

Holy Ground

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

13th Sunday after Pentecost - August 30, 2020

Exodus 3:1-15 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations."

Matthew 16:21-28 *In our last episode, Jesus and the disciples traveled to the far north of Palestine, to an ancient holy site called, at that time, Caesarea Philippi because it was dedicated to Caesar, the god-king of Rome. Previously it had been sacred to the Greek god Pan (who won battles by causing panic in the enemy), and before that, to the pagan god of the place. It was no accident that Jesus chose that holy ground to ask, "Who do you say I am?" and Peter declared him the Messiah, Son of the Living, the one true, God. Good work, Peter; but affiliation with God is not what you think, because... From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."*

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Who's up for an adventure? In 1914, Sir Ernest Shackleton set out on the ship *Endurance*, intent on making the first land-crossing of Antarctica. Legend says Shackleton placed an advertisement in the paper for expedition members to join him. It declared: "*Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success.*" He supposedly received 5,000 applications, which he sorted into piles: "mad [crazy]," "hopeless," and "possible," before selecting just 27 for his crew. As I said, this may be nothing more than legend. But we do know that the expedition became famous, not for crossing the Antarctic, but for surviving and enduring until they were rescued.

Shackleton's invitation sounds a bit like Jesus' prediction of suffering and death for himself, with crosses and losses for his followers, too. No wonder Peter got upset! It's not what you expect when your best buddy is the Messiah, Son of the Living one true God. Were his followers crazy? Hopeless? Or just ready to change the world? Opinions varied. But they did change the world.

Do you think Moses thought he'd gone crazy when he heard a voice in the smoldering shrubbery telling him to go back to Egypt, confront Pharaoh (another god-king) and ask him to let thousands of slaves just walk off the job and leave? Baby Moses, you will recall, had been rescued from the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter when he was supposed to be drowned. Despite his upbringing, he'd identified with his birth race, the Isrealites, and had to flee the country because he murdered an Egyptian. That was all 40 years ago; now he had a family and a good life in the land of Midian. Why would he possibly want to risk arrest and death for challenging the Empire and freeing their slaves? You can almost read his thoughts: "Hazardous journey. No wages. Safe return doubtful." Ummm, not that crazy, thank you very much.

But think of how God had lured him in: a bush that burned but never got burnt up. A bush that knew his name. A bush that told him, "This is holy ground. Take off your shoes." A bush that named him heir to his great ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. A bush that declared in the fiercest possible terms, "I have seen, *yes, seen*, the misery of my people! I have heard, *yes, heard*, their cry. I *know* their sufferings and *I have come* to deliver them. And you will be the one to do it." No wonder Moses tried to beg off - for the first time, but not for the last. "Who am I, to try this? Why would anyone pay attention? There are a lot of people around claiming to be a god or a

god's messenger, including Pharaoh. Which god shall I say sent me?" And the burning bush says, "I am the sign. I burn and I am not consumed. I will be with you. Tell them that 'I AM' has sent you because 'I WILL BE WHOEVER I DECIDE TO BE.' That is my name." Oh, go down, Moses. His adventures were just beginning. You'll hear more about them in the next few weeks.

Those of you who are here to be confirmed, your adventures are just beginning, too, but I swear to you that these were the Bible readings set for the day. I didn't choose them on purpose to scare you. But the more I thought about them, the more appropriate they seemed Why? Well, first, just like Jesus and the disciples at Caesarea Philippi, just like Moses at the burning bush, you are standing on holy ground. You enter history at a holy time. You are poised on the brink of adulthood, as the church reckons it. You have pondered your faith, and you have named God for yourselves. And that means you have holy work ahead of you. Hard work, like Moses, like Jesus, like the disciples. Maybe even hazardous. It probably won't pay that well. But it is holy work.

And just so that all these good people gathered today - gathered virtually, in ways that might have astounded Moses even more than the burning bush did - just so they know who it is they're approving for this holy work, I want to share some of the wisdom of your faith statements, in a sort of collage of quotes: God asks: "Who do you say that I am?" You answered, "God is the ultimate protector, always watching over us like the moon, like the air we breathe, like an angel on my shoulder, or by my side, guiding me to choose the right path to make me a better person, the best person I can be. God created all of us differently and equally."

Every one of you has been through hard times, and you understand that life will sooner or later deal you more hard times; but you went on, "God uses challenging situations to make us stronger and more independent, but also to lead us to prayer, to rely on God. From Jesus, we learn to love others for who they truly are, just as he did; Jesus gives us the grace to walk through the world and help all people, and the church gives us a mission in life, to help those less fortunate than we are. God uses even things that make us mad to help us understand other people's point of view. After I pray and get my feelings out, I feel like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. The Holy Spirit fills me with hope and joy for the future." Wow.

Those of you listening and affirming these young adults, if these faith statements don't fill *you* with hope and joy for the future, then I don't know what will. They aren't crazy or hopeless, yet they are signing up for the same adventure we all signed up for: A journey that may be hazardous, with the possibility of dark hours, and pay that doesn't come in dollars. But great rewards come in the end, because God is with us *to* the end. As God was with Moses. As God was with Jesus. As God has been with the church through some pretty rocky times: times of great mistakes, grave errors, as well as times of great truth and great beauty.

But here's another truth. I'm not much of a sports fan, but I do know who Jackie Robinson was: the first African American to play major league baseball. He faced hazards and hate like we can't imagine. But he shared a lot of wisdom. He said, "Life is not a spectator sport. If you're going to spend your whole life in the grandstand just watching what goes on, in my opinion, you're wasting your life." I could say the same of faith: "Faith is not a spectator sport. If you're going to spend your whole life sitting in a pew, or praying by yourself when you happen to feel you need it, you're missing the adventure God has called you to." You cannot be Christian in a vacuum; you join a team, a team that counts on you to play your position, fill your role.

Having said that, I also want to honor those sports teams who have showed up with exceptional courage by refusing to play. I mean, not just those teams whose seasons were cancelled so they could better protect and care for themselves, their teammates, their friends and families by *not* spreading the coronavirus. I honor teams who have gone on strike out of respect and grief and anger over police violence and the unjust treatment of Black people. Sometimes you have to play your heart out. Sometimes you have to respectfully refuse to play. How do you balance the two? How do you balance apparent madness against necessity, hopelessness against holiness?

Balancing life is a challenge in the best of times. And these are not the best of times. So how do you stay upright when everything feels unstable? Well, remember that where you are standing is holy ground. If you are standing alone in this world then you can easily lose your balance when the ground starts to shift under your feet. But if you are standing in faith, knowing that you are loved and that you are a source of love for others, then, no matter what you face, you will not be overwhelmed. Stay true to your calling. Trust the adventure. Look to God for hope and for joy in the midst of it all.* And you--yes, *you*--may change the world. Amen. Thanks be to God.

*I'm indebted to Steve Charleston, Episcopal Bishop and Native American elder for this insight.

Prayers

God of our ancestor, you have been with your people, showing up in a multitude of ways for thousands of years. You never set them tasks they couldn't fulfill, with your help. Continue to guide and nurture, challenge and reward these young people: Alayna, Nathan, Heather, Connor, and Katherine, as you did all those who have gone before them. Continue to push all your people out of the grandstands, out of the pews, and into the world that needs us so desperately.

God of prosperity, and God of calamity, when the earth shifts under our feet and we lose our balance, help us know how to stand with the victims of hurricanes in the south, blistering heat and fires in the west, inequity and unrest in our cities, loss of crops and livelihoods in our countryside. Help us to reach out to those crying out for justice without turning our backs on those we have commissioned to maintain order and keep us safe. Help us to be diligent truth-seekers and wise truth-tellers, alert to your voice even in the chaos and uncertainty.