

Have You Been Called?

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Exodus 3: 1-15

A lot of times in Sunday School classes or in Bible Study, when groups are studying a text like today's Old Testament lesson, the call of Moses, or perhaps some similar story of "call"... you know the call of Samuel, or of Isaiah or Jeremiah, you'll hear the following thought expressed. "I wish God would speak to *me*, and tell *me* exactly what I'm supposed to do, like God spoke to Moses." Well, I have two words to say in response to that. Cop out. It's a cop out! I'm willing to say that there is not one person here to whom God has never spoken. There's not one person here that God has never called.

Friends, this is the *present* Word of God for us. The stories in the Bible tell us who God *is*, and how God *is* with us! It is not an accounting of who God *was* two, four, six thousand years ago. God *is* a God who speaks to us. God *is* a God who calls us. The question is not why doesn't God speak to us like God used to! God hasn't changed. The question is why are we not listening, or why are we not recognizing God's voice!

Well, I think today's lesson from Exodus might have some answers for us. See, if we read the stories of the Bible closely, they try to talk about how we have a hard time recognizing God's voice sometimes. And the story of Moses certainly does that. Moses, not recognizing it, has run from his calling and what this story seems to say is that God keeps pursuing, keeps trying to call again, keeps trying to make clear the meaning of his call. When we pick up the story today, some critical information has been left out. You remember last week Moses was still a baby in a basket, left in and then drawn out of the waters of the river. But, between that time and when the story starts today, we need to know a few things. Some very important things happened.

You remember the story. How, when Moses had grown up, one day he went out among his people the Hebrews and saw their forced labor. He saw the misery of the Hebrews' lives as slaves. And more particularly, he saw one of the Egyptian taskmasters beating one of these poor Hebrew slaves. And his heart was broken and he was filled with righteous anger. Now, if we can freeze-frame the story right there, I want you to see the parallelism the author uses in continuing the story in the part we read today.

Only this time, it's not Moses seeing that misery, it's God trying to make clear the meaning of Moses' call, telling Moses that God has seen it. "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..." You see, back there when Moses was moved in his gut at the suffering of his people, that's how God first spoke to him. That was God's initial call to him. But, Moses didn't recognize it. Instead, Moses let his anger take over and he rose up and killed the Egyptian taskmaster. And then he spent years running in fear of being caught and punished for what he'd done... years living as an alien in a foreign land. Moses, not recognizing it, has run from God's call. Instead, he's been biding his time living in exile, when he should have been leading his people to the Promised Land.

Now, you remember what I told you about these Old Testament stories a few weeks ago, how they were put together and edited into their final form when the Jews were in the Babylonian exile... when they'd been carried away from their homeland and lived as aliens in a foreign land? You see? This is the present Word of God, now, just as it was for them those hundreds of years later in Babylon. This is who *we* are. We don't recognize God's call. Instead, driven by fear about what might happen to us, because of what we've done, or because of what others *might* do, we go our own ways and live in exile from the life God intends for us. Maybe we just don't study our scriptures enough to remember that this is who God is. Certainly, in this story, Moses needed to be reminded about who God is...the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

That is a calling, speaking God, isn't it? Or maybe we just need to develop the spiritual discipline of listening closely to our life. I think the shift in the meaning of the word vocation reflects this shift away from those priorities. The word vocation is rooted in the Latin *vocatio*, which means a "call," a "summons," or an "invitation." It's related to the word for voice. But, now it's pretty much come to be a synonym for career or occupation. It's a very different notion. We think of careers or occupations as something we make a reasoned choice about, perhaps taking into account our interests, likes and dislikes, our natural abilities and how much money we want to make. But, in the Bible, a "call" or a "summons"... thus a vocation first of all always comes from an external source, not our own reasoned thought processes, and secondly, often is *against* the will of the person called into service!

A.J. Conyers, writing about the meaning of vocation was aghast, as he should have been, to report that he actually ran across a book entitled *How to Choose Your Vocation!* We don't choose our vocation. God chooses us and calls us. But, how are we to follow if we don't recognize who God is and how God calls us, if we aren't and don't know to be listening. And perhaps more importantly, how is God's Kingdom to come fully on earth, as we've been taught to pray, if there's not a people called church who are actively responding to the call of God in their lives? We will instead be driven by fear and self-interest and continue to live in exile from the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ. We will continue to just go our ways, much like Peter wanted to do when Jesus told him he had his mind set on human things, not recognizing God's call.

Listen to this story. Moses has been living there...gone his own way in fear, living in exile, but God catches up with him and shows him the meaning of his call. That's what the burning bush is all about. It's not just something "supernatural" to get his attention, and let him know that God is speaking to him. And that now he's on "holy ground." You remember just a few moments before that same ground had been just regular desert sand. The burning bush is a symbol of Moses call. It is a symbol of the call he'd felt, but went unrecognized or ignored all those years before. See, almost the first thing God says to Moses is "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

Friends, the burning bush is the family tree. It's the people of Israel... just as it is referred to elsewhere as a tree greater than the cedars of Lebanon, or referred to by Jesus as the mustard bush, or by John the Baptist in saying the ax is laid to the root of the tree. The bush is the family tree and it is burning in the fires of Egyptian slavery, but by the saving love of God, even though it is burning, it is not consumed. And Moses comes to understand that God shares that love Moses has for these suffering people. Moses understands and "hears" God express that same love and concern over their sufferings. Moses comes to understand that God is the God who sustains them still and comes seeking to deliver them. And Moses comes to understand that God is calling him to be part of the work of love and compassion.

Over the entrance to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City there is a "logo" of a flaming bush, with the words in Hebrew, "and the bush was not consumed." And in the library there, there are displays and memorials concerning the ovens and fires of the Holocaust. They know the meaning of the burning bush that was not consumed. And that's what Moses came to see. That was the content of his call. In fact, one Jewish rabbi in a midrash on this text wrote these words: "Why did God show Moses such a symbol? Because (Moses) had thought to himself that the Egyptians might consume Israel; hence did God show him a fire which burnt but did not consume, saying to him, "Just as the thorn-bush is burning and is not consumed, so the Egyptians will not be able to destroy Israel."

Friends, know that God is trying to catch up with each of you. Because, God has called you, and is calling you still. God *has* spoken to you and is speaking *still*. It's what we affirm when

we say with Paul that God “made us alive together with Christ...raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” That is, we belong to God! Despite what our American Myth tells us, our lives are *not* our own, to do and choose as we wish. We belong to Christ and the work of God's Kingdom coming in fullness on earth is our vocation.

So, no matter what your secular career, no matter your occupation, your vocation, as A.J. Conyers has said, “is about being raised from the dead, made alive to the reality that we do not merely exist, but we are “called forth” to a divine purpose.” If we are to be who we really are, as God's children, then we must recognize the call. We take up our cross, Peter. We take up our cross, Moses. We take up our cross, the cross of Christ's kingdom, the cross of God's love and compassion for each and every one, even enemies, each and every one of us. We take up our cross and follow the God who through it all, will not let us be consumed. You have been called.

Amen.