

Beyond the Wilderness

If you have read your Bible, or at least watched the famous 1956 movie, "The Ten Commandments," then you know the story of Moses. Moses was born a Hebrew in Egypt, and in order to save her baby's life, his mother placed him in a basket and set the basket among the reeds of the banks of the Nile River. He was found by Pharaoh's daughter and raised in Pharaoh's household. Eventually, Moses learned that he was of Hebrew birth, and one day he saw an Egyptian official beating a Hebrew who was attacking one of his fellow Jews. Moses then killed the Egyptian and buried the body in the sand, but his crime was discovered. When Pharaoh heard of this, he sought to kill Moses. Moses decided to flee Egypt, and he made his way across the vast desert until he arrived at Midian. There he married a woman named Zipporah and took up the life of a shepherd, working with his father-in-law.

One day, Moses ventures with his flocks out beyond the wilderness. "Beyond the wilderness" – isn't that an intriguing phrase? The wilderness as we typically understand it is already a place beyond our daily routines and common comforts. The wilderness requires us to adapt and be creative and work hard. Picture in your mind what you consider to be wilderness. Now imagine going beyond that. What would that look like? That is what Moses did – he intentionally travelled out beyond the wilderness, to a place called Mount Horeb.

Moses climbed the mountain and suddenly he saw an amazing thing: there was a bush that was blazing with fire and yet was not consumed. The bush had fire coming out of it, there was light and heat, and yet the bush remained. According to some rabbinic traditions, this burning bush is the tree of life, or at least represents the

tree of life from the Garden of Eden story. The tree was ablaze, yet it was not destroyed. It remained a tree but was illuminated. This is what can happen for us when we encounter the presence of God: we are still who we are, but we are more fully alive, we light up.

From this extraordinary, holy, sight of the burning bush came a voice calling him by name, "Moses, Moses!" Moses was instructed to remove the sandals from his feet, "For the place on which you are standing is holy ground" says the Lord. This is sacred space, so you must enter it, and walk on it in a different way.

"I am the God of your ancestors," the voice declared, "the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. I have heard the cry of my people who are in bondage. I know their sufferings, and I have come to deliver them, to bring them to a good land flowing with milk and honey." The Lord told Moses, "And I am sending *you* to bring my people out of Egypt. I am calling *you* to deliver them out of slavery and bring them to freedom."

Moses responds the way nearly all prophets do initially: he says, "No. God, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" In other words, "God, I think you have the wrong guy!" This is no false modesty. Moses is honestly asking why God would choose him. Why not choose someone with more ability, more faith, or more talent. Besides all that that, Moses happened to be wanted for murder in Egypt and Pharaoh wants to kill me. Egypt is the last place he would want to go. "I hear what you are asking of me," Moses seems to be saying, "but I just don't think I could do it. I am merely a shepherd. I am supposed to confront Pharaoh? Who am I to do that?"

But God has a way of seeing in us what we cannot always see in ourselves. And he gives Moses this simple, powerful assurance, “I will be with you. That’s it. God lays out no details how it will happen. Moses is given no strategic plan or definable, achievable goals to mark the way. No timetable is set. Only this: “I will be with you. And I am giving you a sign, Moses.” But did you notice? The sign will be given, Moses, only *after* you have done what I asked you to do. When my people are delivered from Egypt, then, they will worship on this holy mountain.” The sign will come not before the journey, but at the end. I am calling you, and I will be with you. Trust that; it will be enough.”

Moses asks another question, “Then who are you? If I come to the Israelites and say I have been sent to proclaim God’s love and liberation, and when they ask me who sent me, what shall I say? What if I walk into Egypt and proclaim that the slaves must be set free? What if I go and try like that, and people ask me, ‘Who sent you to do this? What shall I tell them? What is your name?’”

God gives a rather mysterious reply. This utterance from God is known as the Tetragrammaton, which is Greek for “four letters”. It is four letters that that cannot be fully grasped or translated. For Jews, this name of God is so sacred it cannot be spoken. It may be derived from the verb “to be”, and so here, in this passage, it is given as “I am”, or “I am who I am.” In most Bible translations, it is written as Lord, written with all capital letters. A few Christian Bibles translated it Yahweh, and it is from that word Yahweh that we get, in Latin, the name of Jehovah. But it really isn’t that. Jews do not call their God Yahweh. God is more than a particular name. What this scripture is trying to tell us is that God is so much more than we can understand or imagine. God is so much greater than our minds can grasp, that we cannot even put a name to it. We cannot fully know even the *name* of God. It is not: “What is your name, O God?” to which God replies, “Well, you can call me Steve or Cindy or

Hezekiah. No. You want to know about me?" says God. Know this: I AM. That's it. I am. I have sent you, and I will be with you. Now go."

Moses did go, and God was with him. This journey God called him to was not going to be easy, and it was not going to unfold the way that Moses would have expected. And here is a scriptural and a spiritual truth: when any of us say 'yes' to God, we cannot know where it is going to lead, exactly what will happen, or how long it might take to get there. But Moses trusted that he was called to be part of God's work to set the slaves free, and to bring them home to the promised land. He trusted God, and let God lead, and that would be enough. The Hebrews were freed from bondage in Egypt, and they ended up wandering the wilderness for forty years, and that journey was sometimes difficult. But the Lord was faithful in the promise to Moses, "I will be with you." And Moses, down deep, believed that.

Last week, we heard the story of when Peter recognized Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. The verses we heard this morning from Matthew chapter 16 come right after that. Yes, Jesus is the Messiah, and Jesus immediately explains to them what the path of the Messiah is going to be. It will be the way of suffering, betrayal, death, and then resurrection. The Messiah must walk the way of the cross. Peter did not want to hear that; he wanted the path of the Messiah to be what he and others were expecting and hoping for: a strong political leader. So, Peter rebuked Jesus, "That must never happen to you, God forbid it!" Don't talk that way, he was telling Jesus. Be a powerful Messiah who will overthrow Roman oppression. That is what everybody wants.

Jesus in turn rebuked Peter. "Do not set your mind on human ways, but on the ways of God." I came to follow the ways of God. My life is to be the way of God.

Jesus then teaches his disciples that the way of the cross is not only for him, but also the path for all who want to follow him. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Peter, the disciples, and everyone who desire to follow Jesus must follow in the way of the cross, following the ways of God and not necessarily the familiar ways we would prefer. God will call us out beyond the wilderness, beyond where we have already traveled, going further than we could ever imagine. That is the path for all those who truly seek to give their lives to God.

From the time of Abraham, and Moses, and Jesus, following God has always meant giving ourselves to something beyond ourselves, beyond our own way of looking at things, something, more accurately, some *one* beyond our expectations. When we give ourselves to God, we are asked to become part of something larger. Our story becomes part of a much bigger story. It was that way for Moses, and all the prophets, and Peter, and the Apostle Paul. It has been that way for the people of God throughout the centuries. If we are serious about following Jesus, it will be that way for us.

We did not physically walk with Jesus like Peter and the disciples did. We are not likely to hear the voice of God coming to us out of a burning bush. But we will encounter the presence of God in our own paths, in our own little epiphanies and moments when we encounter the presence of the Holy. When we see injustice, or oppression, and we hear a voice telling us we can and must do something, as Moses did, that just may be God speaking to us. When we are troubled by fear and uncertainty, yet we *still* find the strength to trust God, and God working in us, that is our own story of being lit up like that burning bush. When we have times when we feel alone, but then discover others around us who want to help, and we meet

companions on our journey are working to build the kingdom of God, that is the Lord speaking to us, the way spoke to Moses and Peter and people of every age.

I define grace this way: that God knows us, fully; God loves us, fully, and God is calling us. Grace tells us that God truly knows us, and loves us, and is calling us. Whenever and wherever we experience God's love, God's grace, that is holy ground. The light of God is not just out there, in one bush, or on Mount Horeb or any other mountain. The power of God is not just out there in Moses, or Peter, or anyone else; it is also given to us. It is within us. Our lives carry that light. We are sent out into the world to bring that light and life to others. Amen.

Trace Browning

Proper 17, 14th Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

Exodus 3:1-14 • Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c • Romans 12:9-21 • Matthew 16:21-28

Preached at All Saints Episcopal Church – Salt Lake City, Utah

3 September 2023