

Sermon for Zion, February 21, 2021 – Lent 1

Hymns: 757 – Come sing, O Church, in joy; 196 – Throughout these Lenten days;
449 – Lord, listen to your children praying; 592 – Here I am, Lord

Scripture: Exodus 3:1-15, Mark 1:16-20

Sermon Title: “Here I Am”

Exodus 3:1-3

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”

When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

Mark 1:16-20

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

Last week, we heard the story of Joseph, the boy who made good, saving the land – and his own family – from famine. Having attained a position of great power and authority in Egypt, and settling his family there, Joseph died at a ripe old age, but before he did, he made his surviving brothers promise to bring his bones to the Promised Land – because remember, they are in Egypt, not in Israel; they are not in the land promised by God to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, and to their many descendants – to these descendants in particular. “You have to go back,” he tells them; and they do. But not for a very long time.

In fact, things were nice enough in Egypt, that the brothers never did get around to moving back home, and neither did their children, or theirs, or theirs, and before you know it, 430 years had passed. The Hebrews, obeying the command of God, had been fruitful and multiplied, to the degree that “*the land was filled with them,*” and a new Pharaoh, to whom, we are told, “*Joseph meant nothing,*” decided that they constituted both a threat and an opportunity. And Pharaoh said, “*The Israelites have become far too*

numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.” And in this case, “dealing shrewdly” meant enslaving the lot of them.

“The Egyptians worked them ruthlessly,” we read, *“They made their lives bitter with hard labour.”* As a result, *“the Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.”* And that’s where the hero of our story today comes in.

Moses is working for his father in law, Jethro, shepherding the flocks, sometimes leading, sometimes following. This time the flocks take him out of the wilderness country, all the way to the foot of Mount Horeb, which, because of the ominous clouds which often gather near its peak, people call the Mountain of God.

Moses’ thoughts are here and there, firmly rooted in the mundane as he checks the flock for stragglers, drifting now and then to pass the time, occasionally wondering if there really was a God on this mountain. When he sees something.

At first he doesn’t know what it is that caught his eye. Then he spies an orange glow, a bush, somehow burning, somehow not. He looks, he squints, he wonders, he scratches his head, he pulls at his beard, he does not move. The sheep have also seen something, but it is not anything strange, just a promising patch of green, and they wander off, but Moses stays standing. He should follow the sheep. But he doesn’t. Instead, it says, he turns aside.

He walks closer, slowly, cautiously, easing up on the sight. It is a bush like any other, but ablaze in a glorious fire, a fire which burns cold like the stars, which somehow leaves the bush whole, intact, not a leaf out of place, not a twig aflame, not a spark, not a tendril of smoke. His sheep forgotten, he looks, he squints, he wonders, he scratches his head, he pulls at his beard, but still the fire rages, and still the bush remains. And speaks his name.

“Moses,” says the bush, says the fire. Moses doesn’t hear it the first time, he just registers the sound somewhere in the back of his mind, while the rest of him stands amazed at the miracle of the burning bush. *“Moses,”* comes the voice again, and this time Moses hears, gives a start, drops his jaw, looks this way, that, then back at the bush.

“Here I am,” says Moses. What else could he say? He takes a step towards the bush, to see if there is someone behind.

“Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” Moses stops in mid stride, frozen, looking to the ground, which looks like any other ground. It is the bush, it is the voice, which makes it holy. He takes off his sandals, and crouches low.

“I am the God of your father,” says the Voice, *“the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”* Moses bows low, shuts tight his eyes, buries his face in the dust. His life flashes before his eyes. There are parts he hopes that God cannot see. There are pitifully few he hopes God can see. He crouches lower.

“The cry of the Israelites has now come to me;” says the Voice. *“I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come,”* says the Voice, *“I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”*

“But,” says Moses, from down in the dust, *“But who am I,”* he says, too terrified to realize he is arguing with the Voice, *“Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”*

“I will be with you;” says the Voice, *“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,” came the voice of Moses from down in the dust, *“Who am I? 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?”*

The fire burns brighter, ablaze with the light of the sun. Moses is flat on the ground, he is the ground, his arms up over his head. *“I AM WHO I AM.”*

To appreciate what’s going on here, we have to get the heroic image of the Michelangelo statue out of our mind, and think of Moses as Everyman, a guy whiling away the hours, thinking everyday thoughts, when God steps in, unexpectedly speaking from out of an unexpected place. Moses, I suppose, as you or me. Moses as you and me, as all of us.

Now I don’t mean to show Moses any disrespect, here. After all, Moses is the one of whom the Bible says, *“Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face (Deuteronomy 34:10).”* But, despite the stirring eulogy and the wonderful respect accorded Moses, we mustn’t forget that he was human, that he had hopes and fears and successes and disappointments and a temper to watch out for. He was marvellously obedient to God, most of the time, and a man of great faith in God, but not particularly in himself. He made the occasional whopping blunder, enough to prompt a line like this one (Exodus 4:24): *“On the way, at a place where they spent the*

night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him.” Not an auspicious beginning. But, things looked up from that point on, and Moses and God got along well enough, to the point that it says (Exodus 33:11), *“Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses... as one speaks to a friend.”*

So maybe it is a bit arrogant to say that Moses was just like you and me, but if you look at our story this morning, and put yourself in Moses’ sandals, you might learn something about what made Moses tick, and what makes us tick as the people of faith we are, or try to be. Or think about someday trying to be.

The story starts out, as you remember, with Moses shepherding his father-in-law’s sheep. He’s not a general, not a fearless warrior, not the leader of a nation. He is the leader of a flock of sheep. In our reading this morning, we come upon Moses at work. Moses at the office. Moses punching the time card, and walking onto the shop floor. Did he expect a voice from God? Would you? Did he expect his faith to be challenged, his life changed? Would you? At work? At home, doing the dishes, reading the paper, making the bed? But doesn’t it seem, time and again, that God speaks when people least expect, where they least expect?

He comes, following his sheep, to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. Somehow, his everyday course of events bring him into a situation somehow sacred, somehow alive with the possibility of God coming up in discussion, of God coming into view. Are you surprised when, in the midst of the mundane, the sacred suddenly intrudes? Someone at work mentions a dying relative, a show they saw, a worry they have. The phone rings at home, and a friend is upset, a child is in trouble, a marriage is on the rocks. “You go to church, don’t you?” comes the question. “What about God?” they ask, to you, to no-one in particular. What do you say? Something? Anything? Does that kind of question belong only in church, or does anyplace become sacred, when God is in the air?

And then the burning bush. “There I was minding my own business, when...” The extraordinary, the unexpected, in the midst of a day like any other. And now the important part: it says (Exodus 3:3), *“Then Moses said, ‘I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.’”* He turns aside. He is busy, he has a job to do, he has responsibilities, but he turns aside. He stops, he takes a moment, he turns aside.

This is where we miss the boat. This is where we miss God, where we miss life itself. We miss the chance. We miss the opportunity. We drive by. We don’t take a moment, just a moment, to stop and think. We let the one hundred and one little things we really should be doing push us along, and at the end of the day, we look back, having accomplished “x” amount of tasks and busy things, but we know, somehow, that we missed something far more important, if only we could remember what. This is, perhaps,

the thing which sets a Moses apart. It says, *“When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush. ‘Moses, Moses!’”*

God speaks when Moses stops, *“When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see.”* How many times has God wanted to speak to us, to move us, to work within and through us, and we were just too busy to turn aside? How many times did God have something in store for us, and we were watching TV? One of the great things about Church on a Sunday morning is that we do take a few precious moments out of the 10,000 minutes of our week to sit and listen. Hopefully, for God.

And Moses said, *“Here I am.”* He turns aside. He stops to listen. He hears. And he says, *“Here I am.”* He doesn’t say, “Not me,” although he will think of that later. He doesn’t run the other way, which he also maybe doesn’t think of ‘till later, which I would have thought of first. He doesn’t keep on walking, and pretend nothing happened. The opportunity is there, the moment is now, and he says *“Here I am.”*

It is coffee break, and a co-worker shakes his head, staring into his cup, and says, “Sometimes I ask myself if any of this means anything.” We are on the phone with a friend, and they wonder out loud whether anybody really cares. Out for a stroll in the sun, and someone mentions in passing an old neighbor now in a nursing home, and nobody ever seems to visit. God calls our name. God opens a door. “Here I am,” we say, and we reach out, we make ourselves available, we extend a helping hand, an encouraging word rather than a platitude. For once, for once, we don’t put it off, we don’t let the moment pass. Although we would rather chew nails than tell a co-worker that God cares, although we would think nothing of recommending a restaurant or movie we balk at recommending church, although the last thing we want to do is visit a neighbor in a hospital who may not even remember who we are, for once we say, “Here I am.” For once, we give God the go-ahead, we make ourselves available, we respond to the opportunity. And what happens?

We know what happened with Moses. God spoke to Moses, and kept on speaking, and Moses kept on listening, sometimes arguing, sometimes afraid, but he kept on listening, and then he did what God inspired him to do, and taking one step at a time, he changed the world. He had help, mind you, and plenty of it, but because in the middle of an ordinary day Moses stopped and turned aside, and listened to what God had to say, you and I are here this morning. 3300 years ago, Moses takes time in his busy schedule, his one hundred and one things he should be doing, and he stops and listens, just as you and I are doing here this morning.

In our other reading, someone else takes time, takes a moment, takes a chance: *As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will*

make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. (Mark 1:16-20)

These guys, like Moses, were just doing what they always did, day in and day out, which in their case was fishing. Jesus walks by. “*Follow me,*” he says, and not much else, and they do. They turn aside. They are busy, they have a job to do, they have responsibilities, but they turn aside. They stop for a moment, they take time in their busy schedule, their one hundred and one things they should be doing, and listen, just as you and I are doing here this morning. And, it says, “*they followed him.*”

One last thing. God tells Moses the plan, that he will deliver the nation from the hand of Pharaoh, that Moses will be the spokesman, that Moses will be the instrument of grace. And then Moses, Moses the everyman, Moses you and me, says what all of us would say, what all of us want to say: “Who, me?” “*Who am I,*” says Moses, “*that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*” Who am I to tell someone about God? Who am I to invite someone to church? Who am I to visit someone in the hospital? Who am I to share my faith with another? We can feel with Moses the lump of fear rising in our throat. Who am I?

God answered Moses’ question. “It’s not about who you are, Moses,” He said, “It’s about who I am. And, “*I Am Who I Am.*” And, “*I will be with you.*” I will be with you. He said that to Moses, and God didn’t let Moses down, even when Moses came close to blowing the whole thing. He said “*I will be with you,*” and so he was.

Someone else said much the same thing. “*Remember,*” said Jesus to the disciples; “*Remember,*” said Jesus, to you, to me: “*Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” (Matthew 28:20). “I am” with you. Always. He said that to us, and Jesus hasn’t let us down, even when we’ve come close to blowing the whole thing, over and again. He said “*I am with you, always,*” and so he is.

“*Then Moses said, ‘I must turn aside...’” “And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.”* Lent, the 40 days leading up to Easter, is a time meant for setting distractions aside, a time meant for listening for the voice of God, speaking to us. May God help us to take the time to listen, wherever we are; may God help us to hear his voice, however it comes; may God help us to say “Here I am,” whatever we are called to do, and in following him, help bring healing to our hurt and lonely world. Amen.