**God Calls, We Respond**

Exodus 3:1-15

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Moses is going about his normal business, tending the sheep of his father-in-law. He’s probably dusty and sweaty. I figure that his muscles are a little fatigued. Walking among the rocks he suddenly sees something strange up ahead. He moves toward this flickering light and discovers a bush that is on fire. A bush that, though burning, is not consumed by the flames. And then God speaks.

Journalist Bruce Feiler has written a delightful travel book entitled *Walking the Bible: A Journey by Land through the Five Books of Moses*. Feiler writes evocatively and entertainingly of his first-hand experiences in the holy lands. My favourite story occurs when he is staying at St. Catherine’s monastery on Jebel Musa, which tradition considers to be the Mt. Sinai of the biblical story, the very place where today’s story from the Book of Exodus occurred. Feiler arrived at St. Catherine’s late in the evening and hadn’t yet had a chance to look around, so even though it’s getting dark, he decides to go exploring.

Before going to bed I decided to go for a stroll and visit the burning bush. The bush, which grows alongside the chapel, is a rare mountain bramble akin to the raspberry that monks say is the actual shrub in which Moses first heard the words of God. I went from the third-floor perch where I was sitting, down across the roof of another building to a set of stairs that led to the base of the chapel. At the stairs a deep darkness seemed to reach out from below and I realized I was scared, that little boy afraid to go into the attic. Across the alley was a crypt with the bones of every monk who ever lived in Saint Catherine’s, including a heaping mound of hundreds of hollow-eyed skulls that spill onto the floor like dry cereal from a box. How many creepy images could this place conjure up? I wondered. How many childhood anxieties? I opted to go back for my flashlight. . . .

I retrieved my flashlight and retraced my steps, cursing the creaky floors that seemed to broadcast my every move. I tried an alternate route . . . but found myself in a dead end . . . . I backed away, tiptoed through the alley, and found the same stone steps as before. Even with the light they seemed bottomless. I hurried down and tried not to look in any window. On the ground level I exhaled and rounded a corner. A cat was digging in the flower bed like a squirrel. He looked up at me and meowed. I jumped, despite myself, then stopped to feel my heart. How silly.

I took a few more steps and rounded the last corner of the alley. To the right was the back wall of the chapel, about twenty feet high. Directly across the walkway was a rounded stone wall about ten feet high that looked as if it were made of peanut brittle. Sprouting from the top was an enormous, fountaining bush. The plant was about six feet tall, with large, dangling branches like a weeping willow that sprouted from the center like a cheap wig. A white cat with a brown splotch around one eye was perched at the base of the bush, and off to the side was a slightly out-of-date fire extinguisher. *A fire extinguisher?*

Can’t you just picture it? God decides to speak once again from this bush and when it catches on fire, some hapless monk or tourist grabs the fire extinguisher and puts out the flame. I think that’s a great metaphor for our insecurities when it comes to our encounters with God and with God’s call. When God calls, we are shaken out of our complacency, and invited onto holy ground.

In all the great journey stories our hero is going about her normal life when a disruption occurs and she is summoned to the task that will define the rest of her life. This makes me think of J. R. R. Tolkein’s *The Lord of the Rings*, where Frodo Baggins enjoys his good and simple life in the Shire—eating good food, drinking beer with friends, sleeping soundly and comfortably in his own bed. He really is a homebody. Yet, he is called forth on a great quest. He is on a journey to save the world. He bears the responsibility of carrying the ring of pure evil with the assignment to destroy it.

The scene that’s at the heart of the movie *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* occurs in the Mines of Moriah. Frodo sits talking with Gandalf the wizard. Frodo’s bemoaning his fate in life, because He would rather be back in the Shire, enjoying his ordinary life. On this journey he has already faced great trials and great heartache and even worse is to come.

Gandalf tells Frodo that just as there is evil in the world, there is also a force for good. And it is this force that has brought the ring to Frodo. It has come to Frodo because he of all the creatures has the ability to carry this burden. Gandalf also says that we do not choose the times in which we live, but we are responsible for what we choose to do given those times. It’s an unfortunate burden that has come upon Frodo, but it’s a duty that he must fulfill.

Tolkein’s theology here is subtle: God is helping good to defeat evil, but these characters are responsible for their own actions. Ultimately, the fate of the world is in Frodo’s hands. Should he fall to temptation or draw back from his duty, evil will triumph.

Last week we began this series on the Book of Exodus and read the story in which the people cried out and God heard. Now God is responding.

And the Lord said, “I indeed have seen the abuse of My people that is in Egypt, and its outcry because of its taskmasters. I have heard, for I know its pain. And I have come down to rescue it from the hand of Egypt.

And how is God going to rescue the people? God says to Moses, “I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” When God hears the cries of the people, God calls us.

And overwhelmed is probably the right description for how Moses feels. Moses asks, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” He then spends most of the chapter trying to talk God out of calling him. “What will I say? What name will I give them? Suppose they don’t believe me? Or don’t listen to me? What if they question whether God even appeared to me?” and finally, “I’m not an eloquent speaker, surely you need someone who speaks more eloquently than I do?” We probably have our own set of excuses when God’s call comes.

Moses’ response can be contrasted with that of the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 6 Isaiah has a divine vision of God seated on God’s throne, high and lifted up. The seraphim are swirling about singing praise to God, and when the divine voice asks “who will go for me?” Isaiah responds, “Here am I, send me.”

Where Moses is reluctant, Isaiah immediately responds in the affirmative. “Here am I, send me” is a lot more stirring than Moses’ “Who am I?” As a young man, I too was caught up in the stirring words of Isaiah and understood my own call to ministry that way. But, with a little maturity, I realized that Isaiah’s response is not very realistic. Moses’ hesitation, his question “Who am I?” is a much more honest response. We like to keep those fire extinguishers close by.

In the midst of this sacred encounter, Moses asks God for a name and God’s answer is *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.*

The ancient Hebrews held this word to be sacred and holy. So holy, in fact, that it would only be spoken once a year by the priest. Yet, even that word spoken only once a year by the priest wasn’t this word. That holy word was “Yahweh.” “Yahweh” is a third person form of the word used here. So, even a derivative word was so sacred it could not be pronounced except by a priest once a year.

The name spoken here was so set apart from the rest of the Hebrew language, that English translators really do not know how to translate it. Your Bible is probably like mine in that the footnote carries a variety of possible translations. It was traditionally “I AM THAT I AM,” though other possibilities include:

“I AM WHO I AM”

“I WILL CAUSE TO BE WHAT I CAUSE TO BE”

“I WILL BE WHO I AM”

“I AM WHO I WILL BE”

“I AM THE ONE WHO BRINGS THINGS INTO BEING”

“I AM THE ONE WHO ENDURES”

Or my favorite: “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE”

The very name of the God we worship remains a mystery to us: it has a variety of possible meanings, plus it’s basically a verb, suggesting that God is always on the move, creating and challenging and calling us forth. And, you know what, I like it that way. We can’t pin God down. God is always surprising us.

It also means that God is probably going to call us out of our comfort zones in order to respond to the needs of God’s people. Just as God called Moses and just as Frodo was called.

It’s unlikely that we will be given a challenge as great as Frodo’s, in which it becomes our personal responsibility to save the entire world from the forces of evil destruction. Nor is it likely that we will be called to lead God’s people from slavery into freedom. But I am certain that God will call us to respond to the needs of other people.

In the black hymnal, you can find the statement of faith of the United Church of Christ. It is near the back, number 885. After all of its statements about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit we read:

You call us into your church  
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,  
to be your servants in the service of others,  
to proclaim the gospel to all the world  
and resist the powers of evil,  
to share in Christ’s baptism and eat at his table,  
to join him in his passion and victory.

You promise to all who trust you  
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,  
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,  
your presence in trial and rejoicing,  
and eternal life in your realm which has no end.

All of God’s people are called to serve others, to proclaim the good news, to resist evil, to struggle for justice and peace. And when we are called, there is a cost, there will be trials. But there will also be joy and grace, victory and eternal life because God promises to be with us in this work.

So, let’s leave our fire extinguishers behind. Let’s open our eyes and attune our ears. We don’t want to miss it when God speaks to us, calling us out of our status quo, to become God’s instruments, responding to a world in need.