I never... *ever*... thought that *I*... would be *preaching*... in a *church*. If someone had told me ten years ago that a decade later I'd be standing in the pulpit of a Christian church in the lower east side of New York City, wearing a white robe while preaching a sermon, I would have assumed they were either mentally ill or insulting me. I came into this whole "church" business kicking and screaming.

But it's precisely that whole kicking and screaming *thing* that we hear about today in the story of Moses... somehow, the kicking and the screaming seems to be a vital part of the experience for so many of us, in the process of becoming of who we truly are. I preach to you this morning on the basis of nothing more than this: the authority of God's work in my life. Which, I like to think, is the most genuine, intimate, and powerful kind of authority there is. Of course, it may not have much to offer in the way of prestige, power, or a five-year plan. And in fact, it generally involves a level of vulnerability that can be both dangerous and terrifying.

Perhaps that's why it's still not generally accepted, even in church circles, to respond to the question of "what do you do," with something like "I'm a prophet of God!" Though I think many of us in this room actually are. I don't think I'm *alone* when I say that the story of Moses resonates, and that it reveals something that is deeply true for *all* of us about the way that God forms and transforms our lives. Having gotten to know a lot of you at this point, I know that some of you have felt this way too. I know that many of you are just as surprised as I am to find yourselves sitting in a church, Sunday after Sunday, and *loving* it. I know that some of you have *no* idea how you've found the strength to overcome some of the challenges you've faced. But that you have experienced God showing up in your life, in strange but unmistakably incarnate ways, over and over again – luring you into a life that is fuller and more truly yours than anything you could have ever imagined.

Now... I'm someone who likes to take the stories in the Bible at face value. Which is simply to say that I assume these stories are actually saying something that really is true – something that is as real now as it was back then. I don't think of Moses' burning bush experience as a past historical anomaly. I don't think that miracles like this have stopped happening to people. I know I've experienced something like them... those moments when all sense of the normalcy that usually veils our everyday experiences slips away, and we find ourselves present to fullness of What Is - to the fiery Presence of God right in front of our faces. If this way of thinking is difficult for you, think about when you were a child. Or think of a child you know. Children encounter the world with such a deep sense of wonder and curiosity. They truly do experience the world around them as being lit up and alive, with mystery and presence. Think about those moments when you have allowed yourself to become like that again. It is *that* frame of mind, that state of Being, in which we are best able to hear and see and experience God.

I think it is no coincidence that Moses meets God while paying attention to a bush. I love how he gets so caught up in the whole thing that he starts talking to himself: "What's this burning bush? Why is it not burning up? Let me *turn aside* from the path I was walking. Let me *go and see*

what this is all about.” It’s when Moses turns, and gives himself over to that sense of wonderment and curiosity, that he begins to hear the voice of God speaking to him.

I also think it is no coincidence that Moses has this encounter when he is *beyond the wilderness*. Speaking for myself, it was only after I had traveled through my own long wilderness, during a time in my life when I had lost nearly everything, when I finally heard God speaking to me. The details of that encounter are pretty fantastical too... but for the sake of time, I’ll just paraphrase: God basically said, “Hey, listen, I know that we just met, and I know that you *really* don’t like Christianity all that much, and that you think it’s kind of stupid, but... I really need you to follow Jesus now, okay?”

Now trust me, I did not think this was a very good idea at all. I mean, Jesus? *Really?*

You have to understand, I was raised by liberals, in *the Bible belt*. I grew up hanging out with punk kids and hippies. In my context, Jesus-following was just *weird*, at best. I couldn’t follow *Jesus*. My friends were going to laugh at me! Heck, *I* was going to laugh at me! And besides, why would God want *me* to follow Jesus anyway? I was a poor, young, smoking, cursing, drinking, folk-singing *woman*, who didn’t have a whole lot of self-confidence, wasn’t raised in the church, and had a long litany of criticisms against “institutional religion.” I was pretty classic. How was anyone going to believe that *I* had met *God*, or that there was any legitimacy to any of this? The whole thing sounded absurd. I mean, couldn’t I be a Buddhist, or a Hindu, or something *cool*? Nah, God said. I really need you to follow Jesus.

Ugh.

In the somewhat haphazard seven-year journey that followed, I have traversed a vast vocational wilderness. Perhaps God called me into the church to reveal something about the inadequacies of its teachings on vocation... because I have to report that the Church ecumenical hasn’t exactly fleshed all of this out in the most life-giving way, especially for us laypeople! The Roman Catholics seem to think that there are only three “vocations”: priesthood, monasticism, and marriage. At least at this point, I don’t seem to be called to anything on *that* list. Meanwhile, the Protestants (bless their hearts) have really turned the whole idea of “vocation” into something equivalent to one’s *job* or your “career.” Gotta love that good ol’ Protestant work ethic.

But I say God forbid we have to think of our “job” and our “calling” as the same thing. This is such a first-world way of thinking, really – the idea that everyone ought to be able to figure out how to monetize whatever it is that they truly love doing, so that they can make a living at it within a capitalist society. Work, in the most basic sense, has to do with survival. Whether you enjoy it or not, most of it is – and will always be – utterly mundane. Not many people feel “called” in their heart of hearts to scrub toilets, pull weeds, or deliver the mail. Maybe they enjoy some aspects of the work. But this is different from one’s “call.” Notice that Moses’ *calling* was to liberate the Israelites from Pharaoh. But Moses’ *job* was to keep the flocks of his father-in-law. Moses was a shepherd by trade – a not-very-well-respected profession in the ancient world, actually. Shepherds were surly characters, not to be trusted. And yet, it was *through* his participation in this very mundane and probably rather unfulfilling job that Moses found his true calling.

A couple of weeks ago, we heard about Jesus going out into the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. This wilderness theme is integral to the Biblical understanding of what human transformation looks like, because we know that there are these “wilderness times” that we sometimes have to go through in order to understand on a deeper level who we really are. Maybe this is why shepherds are so well-respected in Biblical texts, if not in society. Like Moses and Jesus, shepherds have been through the wilderness and beyond. They know the way through. For anyone who has ever struggled with depression, you may have heard it said that “the only way out is through.” Which is why spiritual writer Gordon Cosby once said that “we cannot even *begin* to get at the idea of call, without first saying something about grief.”

So let’s say something about grief. All of us in this room have experienced grief. It may not be right there at the front of our minds right at this moment, but it’s there, for all of us, for one reason or another. Now of course, we are socially-adapted creatures, so we are accustomed to coming to church and smiling at one another and passing the peace in love and good cheer. But if we just barely scratched at the surface of each other’s lives, we would learn that every single person here has lived a life of tears. And this is not something that we should be ashamed of, or something that we should try to suppress, or hide. Because “tears,” writes John Neafsey, “are the prophet’s weapon.” It is only when we open up to those cries of pain in our own hearts, that we can begin to hear and empathize with the cries of others, and that is how we hear the cries of God. From *that* place of tearful knowing.

Now of course, making all these kinds of connections to grief, and pain, and tears - this is not fun stuff. This is where the kicking and the screaming comes in. In fact, as the Dalai Lama once said, “If you can possibly avoid a spiritual path, then by all means do so! It will take your whole life away.” Christianity, at its essence, is meant to *call* us (and not just those who are ordained priests in the institutional church, but *all* of us) into an encounter with the living God that makes “the spiritual path” (as the Dalai Lama puts it) unavoidable. But he’s right, it’s a path that demands *our whole lives*. It transforms us, but as Jesus says it will also ask us to surrender our lives, and ultimately to die to our smaller selves. This is the fear that Moses faces in his encounter with the burning bush. He doesn’t say, “Woohoo! This is great! I’ve been called by God! That makes me important!”

He says no. No. I won’t do it. I *can’t* do it. In fact, Moses says no to God *five times* in our reading today. Among his reasons for saying no are that 1) he doesn’t know God’s name, 2) that he is nobody of consequence, 3) that he is not a very good speaker, and 4) that he has no credibility. He basically says, “God, you know, I’m pretty sure you’ve got the wrong man. And furthermore, I don’t think your strategy is very good. I mean, I was *raised* in Pharaoh’s house. I *know* Pharaoh. He’s not going to let *anybody* go.”

But God says, “Look, Moses. Don’t tell *me* about Pharaoh. I was the one that *put* you in Pharaoh’s house. You were a puking little baby in a basket among the bulrushes, and *I* got you from that basket into Pharaoh’s household, *so that* you would understand the pain of my people, *so that* you would understand the inner workings of the dominant consciousness of empire, *so that* you’d be *perfectly* well-equipped to hear these cries, and heed this call, and do this work.”

Whether he liked it or not, Moses finally had to admit that he was born for this.

And I think this reveals something important about our “vocation” as well: that it is less about what we *do* than it is about *who we are*. Thomas Merton writes that in order to fulfill your vocation, you must do one thing: be yourself. It’s interesting that in the context of Moses’ calling, God reveals his name for all generations to be: I AM WHO I AM. It is a name that points to the Presence that we find when we allow ourselves attend fully to What Is, to the truth about ourselves and the world around us. We are all made in the image of I AM. The presence of God that we encounter when we pay attention to what is around us is the same as the presence of God that we encounter when we pay attention to what is *within* us, the truth about ourselves - our identity, our history, our grief, our longings, all that we have seen and done, and the hope that is within us. If Christ is the *ikon* of “I AM” made flesh, and if we are called to be *ikons* of Christ, then brothers and sisters, each and every one of us is called with Jesus to come into the fullness of who we are. We are called to be precisely ourselves, and nothing more, in order to incarnate the I AM through the Body of Christ.

There is another possible translation for the name of God here: “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE,” a kind of forward-minded variation that gets at what this name for God reveals to us about ourselves over time. Our vocation is not just one thing that we *do* - one career path, or one ministry project. Vocation is about who we are called to be in this present moment *and in all future moments*, which includes whatever callings may emerge within us from out of that state of being with God over time. This might mean many different things over the course of our lifetimes. We are dynamic creatures, ever evolving, and hopefully we are always listening and learning. Vocation is like a fire within us that continues to burn, but will never consume us. Rather, it continually transforms us.

Learning to hear and heed God’s call on our lives, then, is a *practice of discernment*. It is not a choice we make once in our lives and then its over and done with, but a kind of a spiritual discipline that we must take up and live out in new ways every day. It involves a deep and persistent trust in God, and a continual willingness to pay attention to the truth of both our inner and outer worlds – *especially* when we encounter those things along the way that tug insatiably at our sense of wonder and curiosity. Sometimes this involves “repentance,” which we heard about in our Gospel reading today. But this word ‘repent’ – *metanoia* – quite literally means to turn around. Sometimes hearing our call will mean turning from the path we are on, just as Moses did, to meet our own burning bush.

When we are truly called to something, Thomas Merton says, we will discover not only the ability and the desire within ourselves to do it, but the courage to persevere through whatever conflicts and hardships and pains we will inevitably face along the way. This happens when *what* we choose to do emerges out of a deep sense of purpose – the very deepest sense of the truth of who we are. And so, perhaps when considering what we “do” in terms of how *we* can make the best use of our time here, the question we should be asking is not “What would Jesus *do*?” but “Who would Jesus *be*?”

Jesus would be *himself*.

Go, and do likewise.