

February 21, 2016

Exodus 3.1-15

We find Moses, as he is keeping watch over his father in law's flock. Long gone is the man of privilege who kept watch over a powerful nation, now he keeps watch over a few dusty and smelly sheep. He has fallen away from the house of Pharaoh to watching over the dumbest animals. While Moses may have described himself as an alien in a strange land, he now seems to have settled into this life among the Midianites. No longer does he seem to be a man suffering an identity crisis between who he once was and who is currently is. Years have passed, marriage and fatherhood have allowed Moses to accept who he is. Whatever he once was before seems to have fallen away, leaving only an Egyptian name. He is the shepherd who leads his flock to safety, to places where they can find sustenance. He is the shepherd who does not own his flock but instead works for another, who tends sheep who are not his own. He is the humble shepherd, who can have no illusions of grandeur, who has led Jethro's flock beyond the wilderness, to the safety and nourishment of Mount Horeb, where the sheep can feed. If that isn't foreshadowing I do not know what is.

And it is now when God begins to act and to speak, making His guiding presence known. This is when God finally crashes into the scene, who has seemed so absent up to this point. It is when Moses feels comfortable and contented with his life that God acts visibly in the life of Moses, even though He has been present the entire time. It is exactly when Moses is happy with the life that he has built for himself, away from the power he once had, and away from the suffering of his people which he has long forgotten, that God enters into the narrative. It is now to this humble shepherd, who does not own his flock that God appears. This is the man who God is going to call, to shepherd a flock that belongs not to himself but to God, to guide them through

the wilderness to a place where they can be sustained by the gracious Word of the Lord. Moses may be content with his life as it is, but God is not going to let it remain that way. Moses may have finally found an identity for himself outside of his Egyptian roots, as a husband and father, but that is not the identity that God is going to let him keep. God has other plans for Moses, Moses has a job to do.

It does not matter how contented you are with your life, our Lenten journey calls us out of the life we come to know. That is what going into the wilderness means. It means leaving behind the life you knew, entering into the mystery and unknown of desert life. Our faith calls us away from the identity we have constructed so meticulously. Away from who we think we are. Because God is going to construct an identity for us that has nothing to do with who we think we are. Our God calls us away from who we think we are, no matter how exalted or humbled to be people, a Church, who define ourselves in light of our relationship with the God who is calling out to us. You have an identity and you have a job, based on your relationship with God. Let us each, discover that identity in light of who we are in relationship with our God. Let us discover with Moses exactly who it is God is identifying us to be.

So as Moses tends to this flock on this mountain, surrounded by lifeless desert wilderness, a wasteland, he sees a bush ablaze, and yet unconsumed by the fire. The text gives us a kind of awkward moment, where Moses says aloud, to the sheep I guess, that he must look away and see this great sight. This section reads awkwardly and we wonder why the writer even thought to include this sentence at all. Why not simply go right from the bush burning, to God speaking? The text seems to imply is that God only calls out Moses by name after he turns towards the bush. Moses does not simply stumble upon this burning bush, God stumbles upon Moses, and Moses must set his eyes upon this great sight. It is only after Moses turns away from

the sheep he is tending, towards his humble life as a shepherd of God's sheep, towards the burning bush which is unconsumed, that God speaks his name. It is only after Moses turns away from the life he had become so contented with towards his people who burn under the oppression of slavery, under the torment of their taskmasters, yet remain unconsumed, who continue to survive, that God speaks to Moses from this bush. In order for Moses to be the leader that we know he is going to be, he has to leave behind the identity, the contented life that he lived in Midian.

It is only after Moses turns towards the bush, that God identifies Himself, to this man with an Egyptian name, who is no longer an alien among the Midianites. To this man, God says I am the God of your father, I am the God of Abraham, I am the God of Jacob, I am the God of Isaac, I am your God and the God of your people, the people you have long since forgotten. While Moses may not know God, while no one other than God may be able to identify Moses as Hebrew, God calls to Moses by name, and says I am your God. And God says to Moses, "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". The suffering of my people is not alien to me, I have seen it, I have heard their cries, I know their suffering. I am not the God who is disconnected to the suffering of my people, I know it, and I am the God who continually comes to deliver my people. I am the God who intimately knows the suffering of my people, who witnesses how they are abused and oppressed and hears how they moan in their suffering and I am the God who is coming to set them free from their oppression.

And this is exactly who we know God to be, this is the God who walks with us on our Lenten journey, this is the God who we walk with towards Holy Week, the God who has come to set us free. God identifies Himself to Moses and to all of us, I am your God, I am the God who

comes to deliver you. I am the God who see your suffering, and I am the God who will deliver you from it, I am the God who feels the suffering of my people even to the point of taking it on myself. This is who God is, this is how God defines Himself to be, and even Moses instantly understands, as ignorant of God as he is.

But apparently Moses did not understand enough, because right after God finishes telling Moses about the land of milk and honey, God tells Moses that, He is sending Moses to Pharaoh to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses responds, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt”. But God does not respond to Moses’ question exactly, God does not build Moses up, God does not tell Moses how he is the only one who can take on this task, God tells Moses that He will be with Moses. Who is Moses that he should bring the Israelites out of Egypt? He is the one whom God is sending, the one whom God will be with, the one commissioned by God to be a shepherd of a flock that he does not own, to lead the people to this mountain so that they can worship God, so that they can be brought through the wilderness and brought to where they can be nourished and sustained. That is who Moses is, his identity, his job, his mission has nothing to do with who he is, and everything to do with who God is. That is why we flawed and broken people are able to come together in fellowship and communion. That is why jerks like me are able to share the Good News, because who we are, are those who are in relationship with our God, who guides us, who stands with us through the difficult journeys of life. That is who we are, and what greater identity could we desire?

Moses is still not completely sold on his call just yet, he already knows that God is the God who delivers, the God of his ancestors, and Moses has been given a new identity in his relationship with and call from God, but he asks what if the people ask for a name. So God gives Moses something unintelligible, something that cannot be spoken, a name which does not make

sense. The name that God gives, I am who I am, or I will be who I will be, Y-H-W-H, a name which cannot be properly spoken, which Jews replaced with Adonai, and which our English Bibles simply translate to Lord. Moses may have been hoping to have some fuller revelation of God, or maybe even understand God as the Egyptians did, calling upon some secret names. But whatever Moses hoped for, what he got was a definition for God which breaks grammatical structures, which cannot be said, which is beyond anything that can be possibly understood, and we are left simply calling out Lord. The Lord who sent Abraham, the Lord who sent Isaac, the Lord who sent Jacob, the Lord who sent Moses, the Lord who is constantly redefining who we are, as those who have been delivered, and sending us out, that is who we are, and that is who our Lord is. And that is certainly Good News!