

Sermon – August 30, 2020

Exodus 3:1-6

*Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" and he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.*

Moses was just hanging out with his father-in-law's sheep way out beyond the wilderness. Maybe he thought it was far enough away that no one was going to bother him about anything or he knew of a particularly succulent piece of pasture. There really wasn't anything for him back at the ranch. Home really wasn't anywhere, not in Midian with his Midianite wife and son, he never really settled not even after all these years, not in Egypt where his own people still suffered under the taskmasters, and home was certainly not the Egyptian royal court of his youth and young adulthood. He was a foreigner no matter where life put him. May as well wander with the flocks and keep them well fed. His Hebrew ancestors, after all, knew this career path. By now it was just about one foot in front of the other and keep the sheep happy. But, the idea of "home" niggled in his brain, ground under his own feet that was truly his place. An interesting concept; he envied his father-in-law. Now there was a successful man! Respected as a priest and business man, he certainly had a home where he belonged, made contributions, had purpose and history, family and friends that cared, supported and challenged him. Oh well, this work is one his ancestors were familiar with, there is comfort in that. Forty years had passed, where had the time gone, but he pretty much knew the drill out here, or at least he thought so.

As he came around a bend at the base of the mountain he noticed a bush burning, not terribly uncommon in this dry and hot climate, but wait something was different here, this bush was not burning up, not consumed by the flames. Now he was distracted from the herding, he turned his face and approached the bush to figure this out. This fire was different; an inextinguishable flame that was both dangerous and attractive, frightening and comforting, untamed but reassuring. It is a sign of God's awesome and powerful holiness. (Prof. Dennis Olson) Moses turned his face away in fear. In that moment life changed forever!

Now that Moses has turned aside, distracted from his duties, he recognizes in a split second that he is in a life shifting, disturbing and powerful presence he hears his name, "Moses, Moses!" "Here I am!" he responds in the turmoil of the moment. And then a command, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

"Draw away the covering that has protected you. Clear away the barrier between yourself and the earth so that your bare feet may touch and sink and take root in this holy ground. Let this living soil coat your skin. Dig in, feel your way, and find your balance here upon this mountain, so that its life becomes your life, its fire your fire, its sacred sand and loam and rock the ground of your seeing, speaking, and calling." (Anathea Portier-Young) Moses, feel the earth beneath your feet. Feel the rocks that poke, the dust that clings, feel the plant matter that is disintegrating under your feet and the new grasses that nourish your sheep. Remember that it is from this dust that you are created and all things that nourish and sustain humankind. This is holy ground, this is where everything begins. The earth, the soil, the rock, the dust, the humus, living matter; all that is beneath our feet and it is from which everything that we need comes. God created this earth and all that is in it, we know the story in Genesis and substance through earth sciences. Remember...

This is messy! This is hot, distracting, confusing; there seems no direction in the midst of bushes that won't burn to ash and the voice that commands vulnerability. God may have said; Moses, Moses focus, this is not a mirage off the hot desert floor! I have a job for you, a journey, your people need you. Everything that you need to do the work I ask of you is here for you. I am with you in the very rocks and stuff of the earth and your ancestors. "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." I have journeyed and wrestled before and will again.

Holy ground a place of encounter with God. A place of vulnerability. A place of growth. A place of fear and reassurance.

You need not wander without direction Moses! You have purpose and direction now. Your people need you to bring them home, out of Egypt. Bring them to a promised land, but in the mean time Moses, home will be wherever I am with you, and I am always with you. You are no longer a displaced person, a foreigner, one without a home. Prof. Portier-Young says, "Moses will lead God's people back to this holy place. They will worship at this mountain (then Mt. Sinai, 3:12). Here Moses will receive a plan for the tabernacle. And from this place the fire will travel with them into the wilderness, sanctifying their camp just as the divine fire now sanctifies the holy mountain." It will all be on holy ground for God goes with them.

So in this exposed, bare contact with holy ground and with God flaming from the burning bush what is expected of Moses? You must be crazy God! What happens when I put on my sandals on again?

His call was an impossible burden, fraught with ambiguities. When God called him, Moses responded: "Here am I!" But later he wondered, "Who am I?" God assured him that "the people will listen." But Moses worried, "they won't listen" (3:18, 4:1).

So, he was full of ambivalence, inhibitions, fears, and doubts, and rightly so. As Zornberg puts it, "there's a certain kind of reticence, or circumspection, that halts the true prophet, faced with the inscrutable God, whose revelation must be narrowed into what can be said."

No one in their right mind would think themselves worthy or capable of that call — or any call, for that matter. To speak the unspeakable. To name the Unnameable. The presumption. The audacity. The futility. To remove your sandals and stand on "holy ground." And so Moses instinctively "hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God." (Dan Clendenin)

He said to God, "How am I going to accomplish this impossible task you have given me?" And God said, with such confidence in this argumentative, hesitant and stammering, outback shepherd. "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." Most importantly, "I will be with you."

What an amazing, absurd God to expect the amazing and absurd from human beings, such as Moses, that almost laugh in God's face, except for the flames of the burning bush! We, you and I are asked no different! In the face of the pain, horror, destruction, fear, disrespect, illness and racism of our today we are asked, no, called and told to take off our sandals, to feel the fire in the earth, pick up our cross, go the distance, to follow Jesus, to trust that God is with us. To go on our journeys, home and beyond, alone and together, with the tools of genuine love, patience, hope, love for one another, caring for those in need and for our enemies. Be kind to one another. God will take care of the rest.

*And we know, when Moses was told,  
in the way he was told,  
"Take off your shoes!" He grew pale from that simple*

*reminder of fire in the dusty earth.  
He never recovered  
his complicated way of loving again*

*and was free to love in the same way  
he felt the fire licking at his heels loved him.  
As if the lion earth could roar  
and take him in one movement...*  
*-all poetry excerpts from David Whyte, Fire in the Earth*

Amen