

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 31, 2014

"Where's the Fire?"

Exodus 3:1-15, Matthew 16:21-28

There's a story of a duke and a duchess who owned a country estate, and had a whole lot of servants who were maintaining the estate in their absence. One day the duchess went out there to talk to the servants, to get an accounting, see what all of them did. She called them into the room, one-by-one, and asked them what they did and how things were going. About an hour into the interview, and old man came into the room.

The duchess said, "Let me see, you have been with us now twenty years?" "Yes, ma'am."

"Your job is walking the dog?" "Yes, ma'am."

"But the dog has been dead for eighteen years?" "Is there anything else you would like me to do, ma'am?"

This morning, I would like to talk about Moses, and the life he was living in Midian. You heard the story of Moses in Midian, that part of the text for this morning, that wonderful narrative of Moses, and you get the impression that Moses is hiding there, hoping that God won't find him and will leave him alone. You get the impression that Moses knows he ought to be doing something else with his life. But he is happy there in Midian. He has a whole list of reasons why he shouldn't do those things that he thinks maybe God will ask him to do.

Besides that, it is such a lovely life there in Midian. He works for his father-in-law, Jethro. He married the boss's daughter. He married Zipporah, Jethro's daughter. They have two sons. They are the perfect nuclear family: husband, wife, two children. One day Moses will inherit the farm. One day Moses is going to be rich. One day it will all be his, and he will settle back and be a gentleman farmer. It is such a wonderful life. It is the best possible life that Moses could ever have. The only problem was that burning bush. If it only hadn't happened. But it did happen. It changed everything.

The story of the burning bush is one of the most famous of all the stories in the Bible. I want us to look at it this morning and see what it says to us. The first thing that I want you to notice is that it didn't just happen out of the blue. It was the resolution of something that had been bothering Moses for many, many years. In fact, what happened at the burning bush in Midian, started at the pyramids in Egypt.

Moses was born in Egypt, the son of illegal immigrants. The Jews migrated into Egypt because there was a famine in their land. They were poor, they were hungry, they had no food. They did what all poor people do, they migrate to where there is food, where there is prosperity, so they can participate in it. The Egyptians tolerated this infusion of aliens into their land until they got too numerous. Then they enslaved them, put them to work on public projects, like making bricks.

During that time, the Pharaoh, who was the king, ordered that all male babies born to Jewish women that year were to be killed as a means of population control. There were too many immigrants in the country. Moses' mother, when she heard this, hid her baby, Moses, in the bulrushes along the Nile. Pharaoh's daughter came along and found the baby, took him into the palace, raised him as a prince of Egypt. In fact, she's the one who gave him his name. Moses is not a Hebrew name, it's an Egyptian name.

One day Moses, now a grown man, visiting the construction site, sees an Egyptian slave master strike a Jewish slave. Moses, overcome with rage at the injustice of this act upon a Jew, and enraged over the whole thing of slavery, and for the first time identifying with his own people, struck the Egyptian guard and killed him. In that event Moses chose sides. He was no longer an Egyptian prince, he's now one with the Jewish slaves. He fled Egypt for his life, crossed the Red Sea, went into the desert, a fugitive. He stopped at a well and met Zipporah. He asked her father for her hand in marriage. He settled down and worked for Jethro, tending sheep. He had a wonderful life in Midian.

He's like the duchess's dog keeper. He hopes nobody will find him out. He hopes that nobody is going to interrupt his wonderful life he stumbled on. He hopes nobody reminds him. "You have people of your own race who are suffering in Egypt." Nobody reminds him...

What I want you to see is that his past is still with him. What he saw in Egypt and tried to run away from, is now imprinted on his conscience. He got out of Egypt, but he couldn't get Egypt out of him. Look what happened to him. He is shepherding the sheep. He is out there all alone. He is days away from other people. He has gone all the way to Mount Horeb. He is on a lonely hillside there and the only sound is the wind sweeping across the desert.

In circumstances like that, when you're all alone, all by yourself, and it's all quiet, do you know what you are left with? Just your own thoughts, and that is dangerous. If you don't want to think about your life, then always keep busy, keep moving, keep talking, keep listening to the radio, keep listening to the television, because sure enough, when you get off by yourself someplace where you are all alone, where it is all quiet and thinking, anything can happen. You could start seeing things, maybe hearing things.

Moses said what happened to him was that he saw a bush aflame, yet it wasn't consumed by the fire. Then he heard a voice. He said it was the voice of God, saying, "I have seen the affliction of my people in Egypt, I have heard their cry; I know their suffering." What I want you to see is that this was also on Moses' conscience. Moses could have said that. "I have heard their cry." He was there and was witness to it. God didn't tell Moses anything that Moses didn't already know. What God said was, "Do something about what you know."

When people read this story they are attracted to the detail of the burning bush. They think that's the miracle. I mean how can a bush be enflamed and not burn up? They focus on that. Some try to rationalize it. We live in a scientifically oriented world, so we try to rationalize it. Some commentator had this explanation, "You know, there's a bush out there in the Sinai desert that in the springtime has red flowers on it. Just at the right time of day when the sun is shining..." Or, they psychoanalyze it, "It was just in his head." That is nonsense. The real miracle was not that the bush was on fire. The real miracle was that God put a fire under Moses, who like you and me, was just trying to stay the course, right up to retirement. Don't get distracted, mind your own business. Live well. Leave well enough alone. And hope the duchess doesn't pay a visit.

That was Moses' goal in life. Sound familiar? He just wanted an ordinary life. His mistake was he got out there all by himself, where he could think, where he could reflect on his life, and that is where God got him. Into his life came fire, passion, dedication, commitment and compassion for other people.

I also want you to see that Moses resisted this. Moses was a reluctant prophet. That is the best kind. Beware of a prophet who enjoys his work. There isn't a prophet in the whole Bible who "whistles while he works." They are all dragged to it. They are all summoned and they all hesitate. God had to practically drag them to their job. They didn't want to do it.

Moses is no exception. Listen to his excuses. He says, "I'm not qualified to do this. Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh. I'm not qualified to do this kind of work." The answer God gives him is, "You don't have to be." God will use you as you are. God just needs somebody to go, somebody to be there, just show up. Which is kind of deflating to your ego if you believe that you have been chosen by God because you are so capable, attractive and creative. The fact is, God can use anybody. Most of the people God uses, according to the Bible, are nobodies. They are all unlikely heroes. The fact of the matter is, the most important qualification for being a hero or a heroine, is just show up.

I've had the opportunity, as I know many of you had, to attend banquets in this city where they honor heroes. They are simple, ordinary people, citizens of this community, who have done courageous things. It is a great evening of optimism for the human race to be a part of the celebration of the lives of these people. They bring them up to the podium, and then an award, ask them to say something. They all say the same thing. They all say, "I didn't do anything. I was just there. Somebody had to do it."

God says, "Go, just go. I will give you the power to do what you have to do. But first, you just go."

He had another excuse, too. The other excuse is, "I can't make a speech. I am not eloquent." That one sounds familiar!! God has an answer to that excuse, too. He says, "I will give you the words. If that doesn't work, use Aaron, your brother, old silver tongue. Let him make the speeches. You do the more important thing, just show up. Just be there."

So Moses went back to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh, leaving behind the quiet, secure life in Midian. He never went back to it. Moses became the liberator of his people. Moses freed the slaves in Egypt and led them to freedom.

God continues to act in people's lives in the same way. Let me ask you, what if God uses your conscience to speak to you? Do you ever think of that? The important thing is that we ought to pay attention to it. God uses whom he wants not who we think is qualified.

What this story tells us is that God uses us to get things done with our lives and in the world. God is our Creator, so maybe God created us with this restlessness, this tendency that when things are going the way we want them to go, all off a sudden it gets boring and we pay more attention to our surroundings. We will see the burning bush in our lives. The point is that we better listen to that conversation that is going on inside of us, because that just maybe where God has chosen to speak to us.

Remember this, what Moses heard from God, was not what he wanted to hear, but already knew in his heart. And remember this, all the excuses didn't really matter. If God calls you to do something, God will make it possible for you to do it. And finally, remember this. It can happen to anyone, and it can happen anytime. Life isn't over when you have reached the goal you set for your life. Life isn't over when you attain a certain comfort and security in this life. Life isn't over at a certain age.

A woman thought about going to college, getting her degree. She had put it off for many reasons, but now as she started thinking about it, she couldn't get rid of the idea that maybe she ought to go to college. But then she thought maybe she was too old now, it wouldn't work. She told her doctor about it. She said, "By the time I get the degree I will be fifty." He said, "How old will you be if you don't get the degree?"

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" If God finds you in your Midian, if he lights a burning bush to get your attention, show up.