

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

March 3, 2013

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

But it's precisely that whole kicking and screaming thing that we hear about in the story of Moses this morning... somehow, that kicking and screaming thing seems to be a vital step for many of us in this process of becoming of who we are. When I hear the story of Moses, it so powerfully resonates with my own experience of being called by God into the fullness of who I am, that I can't help putting myself in his shoes. I preach to you this morning on the basis of nothing more than this: the authority of God's work in my own life. Which, I like to think, is the most intimate, genuine, and powerful kind of authority that a person can ever have. Although of course, it may not always have a lot to offer in the way of prestige, or power, or a five-year plan. In fact, it often involves a level of vulnerability that can be both dangerous and terrifying. And frankly, this is the kind of thing Jesus got himself killed over.

So, maybe that's why it's still not generally widely accepted, even in church circles, to respond to the question of "what do you do," with "I'm a prophet of God!" Even though I think many of us in this room are. I don't think I'm *alone* here when I say that the story of Moses resonates, or 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 by now, at least a little bit, I'm thinking that some of you must have felt this way too. I know that some of you are just as surprised as I am to find yourselves sitting in a church, Sunday after Sunday, and *loving* it. And 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 you have experienced God showing up in your life, in strange but unmistakably incarnate ways, luring you into a life that is fuller and more truly yours than anything you could have ever imagined. These experiences our sense of who we are, and what we are "doing" in the world.

Now I'm someone who likes to take the stories in the Bible literally. That is to say, I like to assume that these stories are saying something that is literally true, something that is as real now as it was back then. I don't like to think of Moses' burning bush experience as a miraculous, historical anomaly. I don't think that miracles like this have stopped happening to people. I've experienced something like them... those moments when that sense of normalcy which usually veils our experiences in the everyday world slips away, and we find ourselves fully present to What Is - to the fiery Presence of God right in front of us. If this way of thinking is difficult for you, think about children. Consider how they encounter the world with such a deep sense of wonder and curiosity, how they can experience the world around them as being lit up and alive with mystery and presence. Think about those precious 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.

And it is no coincidence to me that Moses meets God by paying attention to a bush. I love how he gets so caught up in the whole thing that he actually 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 hears the voice of God speaking to him.

It is also no coincidence that Moses has this encounter when he is *beyond the wilderness*. At least 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, that I finally heard God speaking to me. The details of the encounter are pretty fantastic too, but for the sake of time I’ll just paraphrase: God basically said, “Hey, listen, I know that we just met and all. And, I know that you really don’t like Christianity very much and you think it’s kind of stupid, but, I really need you to follow Jesus 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, I thought, 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, hadn’t ever really even cracked a Bible, and had a long litany of criticisms against “institutional religion.” So, I was pretty classic. Why was anyone going to believe that *I* had met *God*? The whole thing sounded ridiculous.

Couldn’t I be a Buddhist, or a Hindu, or something *cool*? Nope, God said, I need you to follow Jesus.

Ugh.

And that was just the *beginning*! In the somewhat haphazard seven-year journey that ensued, I have traversed a vast vocational wilderness. Perhaps God called me to 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 a “career.” You gotta love that good ole Protestant work ethic.

I say God forbid that we should have to think of our job and our calling as the same thing. That’s really such a first-world way of thinking, this idea that everyone ought to be able to figure out what it is that they truly love doing, and then be able to make a living doing just that within a capitalist society. I mean, let’s face it. Work, in the most basic sense, has to do with survival. Most of it is, and will always be, utterly mundane. Not many people feel called in their heart of hearts to scrub the toilets, or pick weeds. Remember that Moses’ *calling* was not to liberate the Israelites from Pharaoh. But Moses’ *job* was to keep the flocks of his father-in-law. Moses was a shepherd, which was not a very well-respected profession in the ancient world, actually. Shepherds were surly characters, not to be trusted. And yet, it was *through* his faithful participation in this very mundane and probably rather unfulfilling job that Moses was able to come into 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 that is why shepherds are so respected in Biblical texts. Like Moses and Jesus, they 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 Gordon Cosby writes 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 even just barely scratched at the surface, we would learn that every single person here has lived a life that has been drenched in tears. This is not something that we should be ashamed of, or something that we should try to suppress or hide. “Tears,” says writer 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 the cries of others, and we can begin to hear the cries of God. It is from *that* place, that we can begin to listen for our call.

Now of course, making all these kinds of connections to grief and pain and tears - this is not fun stuff. This is where all that kicking and 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 unavoidable. And the Dalai Lama is right, it is a path that demands our whole lives. It transforms us, but as Jesus says it will require us to surrender our lives, to ultimately die to our smaller self. This is the fear that Moses faces in his encounter with the burning bush. He doesn’t say, “whoopideedoo, 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 he doesn’t know God’s name, that he is no one of consequence, that he is not a very good speaker, and that he has no credibility. He basically says, “God, you know, I’m pretty sure you’ve got the wrong guy. 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.”

And God says, “Listen 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 know the pain of my people, *so* that you would understand the inner workings of the dominant consciousness of empire, *so* that you would be the one who was perfectly well-equipped to hear these cries, and heed this call, and do this work.” Whether he liked it or not, Moses was born for this.

And I think this reveals something really 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 to What Is, to the truth about ourselves. We are 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 attend to what is within us, the truth about ourselves - our identity, our history, our grief, our longings, all that we have seen, 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 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 of the name of God here: "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE," a kind of forward-minded variation that I like even better as a way of getting at what this name of 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 manifest in us from out of that state of being over time. This might amount to many different things over the course of our lifetime, because we are dynamic creatures, ever evolving, and hopefully always listening and learning. Vocation is like a fire within us that will keep on burning, and never consume us, and continually transform us.

Learning to hear and heed God's call on our lives, then, is a practice. It is not a decision we make once in our lives but a kind of a spiritual discipline that we must take up and live out every day. It involves a deep and persistent trust in God, and a continual willingness to pay attention to both our inner and outer worlds, especially when we encounter those strange 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. The word 'repent' literally means to turn around. Sometimes hearing our call will mean turning like Moses from the path we have been walking on 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 something, but the courage to persevere through whatever conflict and hardships and pain we will inevitably face in pursuing it. This happens when *what* we choose to do comes out of the very deepest truth of *who* we are. And so, perhaps when considering what we might "do" in this world, and 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.