

Sept. 3, 2017
13th Sunday after Pentecost
Exodus 3:1-15
The Rev. Carenda Baker

For those of us of a certain age (say 50+), upon hearing the name “Moses” the image we automatically see in our mind is from the epic four hour TV movie “The Ten Commandments”. In this cinematic version of the story Charlton Heston plays Moses. The Hollywood Moses appears as strong, handsome, confident and unruffled, “in charge”. And Hollywood, of course, is about imagination, entertainment, and ratings.

As people of “the Book”, there is much to learn from reading about the “real Moses” in the Exodus account from the Hebrew Scriptures, where Moses does not sound at all like Charlton Heston’s character in “The Ten Commandments”. Exodus gives us a classic biblical “call” story. When we meet Moses today he is in the backside of the desert. He is a man who has never really been at home anywhere. Secretly saved from genocidal drowning and raised by his Hebrew mother, he was adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter and given an Egyptian name. He lived among the royalty. Although he tries to intervene to help his Hebrew kinsfolk, he ends up becoming angry and murdering an Egyptian man who was beating a Hebrew slave. A little later as he tries to break up a fight between two Hebrew men, he scolds the one who started the fight, who turns to him and says, “Who made you ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Pharaoh has also found out what Moses has done and is looking for Moses to kill him. Seemingly rejected by his own Hebrew kinsfolk, Moses flees Egypt and the mess he had created there, making his way to Midian. Here he receives the hospitality of a desert priest, Jethro and marries Jethro’s daughter Zipporah.

Then, for the first in a long time, the narrator of this story gives us a more direct glimpse of God, and it is not the picture of a distant, absentee God. The end of Exodus chapter 2 says - “After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.”

Moses, on the backside of the desert, has taken Jethro’s flock out to pasture near Mt. Horeb, when he spies it. Burning bushes are not a big deal in a hot, desert climate. But bushes that are aflame and don’t burn up are pretty rare. Rarer still are burning bushes that talk to you. Moses turns aside to grasp it all, and I’m not sure he even comprehended that it was the voice of God. All Moses knew was that it called his name and he found himself saying, “Here I am”. And that was just what God wanted to hear.

“Here I am.” Moses did nothing to prepare for this encounter, nor had he gone looking to meet God.

The God who has heard, remembered, seen, and taken notice of the people’s suffering as slaves is about to call Moses to a new thing, to the real thing his life was about, to take on a larger purpose beyond himself. God tells him the plan: I need you to do this, Moses, to go to Pharaoh and lead my people out of Egypt.

Moses who had just minutes earlier said “Here I am”, now says “Who am I to go to Pharaoh and lead your people out of Egypt?” Filled with ambivalence, inhibitions, fears, and doubts – Moses engages in a real heart to heart conversation with God. “Who am I?” leads to “Who are You? What do I tell the people your name is? “Tell them “I AM” has sent you. Moses poses another objection, “But I don’t have any special powers. I can’t perform miraculous signs to convince the people this is your plan. They probably won’t listen or believe me without some kind of proof. God continues to patiently counter and silence each of Moses’ excuses. Moses keeps arguing. “I am not eloquent, not articulate, not a good public speaker.” And finally he utters, “O my Lord, please send someone else.” No one in their right mind would think him or herself worthy or capable of answering this call. Of course Moses wants to get out of it. God is asking a dangerous and impossible thing.

This is the first of many “come to Yahweh meetings” for Moses. The real Moses meets the real God, and we are drawn in by the conversation, challenged to sit up and pay attention to the character and mysterious working of this holy One – named “***I am who I am***”. “Yes Moses, I know you are anxious and scared, but I will be with you. Moses – you’re my man. I have chosen you. I need you to do this.”

This is a picture of the life of faith - for Moses, for you and me, and everyone else. Lutheran preaching professor David Lose comments that “you can’t really know who God is unless you’re willing to sign on for God’s mission in the world.” It’s like that throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and in the Greek Scriptures of the New Testament. “To know God, you have to go with God. Faith is a full contact participation sport. You just can’t sit back and expect to really know God, you have to get up off the couch and get in the game, take a risk, reach for something you think unachievable, step out onto the winding road, the end of which you can’t see from your doorstep.” (*Dear Working Preacher*, 2011)

Is there any doubt that God was able to use every single person who offered him or herself this past week in response to the devastation of Hurricane Harvey in Houston and Port Arthur and parts of Louisiana? People driving their trucks into the area,

hauling boats and kayaks to join in rescue efforts. Places not normally used as shelters opened to provide a safe space for rest – furniture stores, mosques, a football stadium. We've seen and heard the stories: everyday people, neighbors reaching out to help rescue, bring hope and comfort, and provide for physical needs – safety, food, water, clothing, prayer, money, and now post-hurricane clean-up crews. God needs every aspect of who we are. God can use every part of us – body, mind, heart, and spirit – to minister with compassion, hope, love, and generosity. God cares that much. God hears the human cries – in Franklin County, in Texas and Louisiana, in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh where monsoons have claimed the lives of hundreds of people in the past week.

It's okay for us, like Moses to have doubts, to feel inadequate, to voice our objections, to wish for and ask God to please find or send somebody else. As it happened for Moses, God will listen and respond and work with us. And God will always promise us the same thing: "I will be with you". These are the lifelines of faith: God's compassion, God's patience, God's willingness to receive and use whatever we are able and willing to offer. God needs and calls human beings, people willing to follow God and join in the work of healing, comforting, standing up for and standing beside the oppressed, lost, and broken ones in this world.

So here's one question this text is asking us: to what task, what act of ministry is God calling you to take on – today. This week. This month. The next three to six months. I invite you to think, pray, and write down what you sense God is calling you to do. Share it with one other person in the next week or two.

We are coming soon upon the completion of our second year of ministry together. I am beginning to see more clearly the gifts of this congregation. There are those with gifts of wisdom and genuine hospitality to offer. There are those who possess confidence and courage, who are willing to take risks in reaching out to others, who are able to see beyond the faces of strangers, to people we can befriend and learn from. There are those with significant financial resources to share, and who do so generously. There are a cadre of people who serve diligently behind the scenes using their gifts of faith and encouragement to hold us up in prayer and to speak affirming, supportive words that help strengthen and sustain us.

I am grateful to be seeing these gifts more clearly, because interestingly, we seem to be receiving more requests from people in the Chambersburg community to use our facilities, especially the parish hall. I believe God continues to call us to open our doors and hearts wide to serve amongst, and with our neighbors. It is liberating and healing work God is calling us to engage in more deeply.

There is a movie that was released in April of this year titled "The Zookeeper's Wife". I would commend it for your viewing. The movie is based on the sad and beautiful true story of a couple, Antonina and Jan Zabinski, once keepers of the Warsaw Zoo in Poland. The story begins just a few years before the atrocities of World War II unfold. As Germany eventually invades Poland, the zoo is bombed and the Zabinski's have many decisions to make about how they will respond, and to what uses they will put their family's unique resources.

As we seek to discern the tasks to which God is calling us individually and as a congregation, we do well to let the apostle Paul's words to the Roman Christians soak deeply into our hearts and minds: *"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good".*

God declares: "I am who I am". Scripture reveals that this is a God who sees, and hears and cares. A God who feels our pain and suffers with us. A God of justice, love, mercy, and forgiveness. A God who promises to be with us always. A God who can and will use anything and everything we offer to help liberate, heal, stir up hope, and breathe new life.

Often the tasks to which God calls us look insurmountable. But it is only when we see the finiteness of our own resources, and admit the limitations of our skills and abilities that we are in a place to receive, to lean on and rely on God to provide what is needed for the task. Like Moses, we are called to embrace all of who we are - including our vulnerability- as a gift, and then allow God's grace to fill and empower us. Blessed are we who have the opportunity here once again to receive healing balm, and take holy food and drink for the journey. We can be sure God goes ahead and will meet us on the road today, tomorrow, and always. Keep your eyes open, for God will appear in ways we least expect, in ordinary places and ordinary times. Just ask Moses.

Let us pray:

"O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untried, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(from the Lutheran Book of Worship)