

Sunday, October 2, 2011

Exodus 3: 1-3

Curiosity –Step #1 —Sermon Series on Faith’s Stages

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In this church we strive to welcome everyone. We start our services with a reminder that everyone is welcome, so our church includes – lots of former Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Unitarians, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Jewish believers, and those with no church experience. We don’t expect you to know exactly what you believe when you arrive at our church because we think your questions of faith are holy impulses. We expect people to talk about your doubts even before you try to articulate your faith. We strive to see the divine spark in everyone and we think that diversity is a sign of God’s grace.

We don’t believe that faith was ever meant to be a test. There is no exam. Life tests you enough –to be sure. We don’t ask you to sign a creed when you become a member here. But we do hope that you will be willing to join a community of faith. We do ask that you consider taking your own journey of faith. We do ask that you take your spiritual life seriously. We do ask that you try to listen to God’s voice. We ask you to be part of a vibrant community that is on the move. Faith is not stagnant. It is a process.

We can see the way faith grows in children. Small children like Bible stories. Youth ask questions about God. Young adults seek purpose and direction in their lives. Middle agers ask more questions as they bump up against life’s deep puzzles - questions that remain unanswered. Seniors hope to pass on some of their wisdom and grow to achieve a deep peace- an equanimity which comes with time. But those are the stages of life, and there are also stages of faith formation too. As people of faith we change and mature. The apostle Paul says- When I was a child I spoke like child and reasoned like a child, but now I put away childish things. He was not talking about the stages of life- here. He was talking about the stages of faith.

The Bible is full of stories about people who take trips. These trips are always the result of an encounter with God. Abraham is called by God and he and Sarah pack their bags and spend decades on the road. Jacob moves out of town, and learns lessons he cannot learn at home. Paul never rests, but travels all the time. Jesus is always on the road. He complains that he does not have a place to lay his head – even foxes have dens, but Jesus has a new bed each night. These journeys are not coincidental. They are a metaphor for faith. Faith will take you on a journey.

This month as we look at the stages of faith we will talk about Moses and the story of the Exodus. By far, the most important story in Hebrew scripture, the Exodus forms the foundation of the Judeo Christian tradition. Here in Moses’ life we find all the steps of faith for our life too.

You may remember that Moses was born to slaves in Egypt at a time when babies were not safe. So his family put Moses in a basket on the Nile, and Pharaoh’s daughter rescued him and raised him in the

palace. Moses grew in stature; as a young man he could not reconcile his privilege with the cruelty his people endured. One day he saw a slave being beaten, and reacted quickly, knocking the Egyptian soldier down, in what turned out to be a fatal blow. Moses fled from Egypt to Midian, a rural region in the outback. There he made a new life, keeping sheep for his father-in-law. One day Moses saw a bush that was on fire- yet it failed to be consumed by the flames. So Moses stopped what he was doing and went to investigate. His curiosity changed his life. The first stage of faith is curiosity. What can we learn from Moses about our own faith journeys, today?

In the first place, curiosity is stronger than fear. Most shepherds keep an eye out for fires. Desert fires are rare, but destructive. So Moses must have been wary of the burning bush. But a bush that was not consumed was freaky. Moses might have been spooked. Here was something that came out of nowhere, something that defied the laws of nature. Here was a bizarre site. Moses must have been afraid, because fear is the normal reaction to the unknown. When you are frightened sometimes it is only curiosity that gets you through.

Last weekend I attended my 40th high school reunion. I knew about it for months but only decided to go about a month ago. Why, because I was nervous. I worried – “What if I arrived in Clayton Missouri and morphed back into my adolescent self? What if people got back into all their old roles? What if I did not like any of my old friends” But in the end my curiosity was stronger than my fears and my journey was rewarded by lots of interesting connections with people who had 40 years of new stories to tell.

The Discovery channel has a program on Cave Men tonight. It features a show about curiosity and why it was so crucial to the development of the species. Cave people lived between 2.5 million and 10,000 years ago; curiosity was key to their evolution. Neurologists tell us that curious people activate two parts of their brains simultaneously – the place that anticipates and the place that comprehends information. When you are curious your brain lights up. Babies are born curious, and it children’s curiosity that we find so endearing.

I think a child’s curiosity reminds us that we all were born with a divine gift of inquisitiveness. But I don’t have to tell you. People who attend worship are curious. We are seekers. We wonder how life works. We try to know more about how to make a difference in the world. We ask questions about the parts of life you cannot see. We are curious about whether God exists today, and how you hear God’s voice. We puzzle of the mysteries of injustice and why good people suffer. We seek to discover how to make the most of our lives. All these questions are like our burning bush- they are invitations to turn toward God.

In the second place, it is ok to be restless. God can work with your restlessness. Moses might have stayed put. He was safe in Midian. He had found a good wife- the daughter of a Hebrew. He had work. He was respected in this small place. He had found security. What more could he ask for? For all his security I suspect that Moses was a little restless. He did not want to stay put. He craved more. He was not satisfied with the easier life. Safety was over-rated.

As a congregational church we claim historical connection to the original Pilgrims – those people who left England journeyed to Holland. The myth is that they went to Holland because they were persecuted, and then left Holland for the same reason. But in fact, these ancestors of ours were restless people. They were searching for a place where they could practice their faith without distraction. They were so restless, that they kept searching for a home until they got to these shores.

It is restlessness that moves many of us to engage in a search for God. There must be more to life. There must be more than just collecting gadgets. When you have gone to the right schools and found the right job- there are moments when you wonder what you are striving for. What gives life meaning? Why do I feel such stress? How do we find happiness? When you reach a certain age and realize that all the things you think will make you happy don't do it, you are pushed to ask the deeper questions about life and faith.

Finally, every faith journey begins with one step in the right direction. The Bible makes a big deal about what happened to Moses that day. It tells us that he saw the bush and then decided to turn aside to look at it more closely. This is important in a book that leaves many details out of other stories. Someone has gone to great pains to record the fact that Moses turned toward God in a story that happened 3500 years ago. Why does it matter so much that Moses took a step toward the bush that day?

That first step was the key. It made all the difference. People ask me how to hear God's voice in their life. They ask me how to pray. They ask me how to know God's will. The truth is I don't know the exact answer to those questions. But I do know that one vital step in the process is your willingness to turn toward God. I am not sure you need to wait for a burning bush. I don't think the burning bush was as important as Moses' willingness to take the detour. It was a signal that Moses was curious. It was a sign that Moses was willing to look at something he could not understand. It was a sign that Moses was open to discover something new. It was a brave step and the first in a long journey. No journey is possible until you take the first step.

Once he took a step toward God, God spoke. In that moment he realized he was only holy ground. He had entered a timeless place and was hearing a holy message. Last weekend when I was waiting for a plane at Lagan Airport one of you came into the gate on runway C. We started talking and then boarded the plane. I found the seat next to me was free. (If I had not realized that this coincidence was planned by a greater power- the free seat told me for sure.) So we continued our conversation about faith – and our different journeys with God. When we got to Logan I found myself so grateful for this conversation that I mused – “If only I could know your flight plans and share air time with more of you, what a wonderful gift that would be.” The journey of faith starts here in this church. This is the hub for faith expeditions; this is the terminal. Flights are available all the time.

All you have to do is turn toward God, and you will be stepping onto Holy Ground. It happened for Moses in a wilderness, I don't think it matters where you do this. If you have been thinking about starting a spiritual journey but don't know how, it might not be as hard as you think. If you let God know

you are interested in deepening your relationship- that is all it might take. You might tell God you are ready today.

Let us pray: Gracious God, you see our curiosity and know our restlessness. Help us to find a way to turn toward you this day. Help us to open our minds and hearts to the possibility of embarking on a new faith journey, starting here and now. Amen