

“SHOW ME A SIGN: III – BURNING BUSHES AND FISHING NETS”

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January 28, 2018

Exodus 3:1-12

Matthew 4:18-19

The great leadership guru John Maxwell is fond of reciting this little ditty to his audiences:

“There was a very cautious man who never laughed or played,  
He never risked, he never tried, he never sang or prayed.  
And when one day he passed away his insurance was denied.  
For since he never really lived, they claimed he never really died.”

Do you know what? Several people in this morning’s scripture lessons came close to being like that man, and one of them, Moses, came dangerously close. When we come upon him in this morning’s lesson from the Hebrew scriptures, he is facing a life-changing choice.

But before we revisit that moment, let me take you back and give you a bit of a history lesson about Moses, in case you’ve forgotten what you learned about him in Sunday School.

In the days before Moses was born, the leader in Egypt, Pharaoh, was becoming terribly concerned about the increasing number of Hebrews there. So alarmed did he become, that he sent out a decree that all male Hebrew babies should be killed at birth.

Well now, Moses’ mother is pregnant and soon gives birth to her precious son. Of course, like all Hebrew mothers, she is petrified for fear he will be searched out and killed. So she hatches a plan to save his life. She puts her darling baby boy, by then three months old in a basket, covers him up, and puts him in the water not far from the palace of the Pharaoh – and she also sends her daughter Miriam to hide out a little ways away to keep an eye on what happens.

Well, what happened was that the daughter of Pharaoh found the basket and had pity on the child and took him in. She needed someone to nurse him, and that’s when Miriam stepped up and said she could find someone to do that – and the someone she found was Moses’ own mother.

After he was older, Pharaoh's daughter took him in and he lived as a member of the royal family, with all the privileges therein. Life was good for Moses. He was a member of the privileged elite.

Until years later, one day he was out of the palace, and he witnessed an Egyptian abusing a Hebrew worker, and rage arose in the heart of Moses, and he rose up against the Egyptian and killed him. No matter that he had been raised in the house of the Pharaoh, he was now a wanted man, so he fled and went away into exile. At this point, he's about forty years old.

Thus begins the second phase of Moses' life – as a shepherd. He wanders around the dry and arid land with his sheep and starts his new life. He marries a woman named Zipporah, has two sons with her, and life goes on – for forty more years.

Fast forward through those forty years, and we come upon Moses in today's scripture lesson. Remember, he's a shepherd, he's been at it for a long time, everything appears to be stable in his life. He's got a wife, and a family, it's all okay.

And then one day he comes upon a burning bush. Now, a burning bush would catch your eye, but it wouldn't be anything supernatural, if you will. But this burning bush was burning mightily, yet not being consumed – just burning and burning and burning. And that's what caught Moses' eye.

You heard what happened. An incredible conversation between God and Moses. God calls Moses to a new life, to an important assignment – to rescue God's people, the Hebrew people. God calls him, he encourages him, he reassures him, he challenges him – and what does Moses do? All along the way – comes up with excuses!

“Who am I to go?” he asks.

When God didn't accept that excuse, Moses tried again? “Well, who am I supposed to say sent me?” God gave an answer, and still Moses wouldn't say yes.

He continued: “But what if they don't believe me?” Again, God gave him an answer but Moses persisted. “Look God, I don't speak very well.” At that point, God appeared to get a little angry, but promised to send Aaron his brother to help him with that, yet still Moses persisted in protesting, “Please God, send somebody else.”

God patiently persisted and promised Moses he would be with him, and in the end, Moses went and it changed his life, and indeed, the life of the world forever.

But oh, look how close he came to being that man in that little ditty I recited – how close he came to being a man who never really lived.

Now friends, what are we to make of Moses' story? I daresay that few, if any of us, have seen burning bushes that are not consumed, but the truth of the matter is that God calls out to every one of us in some way at some time or times in our lives. He calls out, and calls us to lives of meaning and purpose, to partner with him in the work of the kingdom. As one pastor put it, "God calls us to participate in his work of encouraging, blessing, challenging, liberating, and healing the world." (Adam Hamilton, *Moses*, p. 68)

I know that sounds huge, and sometimes God's call does come in huge ways, but more often than not, it comes in smaller, everyday ways. Preacher Adam Hamilton, in a wonderful study he has written on Moses, says this: "Occasionally, we may have the kind of burning bush experience Moses had when we hear the audible voice of God of when events clearly reflect God's call on our lives. But in my experience (he continues), God's call most often comes in a whisper or through a feeling, nudge, or compulsion that I can't shake. I hear the voice of God most often when I'm reading, praying, or discussing the faith with others or when I'm worshiping, singing, or listening to the scriptures read aloud or preached. Sometimes I hear God's call when I'm watching the news and seeing stories of pain and suffering. (Ibid.)

Another wonderful pastor named Mike Slaughter said that we might not see a literal burning bush, but he thinks that, for us, the burning bush from God is that fire that will not go out inside of us, when there's something burning in our hearts and minds that just will not go away. That, Slaughter says, is God calling.

Our job, friends, is to listen and watch, to be attentive to God's nudging of our spirits to do something. Over the past few weeks, I've read about or seen evidence of people responding to that burning in their hearts – the voice of God calling to them to do something. Let me tell you about a few of them in the hope that you will realize that God speaks in many different ways, he calls people in many different ways, and the important thing for us is to have the courage to respond, and partner with him in healing the world.

One of the things I learned this week was a story about Martin Luther King, Jr. that I had never heard before. It's a story of how God spoke to him at a very early age and planted a seed that wouldn't actually grow for years, but it was planted nonetheless, just the spark of a burning bush that would call him to greatness years later.

It seems that when Martin was a very little boy, his father, Martin Luther King, Sr., who was the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, so a man of standing and

integrity in his community, took young Martin to the shoe store to get a new pair of shoes. This had to probably be in the 1930's. They went into the front door of the store, Martin, Sr. told the clerk they had come to buy a pair of shoes for his young son, and the clerk told him he had to go around to the back door of the store, come in there and they'd wait on him in the storeroom. Rev. King stood up, and told the man he was not going to do that, that he had the right to be waited on like anybody else in the front of the store, and walked out, with his son in hand. Martin Luther King Jr. later said he never forgot that moment, and it was a tiny spark that burst into a flame later in his life as he answered God's call to lead his people to lives of justice and freedom, the same justice and freedom others enjoyed in this country. A burning bush? No. Just a few words between a clerk and his father, but a moment burned in his heart, that would later change the course of his life and millions of others.

A second story of calling – not nearly as dramatic – but powerful nonetheless. A very, very modern story – in fact, it involves one of the players in next week's Super Bowl, and, you'll not be surprised to know that it's one of the Philadelphia Eagles. (Sorry, I can't help myself.) Many of you probably already know this story. It's about a defensive player named Chris Long. Chris is the son of retired football player and now FOX sportscaster Howie Long. Chris is donating his entire salary this season to educational work in the three cities in which he has played football – Philadelphia, Boston and St. Louis. Chris felt a tugging at his heart to do something, to make a positive difference in the lives of those in need, and he made his gesture public in the hopes that other hearts would be touched as well. In a professional sports world so focused on getting and getting and getting, and being all about oneself, Chris Long is showing a better way, the way of love, the way of God, helping to bring forth the kingdom one school at a time. He listened to that burning in his heart and did something about it.

Finally, a quieter story, one that will never make headlines in the news. Many of you know that Larry Gaultney lost his father this week. He's being buried today. Bill Gaultney was 92 years old when he died. I called Larry when I heard, and he wasn't there, so I left a message. Larry emailed me a word of thanks, and he sent me a copy of his father's obituary. It was incredible. He was born on a farm in Tennessee, grew up and entered the Navy during World War II. After his time in the service he went to college, getting a degree in Agricultural Engineering. Over the course of his life, he farmed and he taught, and he and his family served as missionaries in Pakistan for a time. There was so much more, but what really tugged at my heart were a few lines near the end of his obituary. For over thirty years, every single Friday night, no matter what, bad weather or holidays – it didn't matter, Bill Gaultney went to the local Grainger County Jail and ministered to those who were incarcerated there. He would read some Bible passages, play his harmonica and have prayer with them. Even when he physically had trouble

getting there, he still went. The obituary talked about how very many people over the years he had touched in what was a difficult time for them.

You see friends, it doesn't have to be a bush burning in front of you, it can be anything. For Moses it was a burning bush, for the disciples fishing nets that reminded them they would fish for people. For Martin King, a pair of shoes denied, for Chris Long, faces of school children, for Bill Gaultney, a harmonica, a prayer and a word of hope from scripture.

Dear friends, keep your eyes open, keep your hearts open for God calls all of us to be his hands and feet in the world, he calls us to help heal the world and bring hope.

I close with a quote from a pastor named Joanna Adams, who said this in a powerful sermon on this text: "I do not know what you do in the world, whether you teach or work in an office, whether you are at the beginning of your career or whether you are retired, but I do know this about you: If your only goal in life is to get your needs met or to get the glory for yourself, then I will guarantee that you will miss out on the life God intends for you. The purpose of human life has always been about being a part of that which is larger and more enduring than one's self."

And she ended with this line, to which I say "Amen" – "Friends in Christ, the life you're living now, it is the only one you've got. Don't spend it being scared, not being ready, not being what you should be. The bush is burning. It burns for you." (On-line, The Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams, PCUSA, "Clarity About Your Calling," 2/12/06)

Oh friends, may that poem that I said at the beginning of the sermon never be said about us. May we live, really live, by saying "yes" to God's call on our lives. May it be so.

Amen.