

Exodus 12:7-11

The Journey – Step #3 in the Stages of Faith

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This month our worship theme is Stages of Faith. Most of us can see that our faith changes over the span of life. Children gaze at the sky and ask if God lives in the clouds. Teens question the Bible and seek new understandings of God. Young adults seek direction for their lives and want to know God's purpose. Young families search for a partner so that they can share their life and spiritual outlook with someone they love. Then in the middle stages of life, we grow impatient with the early answers and wrestle with God anew. Finally as seniors we make peace with our unanswered questions and seek to pass faith on to the next generation.

Just as life is a journey, faith is a journey too. If we seek to make the most of life- at every stage, we also need to learn more about the various stages of faith. For this series we will look at the life of Moses to outline the way faith progresses through different stages. When Moses saw the burning bush, the Bible says he turned aside to see it better. The first stage in faith is curiosity. When you search for more meaning in your life then you have discovered the first step toward God. If with all your heart you seek God, then your curiosity will bring you onto holy ground. Once Moses was standing in God's presence, he heard God call to him. During the Children's Time last week Heike got a call on her cell phone and carried on an imaginary conversation with God. Most of us wish it could be that easy to hear God's voice, but the Bible gives us many examples of people who heard God's call. They sensed God summoning them. Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Samuel, Mary, Peter and Paul heard God's call. Last week Heike talked about what it means to hear a call from God today.

This week, we will look at the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of faith. Today we will discuss responding to God's call. Today's sermon is about putting our faith into action. You pray, and listen for God. You think you discern a voice and then you respond. The 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of faith is to begin again. It is to embark on a new journey. It is to go someplace that you have never been to before, or to go down the same streets and see them all differently. Today's sermon is about the journey of faith.

When Moses drew near to the burning bush God told Moses to leave his home and go down to Egypt and set the Hebrew people free. God challenged Moses to go to Pharaoh and demand that he release the Hebrew slaves. What does this story have to tell us about the journeys of faith that we take today?

**In the first place- faith is active.** When God called Moses he asked him to confront Pharaoh. God asked Moses to leave Midian and return to the Egyptian epicenter. He invited Moses to take a larger role in the life of his own people, and make his mark in the history of the world. Moses has big shoes to fill, but faith always involves action.

After you are curious enough to seek God, and then you pray to hear God's voice, often something will happen to you which is a game changer. A door will open you have not expected. A person will say something that seems significant. An opportunity will present itself to you in a new way. Then you will have to decide. How do I respond to this new possibility? You will be asked to respond. You will be asked to do something.

When God called Noah, Noah got the impression he was supposed to build an ark, and then he had to start cutting trees, looking at blueprints, and herding animals. When Christ called Peter and Andrew, they left their family fishing business and put their nets away, and got up out of their boats and left town to live with Jesus. When God called Mary she was confused but she said "yes" to God's invitation, and then Mary realized that she pregnant and that her child who completely would change her life. The Bible stories of people who hear a call and respond. God calls them to do something new.

Like Moses they don't always know what they are getting themselves into. They just know that they are ready to respond, and one step leads to another. If we could see the whole journey ahead of us we might not start these journeys of faith. But there is a certain logic to the progression. Moses talks to Pharaoh. Pharaoh listens but he does not release the slaves. Moses enters this negotiation with Pharaoh; God serves as legal advisor and keeps the pressure on with a series of increasingly awful plagues. Finally, when his own son was killed, Pharaoh conceded. So Moses led the people out of Egypt and they came to the Red Sea. Then Pharaoh changed his mind and sent chariots to retrieve the slaves or kill them for escaping. In desperation, Moses asked God what to do, and God instructed Moses to put out his staff over the water. Behold the water parted and Moses' journey began his journey in earnest.

Now, there is something about this moment that I want to point out. A rabbi told me once that he believes the waters parted after Moses put his foot out, not before. He thinks that Moses stepped into the water and then it parted. The reason this is a crucial distinction is that we often worry that we don't know what to do. We worry that even though we pray we cannot hear God calling us. We worry that when we think God wants us to take action, we cannot see the way to go. If my rabbi friend is right- these are all the wrong questions to ask. If we really hear a call from God, then all we need to do is respond, God will part the waters. Moses had no idea what he was doing. He had no idea- how to free slaves. He did not know God had a series of plagues ready to go. He did not know the waters would part when he stepped out in faith that day.

**We don't have to know everything. We do need to know that faith requires action.**

When the Jewish people celebrate the Passover, they eat matzah to remember that there are times when you have to be ready to get up and go. You cannot wait for the perfect moment. Faith is not a static business. Faith is not a switch you turn on. It is not a creed you sign. So often it is your willingness to put one foot in front of another, and take a trip even when you don't have a GPS, or any map.

Jesus lived in Nazareth for 30 years – working as a builder. Then when he was ready to do his ministry, he journeyed to the River Jordan to be baptized. From then on Christ was never still. He moved constantly, living in followers' homes, or camping out under the sky with his disciples.

When we baptize children in this church as we did today, we recognize that our very lives are journeys of faith. That is why the first hymn said – At the font we start our journey.

**In the second place- faith pushes you to face your fears.** When God called Moses to go to Pharaoh, Moses was terrified. Pharaohs did not typically release their slaves. To suggest it was an affront. You could get killed for challenging the Pharaoh. (These ancient empires were not democracies.)

Of course, Moses knew the Pharaoh, which might have provided a little safety net. Moses had been raised at court, like a prince, so he had a relationship with Pharaoh. But often facing a father figure is even harder than challenging a stranger. Moses had to face his grown-up fears along with those of his inner-child. He had to stare into the supreme psychological test. He was legitimately terrified.

Often, life's most vital faith journeys take us back to confront our primal fears. Moses did it the only way anyone does; he told God he was scared, and heard God telling him that God would be there. Whenever we face our real fears in life, we open a door and God walks in to meet us. When we face our fears we are well on our way to a new place.

**Finally, faith will transform you. When you take a trip with God, You will never be the same.**

John Westerhoff was a professor at Duke University Divinity School when he led a conference on baptism for Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy. Simultaneous with the clergy conference there was a large group of Protestant and Catholic children invited to the center get to know each other and to reduce their hostility. Each morning started with worship that featured a Bible story about healing. The days were spent with the adults arguing or talking past each other and John Westerhoff reports that he felt

like a complete failure. His efforts to sow seeds of peace in Ireland seemed to come to nothing but he continued doing what he had planned for worship each morning. One morning after a very hard session, he told the story of the woman who reached out to touch the hem of Christ's robe so that she might be healed.

That day quite by chance at worship a Roman Catholic monk decided to sit on the floor with the children. After the story a little girl came closer to the monk and whispered loudly, "Can I touch you?" Of course, the monk replied, "I am scared", the little girl said. "Why" said the monk. "Because if my father knew I touched you he might beat me".

"Perhaps, he does not have to know", he replied. The child reached out her finger and touched the monk, and looking at it, she said, "Nothing happened." Tears welling up in his eyes, the monk replied, "Yes, it did; you and I will never be the same again." <sup>1</sup>

It is faith that will change your life. You don't have to do as much to make the change happen as you might think. You just have to want something more. You have to seek more than happiness, but deeper joy that carries a spiritual weight. You have to be willing to entertain the questions you cannot answer, but that you know will become like doors to your own unlocking. You don't have to be able to answer your hardest questions, but just be willing to hold them in the basket of your soul. If you are curious enough to draw closer to God, I guarantee that God will draw closer to you. If you ask God to help you face your fears, I know God will journey with you in deeper and deeper ways.

When you travel with God, each step will be a holy one. New waters will part. You won't understand it, but the simple act of stepping out in faith, will change you and change the world.

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<sup>1</sup> John Westerhoff, *Spiritual Life: The Foundation for Preaching and Teaching*. (Louisville KY: Westminster, John Knox) 1994. P. 50-51.