

Moses and the Burning Bush

September 3, 2023

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.”

For most of the summer our Old Testament lessons have been from the book of Genesis. Last week we began the book of Exodus, where we heard about the birth of a baby boy to Levite parents living in Egypt, during a murderous reign of terror against the Hebrew residents, initiated by the then pharaoh. The baby’s desperate mother, in an attempt to save her son from being murdered, hid him first at home, and then in a basket which she made waterproof and placed in the reeds beside the Nile river. Through a twist of fate—or maybe clever story-telling—the baby in the basket was discovered by the pharaoh’s daughter who adopted him, and was raised by his own biological mother and sister, who apparently were part of the pharaoh’s household.

In his sermon last week, Father Geoff pointed out how the Lectionary leaves out a lot of the story, which we never hear about on Sunday mornings. He also noted that the story about the baby being discovered floating in a basket in the water, was likely an ancient legend that came from Assyria about Sargon, who became their king.

Our Sunday lessons jump from the baby in the basket being rescued and named Moses, to today’s lesson, where Moses is a grown man. Fr. Geoff filled in the missing parts for us, where Moses grew up and murdered an Egyptian man for beating a Hebrew, and then fled for fear of reprisal from Pharaoh.

Moses ended up living on the opposite side of the Red Sea from Egypt, in the land called Midian. He worked as a shepherd for the priest of Midian, and married one of the priest's daughters. The priest is sometimes called Jethro and other times is called Reuel; both of the names Jethro and Reuel are used interchangeably, and this reflects the different sources that were used to create story which we now know as the book of Exodus.

Moses was busy tending the flocks of his father-in-law, minding his own business, when he was alarmed to see a bush that was on fire but was not being burned up. The fire was described as containing "the angel of the Lord," and was apparently God's way of getting his attention. The divine being in the fire called Moses by his name, but Moses did not know the name of the deity who addressed him.

God then tells Moses that he feels bad about the enslavement and mistreatment of the people by the Egyptians, and he intends to free them from their bondage and deliver them to the land that he had long ago promise Abraham. And furthermore he has chosen Moses, the humble shepherd, to accomplish this effort.

Understandably, Moses is freaked out, and comes up with all sort of objections, including asking this god who he is.

God proceeds to identify himself to Moses: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," a phrase which he repeats, adding "the LORD." Oh, okay. That God.

God then says "I AM WHO I AM." I never understood this, and the words really don't make a lot of sense in English. Apparently I am not the only person who found this confusing, because a lot of theologians through the ages, from St. Augustine to Paul Tillich, have written about it and speculated as to what this means.

In Hebrew, the words represented by the tetragrammaton YHWH mean something like “I am who I am,” although there have been several other translations. This is considered important, because it is the first time that God identifies himself as “the Lord.”

The Septuagint, which was the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, translates YHWH as the word “Kyrios” which means lord. In the New Revised Standard Version, the word YHWH is translated as LORD written in all capital letters is. In some earlier translations YHWH was translated as Jehovah.

Why would Moses ask who this god was? Why would God need to identify himself to Moses at all? Wouldn't Moses have known that it was God that he was speaking to? Not necessarily.

In Genesis, gods are known by a lot of different names including: *Elohim*, which is a plural word, meaning all the gods of the heavenly court; *El*, who was the head of the heavenly court; *El Shaddai* or God Almighty; *El Bethel*, the god of Bethel; and other variations of the name *El*. In fact, there were a lot of gods and other divinities, including angels who were messengers of the gods, all of them were part of a heavenly court.

Israel eventually came to believe in only one god, which we call monotheism, and this was the view that was clearly held by the final editors of Genesis and Exodus. But there was in fact a long evolution from polytheism to monotheism, over many centuries. Monotheism means “belief in one god,” but there is another word for “belief in one god” which is henotheism. Both words include Greek words for “one.” “Mono” means “one” in the sense of “only” or “unique.” “Heno” means “one” in the arithmetic sense of one, two, three. So **henotheism** is the view that

there is one god for a particular tribe or region, but it recognizes the existence of other gods for other tribes or other nations. Moses knew that and the god who spoke to Moses knew that too.

So God identified himself the god of his father and his ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the god of the patriarchs. And he further identified himself as YHWH and The LORD.

God tells Moses how he remembers the covenant he made with the people many generations ago, and he now intends to deliver them out of bondage and bring them to the land promised to their ancestors. And God has chosen Moses to perform this act of deliverance.

This is Moses's calling. It was a theophany, a face-to-face encounter with God, who spoke his name and told him directly what he wanted Moses to do. What God was asking of Moses was daunting. Moses had been a fugitive, and he knew that if went back to Egypt and met with Pharaoh he might be arrested, and likely killed. But Moses answered God's call, he went back to Egypt, and he eventually led his people out of slavery and into the Promised Land. We are going to continue to hear more of the Moses story for the next two months.

Not many of us will experience a theophany or meet God face to face. But all of us, or at least many of us, have a calling, some activity or purpose that we are meant to do with our lives. And if God does not tell us directly what to do, how are we supposed to know what our calling is.

The concept of divine calling, or vocation, was not one that I was familiar with for most of my life. Many of you know that I grew up in an agnostic environment, and

came to the Episcopal church through a long circuitous path. It has only been in the last few years that I heard about calling and began to understand it.

Many of us think of calling or vocation as what we do to earn a living. For many of us, we make decisions on how to earn a living based on what our parents want, how we do in school, and other factors that are usually based in practicality. But a calling from God guides us as part of our spiritual lives, toward some way in which we help the church and our community. God gives each of us certain abilities and talents to be used for the good of others.

I began to understand about spiritual calling when I understood that WE—the people of the church—are the church, and when Father Geoff explained to me that the “jobs” I saw myself doing in church—choir member, reader, altar guild, vestry—were not jobs but ministries.

Last week we heard Saint Paul tell us: “we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” This week Saint Paul continues to tell us how to be the church: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.”

We are all different people, so each of us will understand and act out these words in different ways. That’s okay. We don’t have to be superheroes like Moses. We don’t have to face an evil pharaoh and spend our lives leading our people out of bondage. We just have to listen to God, and try to hear what he is saying to us. Some us will hear God speak to us with words, just as Moses did. For others, it will be a sense, a gut feeling, or a inkling about something.

There are ways we can discern what our calling is. We can ask ourselves these questions:

- What am I passionate about?
- What gifts has God given me?
- Where do I have the greatest opportunity to serve others?

We can also take an inventory of our spiritual gifts. We can ask for confirmation from our friends, family or clergy. We can try out different ministries before we commit to one. And: we can be willing to step outside our comfort zone.

I can tell you that becoming a Lay Preacher was definitely outside my comfort zone. Before Father Geoff asked me to consider it, I felt zero calling to be a Lay Preacher. But here I am 2-½ years later, still outside my comfort zone, but managing to live into this ministry.

There is no right way or wrong way to answer God's call. We just have to open our ears and our hearts.

Amen.