

“Not Me, Lord”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 3, 2017

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Holy Scriptures: Exodus 3: 1-14; 4: 1-5, 10-17

Exodus 3:1-14

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. ² 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. ³ Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” ⁴ 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.” ⁵ Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶ 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.

⁷ 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, ⁸ 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. ⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” ¹¹ But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” ¹² 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.”

¹³ 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?” ¹⁴ 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.’”

Exodus 4:1-5, 10-17

Then Moses answered, “But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you.’” ²The Lord said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, “A staff.” ³And he said, “Throw it on the ground.” So he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it. ⁴Then the Lord said to Moses, “Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail”—so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand— ⁵“so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.”

¹⁰But Moses said to the Lord, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” ¹¹Then the Lord said to him, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? ¹²Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.” ¹³But he said, “O my Lord, please send someone else.” ¹⁴Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, “What of your brother Aaron the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. ¹⁵You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. ¹⁶He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him. ¹⁷Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs.”

Not Me, Lord

We have a pretty good idea of what was on Moses’ mind.

Uppermost in his thinking, as he pondered the situation before him,

had to be the question not addressed, not raised, bypassed and avoided
yet right there in the open.[1]

Why don’t you do this yourself?

Hold on, we are getting ahead of the story.

Let’s start at the beginning.

*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.*

Here is a bush on fire that is not consumed;

in its midst, in the flames, is an Angel of the Lord.

We can see through Moses' eyes

the awe of the moment, the mystery, the magic, the might.

We've sat around campfires and watched as the logs burned and became hot
coals.

To light birthday cake candles we've held lit matches as long as we dared

until the flame consumed the matchstick.

Then we reached for another.

So, when Moses came to Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God,

rounded the corner and encountered a bush on fire,
at first glance, to him and to us it's a forest fire.

A second look, however, reveals that while the bush is on fire it is not consumed.

Furthermore, standing in the epicenter is an Angel of the Lord.

We're invited to join Moses as he enters the realm of the impossible.

Flames dancing yet not destroying.

Conflagrations that burn yet choose to not consume.

A divine messenger surrounded by tongues of flame,

speaking and calling Moses by name.

Surely this is sacred space for a Living God who will not be contained.

We move in with Moses for a closer inspection.

“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.

*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.

So far so good.

Nothing drastic, other than a very bright and warm miracle.

Well, a little mystery, a little might,

a divine reminder of the sudden presence

of the God who will not be contained,
who has the power to burn yet not consume,
who knows the name of this shepherd,
who testifies that this is a deity like no other.

Here is One True God who insists that sandals be removed,

respect bestowed, faces turned aside
because wherever the Lord is present and accounted for is holy
ground.

The Holy One identifies as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Immediately we know what Moses knows:

 this is the same Lord
 who showed abundant compassion to our ancestors.

So far so good.

Introductions are complete and there is no need to worry or be overly concerned.

God said, in effect, to Moses and across time and space to us, today,

I have your attention.

I have told you who I AM.

I have a history and a documented record of compassion and grace.

I will not be contained, for I AM a Living God.

God, having concluded the niceties, gets down to business.

And the business at hand is suffering.

Human suffering.

Human suffering and relationships.

Human suffering and relationships, and what Moses, you and I are going to do about it.

Yesterday at the Decatur Book Festival, Christian ethicist Dr. David Gushee said:

*“I believe that the truest human language is tears,
 and the best test of human beings is how they respond to tears.” [2]*

Moses' heart must have leapt with relief, with joy, with gratitude at God's next word.

Upon the mountain of God, the Lord spoke through the fire, saying,

*“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.”*

Thank you, Jesus!

This is music to the ears of people of faith.

*“If the promise of a land of milk and honey seemed too good to be true,
that would have been beside the point.*

*The God-of-the-incredible-burning-bush cared about Israel,
and about justice, and about protecting those
who couldn't protect themselves.
And that made all the difference.” [3]*

Yes, indeed.

Moses had witnessed up close and personal the sufferings of his people,
the Hebrew people.

He understood being marginalized, being oppressed,

being forced to labor at a task not of his choosing while others benefited,
of the indignity of income and wage inequality.

He knew the power and promise of God to save, to deliver, to redeem, to love.

That has made all the difference.

We, too, know the pangs

of compassion,
of deep pathos for the broke and broken,
of heartstrings played for the hurts and dashed hopes
of neighbors in need.

We know that the question before us is not *“who is my neighbor?”*

The question is always, *“what does my neighbor need?”*

That makes all the difference.

Then, my friends, suddenly the other shoe drops.

God said, *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?”

The Lord 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.”*

Considered, called, chosen, & commissioned to liberate the oppressed,

Moses raises not one, not two, three, nor four but five objections.

“Uh, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?”

Not Me, Lord, #1: I am not qualified!

*“Um, 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?”*

Not Me, Lord, #2: I lack sufficient knowledge to fulfill my calling.

“But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me?”

Not Me, Lord, #3: I lack the power to do what you are asking.

“O my Lord, I have never been eloquent; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”

Not Me, Lord, #4 This is a calling for someone more qualified than me.

“O my Lord, please send someone else.”

Not Me, Lord, #5 I'd rather not.

5 times God calls Moses forth to go down, go down Moses,

go down to Egypt land, tell old Pharaoh to let my people go.

5 times God responds to Moses' doubts and wonderings, insecurities and hesitations.

5 times God acts in Moses' life to fill him with courage,

assuage his fears, provide compadres,
give him a rod as a sign of power, & remind him to keep the faith.

Do not fear Pharaoh! I will be with you!

Not Me, Lord

We return to Moses' unasked question that is on the tip of his tongue.

He verbalized 5 objections, and the 6th he kept to himself, yet it was there all along.

His wondering may be our own, as well.

Chances are Moses was on the verge of saying, *“Lord, you know I love you.*

You know I would go through walls for you, and all I have is yours.

*Since you are the consuming-God-who-is-not-consumed,
if I may be so bold, why do you need me?
Why don't you do this yourself?”*

Chances are God's response is, "Come here, let me show you something."

Come with me to Sierra Leone, where neighbors and villagers from surrounding towns

gather to work as one people to dig out those trapped by sudden mud slides and to mourn their shared loss.

You may want to say, **not me, Lord**, yet you are there as well,

for all of creation is interconnected.

Come with me to Asian nations where monsoons are overwhelming

too many precious families with too few precious resources,
and see how they pull on their oars together to rescue a mother in a tree.

You may want to say, **not me, Lord**, yet you are there as well,

through the prayers and presence of my Church.

Come with me to advocate for those whose human rights and civil rights are being repudiated, refused, and rebuffed.

Prayerfully consider how passionately and persistently
the truth needs to be spoken in love to the principalities and powers.

You may want to say, **not me, Lord**, yet you are there as well,

for we shall overcome.

Come with me to Houston, along the Gulf Coast and north to Louisiana.

See my servants who have heard my call to wade in the waters

to deliver my people to freedom and dry land.

Look closely and you will see dump truck drivers
bringing nursing home residents to safety.

Observe a Latino family making room in their home for Anglo neighbors,
and the Vietnamese fisherman in his boat assisting National Guard rescue efforts.

Listen and you will hear my people worshipping me in makeshift shelters,
singing and praising my name in the face of loss and grief,
for they trust that I will provide, and so I shall.

Consider my schoolchildren from across the land of the free and home of the brave,
young disciples who share and ship whatever they can to help another child.

You may want to say, **not me, Lord**, yet you are there as well,
because togetherness is the key to make a world of difference.

“You boldly ask ‘why do I need you?’” says the Lord.

“I don’t . . . and I do.

I don’t because I have the power to set bushes to burn and not be consumed;

I have the power to make the very stones to cry out;
I have the power to resurrect the dead into new life.

I don’t need to call you forth.

Yet I do.

I will call you again and again until you pray, until you whisper, until you shout,

Here I am, send me to deliver your people.

You see, my beloved, this is my will.

The will of your Lord and Savior is grounded in relationship.

I call you forth to follow the way of love.

*I commission you to serve in love because we are in relationship,
and relationships are the embodiment of love.*

I do because I love you.

I love you so much I have prepared you to have a fulfilled and fulling life.

I love you so much I want you to have a relationship with the Holy and one another.

I love you so much I call you to serve in the name of Christ

to ‘do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your Lord.’”

With that the Lord dropped the mic.

Oh, then Moses picked it up, handed it to Aaron,

and together they walked toward Egypt
to tell old Pharaoh to let God’s people go.

Why don’t you do this yourself?

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] Exegetical notes for the sermon are drawn from Walter Brueggemann, et al, Texts for Preaching, Pp. 462-3.

[2] David Gushee, Still Christian, 2017, Page 150.

[3] Walter Brueggemann, et al, Texts for Preaching, P. 463.