

**From the Pulpit of Fourth Presbyterian Church
Greenville, South Carolina
August 30, 2009**

SERMON: Consider Your Call: Part 2: “Moses and The Disturbing Call of God”

Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 3:1-12

New Testament Lesson: Hebrews 11:23-29

Last week we launched a year-long emphasis entitled *Called Fourth*. The Lilly Fund for Theological Education, through their *Cultures of Call* initiative, has awarded this church a grant of \$11,000 for a program of vocational discernment developed by Buz and a special task force in the church. Over the months ahead we will **again** be focusing in worship, in youth activities, and in Wednesday Night Fellowship programs on how we discern the call of God and respond to it.

I say focusing **again**, because one of the distinctive features in the life of this church the emphasis we place on using the gifts God entrusts to us for the purposes to which God calls us. Long before we received the Fund for Theological Education grant, we already were a **calling congregation**. For a number of years we have been seeking to reclaim the classic theological concept of **vocation**—viewing the work we do, not merely as a job or a career, but as a calling from God and as a means of serving God.

This morning we have heard one of the great call stories in the Bible--the story of God's call to Moses at the burning bush. For those who have grown up in the church, the story is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. It is easy to dramatize, and easy to remember.

But the thing in the story that attracts our attention, and Moses' curiosity, the burning bush, is **not** the central feature of the story. It is merely a prop, a dramatic device, as it were, to capture Moses' attention so that he may hear the God of his ancestors--the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--calling him to a most difficult and demanding task. **“Come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”**

Now, just as Moses is told to stand back from the burning bush, so we need to stand back a bit from the story to get some perspective on it that may help us find our own place in the story.

The first thing we are told about Moses in the story we read this morning is that **“was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian.”** That little detail is more significant than it may appear at first. You see, for forty years Moses had been doing the same boring, mindless job, tending his father-in-law's flock—leading a stinking bunch of sheep from one grazing place to another. Moses didn't even have a flock to call his own. For forty years he had been stuck in a thoroughly dead-end job.

But it had not always been that way, as you may know. Moses was born to a couple from the priestly tribe of Levi. But it would seem that he was born at the wrong time and the wrong place. He was born into a people in slavery in Egypt, and he was born under a death sentence. The Pharaoh had given orders that every baby boy born to the Hebrews was to be thrown in the Nile and drowned. It was in a time of brutal oppression and genocide that a child was born...and he was hidden by his mother in a basket among the reeds along the banks of the Nile River.

As the story unfolds, the baby boy is found by the daughter of Pharaoh. She hears his cry and takes pity on him. She draws him up out of the water and takes him into the royal palace to raise as her own son. She names him *Mosheh*, from the word to “draw up” or “draw out.” There in the palace of the great Pharaoh, Rameses II, Moses is raised in the lap of luxury with all the advantages of wealth and power and education. *Mosheh* has it all.

But one day all that comes to an end. Moses sees a Hebrew slave being beaten by an Egyptian—something he may have seen countless times before. But this time he sees, not just with his eyes, but with his heart. He sees the man being beaten, not just as a miserable Hebrew slave, but as one of his own people. In a violent act of identification with the plight of his people, Moses kills the Egyptian and hides his body in the sand, hoping that no one would see what he had done.

But they did. Soon word gets out, both among his own people, and to the Pharaoh, and Moses has to flee for his life. He flees to the land of Midian. There he meets a woman at a well, just as his ancestor Jacob had done. He marries her and they have a son, and Moses is sent out to tend his father-in-law’s flock.

But that was forty years ago--forty long, boring years out in the wilderness following the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, mired in the middle of no-where, doing nothing that really mattered, with one day pretty much like every other day. I wonder, did he ever think back to how things used to be, back in the palace of the Pharaoh? Did he regret the ways things had turned out? Did he feel sorry for himself?

Have you ever felt that way yourself? Have you ever looked back over your life and wondered how different things might have been if **only**...if only you had made different choices or chosen other paths? If only you had gone to a different school, or taken a different job, or married another person. At some point in our lives, more than a few of us look back and wonder “What am I doing here, stuck in this dead-end life? Did I blow it? If so, what now--what’s next? Or do I just want to stay in this safe and comfortable rut?” There are worse things than being bored.

Then suddenly out of the blue, as it were, on a thoroughly ordinary day, in a no-where place on the far side of the desert, near what later would be known as Mt. Sinai, the call of God comes to Moses in a way that would change the course of his life forever.

It is not in worship that he hears the call of God. It is not on his knees in prayer that the call of God comes to him. It is on a thoroughly ordinary day, doing mindlessly ordinary things, when suddenly Moses is stopped in his tracks by a strange sight that captures his curiosity. A thorn bush burns with a flame that does not consume it. Moses stops to examine the strange sight. As he does, he hears something like a voice echoing in his soul, calling him by name, "**Moses, Moses!**" He responds, "**Yes, here I am.**" The voice warns, "**Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.**"

"**Do not come near,**" the Lord declares. Even when God draws near to reveal his purposes to us, the awesome holiness of God remains. Even in God's word of personal address, God is still and always Holy One, beyond our grasp. Moses hides his face in terror. He knows, as scripture says, that "**No one can see God and live.**" Even when the Lord God draws near to us, the deep mystery of the Divine remains. The Lord warns, "**Do not come near, take of your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground.**"

“Holy ground”? This hot, dusty desert, in the middle of nowhere—“holy ground”? How could it be? There was nothing holy about the place itself. But whenever or wherever the Lord God calls your name, there you are standing on “holy ground.” “Holy ground” can be anywhere and everywhere. It can be at your office on Friday afternoon as the clock winds down toward the weekend. It can be in your car, stuck in traffic on 385, listening to the mounting rage on talk radio. It can be on your way to the dorm at night or in chemistry lab. It can ever be on a Sunday morning as you stare at the windows of the sanctuary or look for mistakes in the bulletin. “Holy ground” can be anywhere that the Lord God lays claim on your life. You may be standing on “holy ground” right now.

It is to a man with a conflicted past, stuck in a dead-end job, on a thoroughly ordinary day, that the call of God comes. Someday all the pieces would fit together. Soon Moses’ understanding of Pharaoh and his empire would be vitally important, and so would his knowledge of every foot of the wilderness around Mt. Sinai. Soon those things would be essential in carrying out the task to which God was calling him, but Moses does not know that yet, just as you or I may not yet know how things that may seem insignificant in our lives now may be the very stuff God uses to accomplish his purposes.

I remember someone saying to me once something like, “All of life is curriculum.” Everything that happens can be used in shaping our lives for the work God intends for us. The pain we suffer can deepen our compassion for others. The failures we experience can strengthen our patience and persistence. The doors that are slammed in our faces can lead to new doors of opportunity, as **“in all things God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.”** (Romans 8:28)

But when God reveals to Moses what he intends for him to do with the rest of his life, his response is one that is familiar to us all. **“Who me?” “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?”**

What do you think? It is humility or fear that lies behind Moses' question? Does he know his own limitations, and know that he will be in way over his head if he responds to God's call? Or does he fear what it might cost him in terms of his own life if he were to confront the mighty Pharaoh? “In case you haven’t noticed, God, there are “Most Wanted” posters all over Egypt with my picture on them. Look, I'm too old to take on Pharaoh. I du..du..du don't speak too well. Not like my brother, Aaron. He's much more articulate than I am. Send him! Look, God, I'd love to do what you say. But now's not the time. I'm not the man.” **“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?”**

Any of that sound familiar? It does to me. It describes me all too well. Too often I have followed the path of least resistance instead of the more demanding and disturbing call of God. Risky obedience has not been the mark of my ministry.

That is why I need to hear and keep on hearing God’s response to the excuses Moses gives. The Lord declares, **“I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”** I will be with you in the work to which I call you.

It is as if God had said to Moses, "You ask, '**who am I** to go to Pharaoh?' But, Moses, don't you see? That's not the issue. The question is not who **you** are but **who I AM**. And I will be with you, come what may. Trust me and see for yourself.

In that assurance even an 80 year-old fugitive, on Pharaoh's "most wanted" list, a man who had risen so high and fallen so low, can serve as an instrument in the accomplishment of God's purposes in the world.

And so can you and I. Whenever or however God may lay claim on our lives, at the same time God promises the power of the Holy Spirit to see us through. God does not promise success, as we define success. God does not promise that the going will be easy, or that the "cost of discipleship" will not be high. God promises never to fail or forsake us, and to use us in ways we cannot yet imagine. Always what matters most is not who **WE** are but **who GOD is**--the God who is with us, always.

How you may hear the call of God in your life, no one can say or know in advance. God uses all sorts of ways to call all sorts of people into his service. But there are some things that we can say—that the call of God will always be **deeply personal**. You will not be called as a number, a statistic. You will be called by name. "Moses, Moses!" And you will be called to **some form of significant service to others**, as an expression of the love of God in Jesus Christ. And as you begin to respond, you will be assured that **God will go with you**, all the way. And the outcome of it all will lead to the **glory and praise of God...to worship**.

After God assures Moses of all that he has seen and known and will do, and how he will be with him all the way, the Lord declares, "**This shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you.**" This is how you will know that it was **my call** to which you were responding, not merely your own wants or desires. "**When you have brought the people of Israel out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.**"

It is only in hindsight, as you look back over your life—it is only after you have been obedient, as best you can, to the best that is called forth from you, that you will come to know that it was indeed **God's call** to which you responded.

The promise of the gospel is this—that whatever you do with your life in faith--however you use the gifts God entrusts to you--God will be with you to make the most and the best of all that you commit to him. That is the assurance of faith. And so it only remains for us to stammer, like Moses, "**Well, here I am... Go with me, Lord, all the way.**" And to you be all glory and honor, all dominion and power, now and forever more. Amen.

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