

The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson, St. Francis Episcopal Church
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Exodus 3:1-15)

If you were in church last weekend then you may recall that we left Moses by the banks of the Nile River, where his mother had strategically placed him in a *little ark* and left his sister Miriam keeping watch. Pharaoh's daughter finds him and adopts Moses as her own son. We are told nothing of his childhood or about what it was like for him as an adopted child, or about how much he came to know about his birth family.

But we can use our imaginations to raise the question of how he came to sort through all of that. An important hint that the narrator gives us for doing so comes later in his life: in spite of his Egyptian name and his privileged upbringing, one day when Moses sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave he rushes to the defense of the slave and kills the Egyptian. The narrator makes it clear where Moses' sympathies lie by referring to the Hebrew slave as his *kinsman*. How conscious Moses was of this is unclear: but from that moment on he stands with his *kinfolk*—over and against those who have given him access to the halls of power. A warrant is issued for Moses' arrest and Pharaoh issues a press release that Moses ought to receive the death penalty for his crime.

So Moses runs to Midian and sits down at a well. Now wells are interesting places in the Bible. They are something like the Biblical version of a singles bar or maybe a Starbucks. It was at a well where Jacob met Rachel and it's at a well where Jesus will speak with the Samaritan woman. So Moses sits down at this well in Midian and sure enough the daughters of the priest are there. They are being harassed by some shepherds. We forget (because of David and because we like to refer to Jesus as "the good shepherd") that in Middle Eastern society shepherds have roughly the same social standing as a gang of bikers. So these shepherds are harassing these nice young women and Moses gallantly steps in on their behalf and later that night they are telling their father about what happened to them that afternoon.

And his reaction is classic: "what kind of daughters am I raising anyway? There was this nice clean-cut Jewish boy at the well and you didn't invite him home for dinner?!" So they go back and invite Moses to dinner and before you know it Moses is married to one of the priest's daughters, Zipporah; not too long after that they have a little boy.

So that is what's happened since last week in the verses we've skipped over to get to today's reading, except for one more tiny detail at the end of chapter two that goes back to the socio-political situation in Egypt: things are getting even worse for the Israelites there. They cry out to God: who hears their prayers, remembers the promise he made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, looks at a people in pain and takes notice. *God hears, remembers, looks, and notices.*

Today the narrative continues to unfold as Moses tend his father-in-law's flocks. But what we now know as readers of this story is that God is on the lookout for someone to take on Pharaoh. Moses' call is similar to the call of Abraham or Jeremiah or Isaiah or Mary or Francis or Clare or the call to each one of us in Holy Baptism in that *God initiates the conversation*. This call is similar to every call in that it pushes Moses out of his comfort zone and into the pain of the world and of his own life. Moses will have to go back to a place he has previously run away from and not only stand up to the powers-that-be in Egypt, but to his own past. But Moses' call also differs from all of those other calls because God is involved in *particular* times and places and therefore every call is also unique. Moses is the right person at the right time and in the right place to go and face Pharaoh—to tell old

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Pharaoh to let God's people go. He is uniquely qualified for the job, even if he has a million good reasons as to why he'd prefer for God to find someone else.

If we forget *context* we do ourselves a grave disservice. If we listen to this reading today without remembering how Moses came to be in Midian in the first place and what was happening in the world around him then we are tempted to think that God works in a vacuum; it can seem almost as if God is absent until all of a sudden out of nowhere there is this magical burning bush. But I don't think God's call works like that—not in the Bible and not in our world either. This narrative wants to insist that God heard and saw and remembered and took notice of a world in need. And that God has been at work in Moses' life from the very beginning, through that conspiracy of women that allowed Moses to survive—Shiphrah and Puah and Miriam and Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter. And that this man running from his past has the gifts that can be used to make that world a better place—if only he will slow down long enough to listen for God's call.

So it makes me wonder how many burning bushes Moses walked by before he stopped at this one. There is a little detail in the text worth paying closer attention to. It says that Moses was out there doing his thing, minding his own business, tending to the flock, but that he says to himself “I must turn aside and see this great sight.” (Exodus 3:3a) It suggests that he could have just pressed on, kept looking forward, focused on the task at hand. Instead, on this day, in this place, he “turns aside.”

Someone told me once early on in my ministry that the really important stuff in parish ministry happens in the interruptions. That has proven to be the case for me. Sometimes I have my day or week or month all planned out (and as most of you know, I'm the kind of person who likes plans.) It is tempting in those moments to keep on looking ahead and to stick with the plan. But then the phone rings and somebody is dying, or has been admitted to the hospital. Or maybe there is a knock on my office door and someone is just passing through, but wondering if they can have a few minutes of my time. And it doesn't take very long before the truth spills out that a marriage is falling apart or the person has lost her job or is caring for an aging parent. As a pastor I have found again and again that it's in these “burning bush” moments when I can “turn aside to see this great sight” that I am most profoundly in touch with my own sense of calling and that it is in such moments that God is heard and seen most clearly and deeply.

And I bet it's the same for you. I don't think this is the case simply with parish ministry: *life* happens in the interruptions. God is there, ready to meet us in the midst of the most ordinary moments of our lives. But we can be so task-focused that we miss what is really happening. If our eyes are always looking ahead we miss those transformative moments. I don't think the point of this text is to spend our lives walking up to bushes and waiting for them to start talking to us. Rather, the invitation here is to see that there are moments in our lives that are ripe—probably a lot more moments that we realize. But we need to be willing to stop and pause and turn aside to attend to those moments that come to us out of the unique circumstances of our own particular journeys, in those places where the needs of the world and our own deep joy meet.

It is in such moments, I think, that we discover (or re-discover) that we really are standing on holy ground. The journeys we are on are always holy ground—whether we cooking supper or helping kids with homework or mentoring a young colleague at work or finding satisfaction in a job well

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done. Moses is just out taking care of business: he's got this wife and kid to provide for and he's working for his father-in-law until he figures out what he's going to do with his life and he's walking by that bush that maybe he's walked by a hundred times before. And yet on that particular day in that singular moment it hits him; and it's both scary and exhilarating at the same time.

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, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; 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."

Last weekend I mentioned four themes that weave their way through the Book of Exodus. We get a twofer in today's reading: liberation and presence. God yearns for the Israelites to take that long and difficult journey from slavery to freedom but it won't happen with the waving of a wand. It will happen only when people like Moses turn aside and notice. *I will send you. I will be with you.* And with God, all things are possible.

So next weekend we'll commission lay ministers and we "begin again." There are lots of liturgical opportunities in a parish church for new beginnings. Advent I and New Year's Day and Ash Wednesday and Easter morning and Pentecost are just a few. But in a suburban congregation like this one, in this part of the northern hemisphere, there is also that old school calendar and the rhythm of summer giving way to fall on Labor Day weekend. Perhaps you've been at St. Francis for a month or a year or maybe much longer. Now is the time to ask yourself what God has in mind for you here and how you can share your gifts both to build up the Body of Christ and to live as a more faithful follower of Jesus in the world.

This week is the time, though, to turn aside and pay attention to those burning bushes in your own life—this week is a time to listen to the ways that God calls you to use your unique gifts in ways that build up the Body of Christ and serve a world in need. *I will send you. I will be with you.* May each of us find the grace and the wisdom to respond: *Send me! I will, with God's help.*