

Exodus 3: 1-12

Standing on Holy Ground

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Rev. Susan Cartmell

The Congregational Church of Needham

This month our worship theme is Vocation: hearing God's call. So all month we will be talking about how we hear God's voice calling to us. We will consider not only how God calls each one of us but also how we can listen for that call, to make sure that we hear it. The Bible is full of examples of people who heard God's call.

The word vocation comes from the Latin root which means to call. Now you don't have to be a Protestant minister or a Buddhist monk to have a vocation or a call from God. In our church we believe that everyone experiences God's call to use their gifts to make the world a better place. Whether you are a dentist or an attorney, a social worker or in sales, whether you know it or not, you have found some inspiration to use your God-given gifts to change the world for good. All month long we will look at people in the Bible who heard God's voice and for whom that experience changed the course of their lives. Through those conversations God challenged them to try a new path, or make a bigger impact in the world. Through those talks with God they all discovered a spiritual purpose for their work, or a mission for their life that was compelling.

One of the most famous examples of someone who heard God's call was Moses. Moses was tending sheep in Midian when God spoke to him at a burning bush. In that moment God told Moses – "Take off your shoes; you are standing on holy ground." Let's take a look at Moses' call and see what we can learn from it for our lives today.

**In the first place, Listening to God's call is a life-long task.** Last week we looked at Abraham, who was an elderly man when he heard God's call; now Moses was not old, but he was no spring chicken either. He was middle aged when he heard God calling him to the mission that would define his life, and earn him a place in history. You may remember that Moses was born to a Hebrew who gave him up for adoption by putting him in a basket. No less than the Pharaoh's daughter took him in and raised him like a son. So Moses grew up in the Pharaoh's palace. But when Moses came of age, he was torn by the discrepancy of his own life of luxury and the plight of his people. One day when he was a young man walking on the streets, he encountered a slave being beaten by his master. Moses could not contain his rage, so he turned on the overseer and killed him. There were plenty of witnesses, so before long Moses had to flee for his life, from the capital of Egypt. He started over, settling in Midian, a small backwater place, where he married the daughter of the priest, and grew contented watching his father-in-law's sheep. (It was like leaving Washington DC to go live in a hill town in West Virginia. That was where he heard God's call.

I imagine that on that day when Moses talked to God at the burning bush he was not looking for a career change. Content, out of the way, his life may have been a little boring at times, but he was happy, and safe. Moses probably was not reading What Color is My Parachute? the popular mid-career assessment book. He was all set.

When children are little, folks ask them what they want to be when they grow up, and they indulge grown up with answers. Kids learn to play this game and find an answer that will please people, proclaiming that they want to be a fire fighter or a teacher. We ask them to consider many options as a way of encouraging them to dream. We know that they will probably change their minds half a dozen more times in elementary school, and they should be expected. But when young adults get to their senior year in college we start to pressure them to come up with a plan. Some feel quite certain about

their trajectory but others feel nervous, because they really don't have a clue what they want to do forever. Many of the ones who feel most conflicted are reluctant to cancel some of their options. The only way to relieve their anxiety is to remind them that they can change their minds after a few years. They don't have to decide their trajectory for the rest of their lives; they probably just have to figure things out for a few years at a time. Our lives can have many different chapters, if we are open to that.

Clark Taylor has a new book out about his experience with the village Sancta Maria Tzeja, called Seeds of Freedom. You might imagine that Clark was always interested in this village, but that is not true. He was a Latin American studies Professor at The University of Massachusetts in Boston when Beatriz Manz, a Berkeley anthropologist took him into the Ixcán. Clark was in his fifties when he decided to learn Spanish.

Life is a book with many chapters. Moses had a chapter when he was living in the palace. Then he had a chapter as a shepherd. Then he had a chapter when he argued with Pharaoh, and God sent all those plagues. Then Moses had a whole chapter leading the people out of Egypt and crossing the Red Sea. Then he still was not finished because Moses began the trek through the wilderness. Moses had the chapter when he climbed up Mount Sinai to discover the Ten Commandments. Then, after all of that, Moses still led the people for another 30 years. A full life contains many gripping adventures, many encounters with God, many detours and mountaintop experiences. God came to Moses at the burning bush to say, "I am not done with you yet". There is so much more. Every time we catch a vision of some new chapter in life that calls to us, then we really are seeing our lives through God's eyes and we are standing on holy ground.

One man said it well... I don't want to spend my life making a living. I want to spend my life making a life.

**In the second place, God's call can push our buttons.** God called Moses to be one of the greatest men in history. He called Moses to demand that the Pharaoh set the people free. While it seems the right

thing to do, and history proved that that Moses was successful, with God's help, at the time Moses must have questioned how in the world he could convince the most powerful man on earth to release his slaves. No one in their right mind would release the slaves in the middle of a building campaign like the pyramids. Not only was Moses way too insignificant to ask such a thing or bring such a message, but Moses had to face his step father in order to deliver it. Pharaoh seemed not to care that Moses killed one of his overseers, but Moses had to return to the man who was like a father to him, and confront him.

No matter who you are, one of the most terrifying things in life you will ever have to do is to stand up to your parents with demands that challenge their authority. Often the path to adulthood involves moments when you stand before the people who raised you and don't assume the child's role but stand there as an adult, and even challenge their authority with your own independent views of the world. Going home to challenge your parents is one of the scariest journeys in life. But it can also transform you.

Moses reminds us that so often the only way to go forward to realize your fullest potential is to deal with the unfinished business from your past. If you want a life that holds a sense of adventure, by definition you will have to face your greatest fears- not once but over and over in various guises.

**Finally, the story of the call of Moses tells us that God needs us. God sees your gifts, and knows how to use them in unique and profound ways.**

God could not free the slaves without Moses. God needed someone to talk to Pharaoh. Why Moses? Moses had a foot in both camps. Born of a Hebrew woman, he was raised in the Egyptian palace. As a young man his two identities were hard to hold together and so he was full of explosive rage. I imagine Moses felt guilty. While his people struggled to make bricks and labored in the hot sun of equatorial Africa, Moses enjoyed the relative ease and advantage of palace life, the education, the

luxury, the safety of a Pharaoh's son. His own guilt led to rage when he saw how his people suffered every day and understood that his own comparative ease was earned on the backs of his people. Maybe one reason Moses ran away from the palace was because he could not really reconcile the two parts in himself.

What is interesting is that God needed someone who was at ease in the palace, someone who could speak to Pharaoh, and get his ear, someone who could bridge both worlds. God called Moses to use the very piece of his life which was most troubling to him. Often God offers us the opportunity to turn our vulnerability into the very gift that the world needs.

Today I want to end this sermon talking about Albert Schweitzer. Born in 1875 in Alsace Lorraine, Schweitzer was the son of a Lutheran pastor, and showed great musical promise as a boy. He studied organ with some European masters, and re-introduced Bach into worship services. Then, in his twenties, Schweitzer studied theology, and was ordained as a curate in Strasbourg. He showed great theological depth and insight. His ground-breaking book The Quest for the Historical Jesus set the stage for the 20<sup>th</sup> century inquiries into the meaning of the life of Jesus. Even with all of this scholarly prominence and musical creativity, Schweitzer was restless and he saw his burning bush when he went to Oberamagau to watch the Passion Play, a story of the Life of Jesus portrayed by the people of a German town every 10 years. When Schweitzer saw the play in 1910, he felt called to go to Africa and serve there as a medical doctor. So, he decided that he would stay in Europe until he was thirty, and then pursue a medical degree in Paris. Eventually, Albert Schweitzer started a mission in Lamborene in modern Gabon. In his first 9 months he treated 2000 patients, some had walked for days to see him. In World War I he was held under house arrest, and then after the war he returned to Strasberg to serve as a pastor and work on a second book, The Philosophy of Civilization. He gave organ concerts to raise money for the hospital, and returned in several years to find that native orderlies were running some of the wards.

Straddling worlds of Europe and Africa he wrote "Oh, this 'noble' culture of ours! It speaks so piously of human dignity and human rights and then disregards this dignity and these rights of countless millions and treads them underfoot, only because they live overseas or ... have skins of a different color or because they cannot help themselves."

I don't know what your burning bush looks like. I don't know where you feel called or how it happens in your life. One online survey on Beliefnet says that 97% of people talk to God, and 90% say that God responds. They hear God through thoughts (73%) or through another person (60%). I do believe that God does not limit these messages to conversations with bearded men living in the Middle East long ago. God needs people in every generation to promote mercy, or demand justice or share their creativity or technology savvy to improve the lives of others. The very gifts that God gave us, even those parts of our lives that seem like crumbled pages not smooth ones, God can take those sheets of paper and make something beautiful out of them.

Let us pray....Lord help us to listen to your call in our lives. Lord we offer you the stirrings in us – our hopes, our dreams, and our ambitions. We also offer you our restlessness, and our fears.

Guide us, Heavenly Father, into the breathtaking empty space of the door you are opening. Amen.