

“Journey to Freedom: Here I Am, Lord!”

Exodus 3: 1-17

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A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

A Jewish rabbi and a Catholic priest were playing golf one day and the rabbi noticed that before every putt, the priest would cross himself and genuflect – bowing on one knee and blessing yourself as a sign of prayer. After nine holes, the priest was nine strokes ahead. So, the rabbi asked if the priest thought it would be okay if he crossed himself, genuflected as well. “Sure rabbi, go ahead,” the priest replied. “But it won’t do any good until you learn to putt.”

This little story reveals something about how we sometimes define religion in our culture – it is the motions we go through to obtain a kind of insurance policy. If we trust and obey God our lives will unfold in the manner in which we desire. For some folks, religion provides the guidance and the values which will structure and perhaps also improve our lives, affording us stability and joy. Religion, understood from these passive perspectives, is somehow going to enhance “my” life. It is a consumer, utilitarian perspective. “What’s in it for me?” is the unconscious question that lurks in the back of our heads and our hearts. And

if it is not somehow going to improve my lifestyle or increase my happiness, well then, I'm not interested.

John Kennedy tried to address this “consumer” mentality of the 1960's when he made that famous speech on the day of his inauguration, “the question is not what your country can do for you but what can you do for your country?” I am concerned about this same consumer attitude as it pertains to and influences our culture and the church. “What is the church doing for me or my family?” We become like the rabbi who wants to genuflect - go through the motions of being religious in order to get something - in his case, improve his golf game. Thomas Secker, Archbishop of Canterbury in the Church of England, living and serving in the 18th century, once commented, “God has three sorts of servants in the world: some are slaves and serve God from fear; others are hirelings and serve for wages; and the last are sons and daughters who serve because they love God.”

If we are sons and daughters who love God, maybe the question we need to be asking is, not “What's in it for me?” but “What can I give to God and Christ's church.” Moses was presented with this dilemma one bright sunny day as he was tending his sheep. An ordinary, mundane day that became the day his life changed forever.

As the story begins, you will remember that Moses is a fugitive from justice.

He has killed a man in Egypt, one of the Pharaoh's taskmasters who was beating a Hebrew slave. Forced to flee from Egypt, Moses fled some two hundred miles across the Sinai peninsula to the land of Midian, where he has married a Midianite woman and plans, presumably, to hide himself for the rest of his life. It is a comfortable exile. He has everything he wants, including a wife and a son, and his father-in-law Jethro is a well-to-do priest with plenty of land and livestock. Moses goes to work for Jethro and he adjusts to the peaceful, country living. Gradually his bad memories of Egypt fade.

Then one day Moses is tending Jethro's flock in the desert country around Mount Horeb.... Let's listen to what happens.

Prayer for Understanding

Read Exodus 3

Moses is minding his own business, tending his sheep in the countryside, when he sees a bush, out in the middle of nowhere, burning for all its worth. Curious, he considers the possibilities: a bolt of wayward lightning? Spontaneous combustion? Perhaps one of the sheep's hooves struck a flint. Or maybe it only looks like it is burning: it could be some kind of fake, rigged up with foil and red lights, some Midianite's idea of a joke. But no, he can smell it and he can see the

column of heat rising into the air above the bush. The odd thing is that it does not quit; as long as Moses stands there watching it, he never sees a single twig turn to ash. Glowing like a coal beneath the flames, the bush is not diminished, and finally, his curiosity getting the better of him, Moses has to take a closer look. Something extraordinary seems to be occurring within what appears to be an ordinary bush.

This event makes me curious. Is God doing something extraordinary in the midst of our everyday mundane lives? Do we take the time to truly look?

When the Lord sees that Moses has turned aside to look, really look, and that he has let the sheep wander in order to pay attention to the miracle right under his nose, then and only then does the Lord speak to him out of the bush, calling him by name and telling him to take off his shoes. Watch out – curiosity may lead to call. Slipping his shoes off, Moses listens as the Lord identifies himself. He is not one of the local, lesser gods; he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses' ancestors. He identifies himself by his relationship to those people – Moses' folks - and his history with them. God has heard them crying- has witnessed their oppression and God has seen how badly they have been treated in Egypt. And now God wants Moses to do something about it - arrange for their escape from the injustice and cruelty of slavery.

When I was a student at Columbia Seminary, I can remember the day in Dr. Shirley Guthrie's class when we were discussing the sovereignty and providence of God and I dared to raise my hand to ask a question. "Dr. Guthrie, if God cares for all of creation, why then, does God allow innocent people to starve in Africa?" Dr. Guthrie, in a very patient and kind way, replied, "Debbie, the question is not why does God allow starvation, but why do we tolerate it, as human beings?" God is challenging Moses with the very same question – people are suffering, the Israelites are groaning under the oppression of the Egyptian Pharaoh – now what are you going to do about it?

God is calling Moses to return to his place of greatest fear – the place where he is wanted for murder and to go toe to toe, face to face, with the most powerful person on earth – or so Moses believes. Now this sounds like a very bad idea to Moses. In the first place, he is a wanted man. If he goes back to Egypt he might as well walk straight into police headquarters and give himself up. And in the second place, he has some major misgivings about his leadership ability. "Who am I that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" he asks the bush, and it is not false humility on his part. He can barely lead sheep; what will he do with an entire nation? And he has a speech impediment - not a particularly good asset for someone being called to preach! 8 times in the course of this one conversation

with God, Moses objects to God's call to service.

God does not take no for an answer; God will use Moses' frailties as well as his strengths. Nor does God offer much reassurance - at least not the kind Moses wants, such as a guarantee of safe passage and a game plan. God does not say, "Nothing bad will happen to you." God says, "I am with you," as if that were enough. Never mind who you are - what you can or cannot do. What matters is who I am and that I have chosen you.

Searching for any leverage he can find, Moses decides to try and find out exactly whom this bush and this voice belong to. Sure, they belong to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but what is this God's own name? What is his essence? It is a diversion tactic - lets discuss theology and doctrine and the essence of God and maybe God will forget about the people crying and God's call of Moses to do something about it. And besides, if Moses can discover God's name, he may have a little power over this deity who is asking so much of him. But he is too clever to ask directly. "If I come to the Israelites and tell them that the God of their forefathers has sent me to them, and they ask me his name, what am I to say to them?" he inquires of the bush. Not that I want to know for myself, you understand, but if they should ask, who shall I say is calling? "I AM WHO I AM," God answers. "Tell them that I AM has sent you to them." Now what kind

of answer is that? Imagine sitting next to someone at a dinner party. You introduce yourself and talk a little while before you realize you never caught the person's name. "Excuse me," you say politely, "but what was your name?" "I am who I am," the person says. "I was who I was. I am who I am. I will be who I will be." It is an evasive answer; although God does answer Moses. But the name is vague, perhaps hinting that Moses can never fully grasp God's essence. By giving us such a puzzling name God lets us know that there is no controlling him. "I will be gracious unto whom I will be gracious," he says later in Exodus, "and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. Furthermore, my face you cannot see, for no mortal man may see me and live." It is an answer, at any rate, that establishes a relationship.

God is patient and encourages the dialogue with Moses. But in each response to Moses' "I" or "Me" statements, God persists in challenging Moses to move out of his self-centeredness and consider what he has to offer his people, especially if God journeys with Moses. God wants to deliver his people, including Moses, from slavery and deliver them to the Promised Land. And without a doubt, Moses' self-concern enslaves him as surely as the Pharaoh has enslaved the Hebrew people. God's invitation is for Moses to step outside his small circle of existence and concern.

“Okay, okay, I’ll go” and Moses decides to believe his burning bush, accept his call, and trust God to journey with him. The end of the story, of course, is that he delivers Israel to the Promised Land and becomes one of the heroes of faith.

Each of us are called, just as Moses was called, to move beyond our own “wants” to listening for the ways in which you and I can serve God by serving our brothers and sisters, especially those who cry out in suffering and pain. We are not now or even in the recent past, pre-pandemic, in the business of acquiring new members as a result of our snazzy programs and warm fuzzy entertaining worship; we are called to be disciples of Jesus Christ - using our feet and our hands in responding to the cries of God’s people. We are not called to discuss theology and ignore Christian service. Jesus didn’t sit around discussing theology to the exclusion of responding to people’s physical needs, suffering and pain.

What is it that you and I are doing for Christ’s church? Are we sitting around on our hands waiting for this pandemic to come to a screeching halt so that we can return to our normal routines? Was what we were doing before March 2020 working out so great for the mainline denominations, all of whom were losing members? What are you and I doing to respond to those who suffer? We are called to be committed enough to our relationship with God to be willing to learn how to putt and move out of our comfort zones.