

“Who Am I, that I Should Go?”
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St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Exodus 1:8-22; 3:1-15

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

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 a 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.

Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” He said, “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.” But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.”

Exodus! How did we get here so fast?

We’ve spent the last three weeks in Genesis; and now suddenly we find ourselves at the beginning of the second book of the Old Testament, Exodus. So a little catch-up is in order here: after last week’s story, where Jacob wrestles with a mysterious “man” and receives a new name in the process, the focus of Genesis shifts to Jacob’s eleven children – it shifts to Joseph, his second-to-youngest, in particular. Poor Joe. His brothers are supremely jealous of him, and end up selling him as a slave to the Egyptians. But Joseph, being both shrewd and faithful, is able to rise up in the Egyptian ranks, and soon is dubbed second-in-command to the Pharaoh. Years later, when his brothers come seeking his forgiveness, he grants it, and his family moves to Egypt, and they all live happily ever after. The end.

...That would be nice. The truth is, Joseph’s family does live happily for a few years, but soon enough, a new king arises over Egypt, who does not know Joseph, as we learn in Exodus 1:8 today. It’s with this new king where the trouble really begins for the Hebrew people – who are, incidentally, multiplying like rabbits. This new king, or pharaoh, has a deep fear of the Hebrew foreigners. So he “deals shrewdly” with them, making slaves of the once-honored guests, forcing them to build grain storage for his profit. He makes them work harder and harder (this is where the expression “more bricks with less straw” comes from), “but the more they are oppressed, the more they multiply and spread.”¹

Having failed to diminish the Hebrew population, Pharaoh tries another approach, an even more chilling one. He commands his people to throw every baby boy into the Nile. Now it’s at this point where we meet a woman who has just had a baby boy – Moses, as it turns out. Moses’ mom cleverly devises a plan to have Baby Moses rescued from the riverbank by Pharaoh’s own daughter (ironic, isn’t it?). Because of these two women, Moses is saved.

¹ Exodus 1:12

Moses. We've all heard of Moses – maybe you've even seen his Hollywood film "The Ten Commandments." But what was he like? What was he *really* like? We tend to picture Moses as a young man (as someone like, say, Charlton Heston): vigorous, full of life, tanned, ready to do God's work. But the dynamic, youthful Moses is a product of Hollywood, not the Bible. For one thing, Moses is a murderer. That's right. When he is a little older, he is out walking one day, and sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Moses is infuriated; and kills the Egyptian right then and there, in cold blood. Fleeing the wrath of Pharaoh, he then becomes a wanderer – a homeless person – finally settling in Midian, which is right in the middle of... nowhere. He gets married; and for forty long years Moses keeps sheep for his father-in-law. Murderer. Homeless man. Not a very heroic existence if you ask me, no matter what Hollywood has tried to lead us to believe.

But one day, a day like any other, Moses is leading his flocks through the desert. After forty years of a disappointing life, Moses suddenly stumbles upon something new: a bush, on fire and yet not consumed. As he draws near, a voice calls out "Moses, Moses!" Surprised, Moses answers: "Here I am."

The voice continues: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." This is the God of family history, the God of late night stories and long ago tales. Never in his wildest dreams did Moses ever guess that the God of his ancestors might leap out of those old stories. Never did Moses expect that he himself might meet God – not in the desert, not as a lonely old man. Yet here is God, all the same. Moses hides his face and trembles.

Again, God speaks: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt.... Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them..."

Moses is, I imagine, in full agreement here: vigorously nodding his head, maybe even offering some encouragement to God, "You know Lord, that's a great idea. I'm so glad you're going to do something about this problem. Go get 'em God!"

And how does God reply? "I'm so glad we agree. So... get to it!" Too late, Moses realizes he's been set up. God intends to liberate the Hebrews; and God intends to do it by means of Moses. Now Moses is backpedaling furiously. "Whoa, slow down, wait just a minute. Who am I, that I should go?"

That's always the question, isn't it? Who am I, that I should dream God's dreams? Who am I, that I should undertake God's work? Who am I, that I should go?

Please note this well: God does not reply by saying, "Well you're Moses, the Great Redeemer of your people, far and away the best man for the job." God does not say, "Moses, I've reviewed your resume and all your references checked out and your transcripts look good, so you've got the job." God does not say, "Moses, you are the most gifted, the most pious, the most holy human being of your generation, and so I am sending you."

God says none of those things. Instead, God says, "Who are you? Don't worry about it. I will be with you. And if you undertake my work, if you step out in faith to do

the difficult thing that I am calling you to do, you will find that I am already there. That's what you get. God with you."

God-with-you. The promise that God will be with him. That's all Moses gets. That's all any of us gets, really. And, if you think about it, that's all any of us needs.

By all measures, Moses was not a remarkable man. He wasn't a hero. He was a murderer; a wanderer; a homeless person; a lonely aging herdsman. But the problem was not his age, or his many failures, or his many disappointments. Moses' only problem was that he didn't really know God. Not yet, at least. Moses thought of God as a figure from the past, a relic, a nice bedtime story – not as someone to be reckoned with in the here and now.

But without warning, the God of yesterday erupts into Moses' here and now, turning things upside down. People – old and young alike – begin to dream God's dreams. Regular people, even pretty messed-up people, find themselves doing astonishing things for God.

...Could that happen here? Why not? Suffering people still cry out in our world; and God still hears them. Which says to me: God will come to us as well. God will come to us so that the struggles of our neighbors become our struggles, too, if only we will allow it.

Do you think you're too old? Do you think you're too new to the church, that you don't know enough? Do you think you're too unimportant? Too full of doubt? Not faithful enough? Do you think you're a failure? Do you think you don't have what it takes? You don't need to ask those questions anymore. Our God has not changed. God's heart still aches for the miserable in our midst. God still has dreams for us and for this church, no matter our age, no matter our past, no matter our resume, no matter our ability. So the real question becomes: Are we listening?

There may not be any burning bushes this morning; I'm guessing that no shrubbery is going to burst into flames today (I kind of hope not). But, in just a few minutes, we will all be invited to this table. The table is set with the most ordinary trappings of daily life: just a loaf of bread, just a cup. Everyday things, not unlike a bush in the desert. But this everyday table testifies to the presence of a God in our midst who is neither dead nor deaf nor silent. This table tells us that the heart of God still aches for the suffering of the world. It tells us that no obstacle will hinder God from setting things right.

St. Paul's Church, today is the day of salvation. We are the instruments of God's work. And... who are we, that we should go? It doesn't matter. God will be with us.

Thanks be to God.