

“The Calling of Moses”

Have you ever had something jolt you out of the life you are living? Has something happened to you which dramatically changed your life? Today we have the story of Moses, a sheep herder. He has been doing this for forty years, ever since he left Egypt after killing someone. He has a wife and family and is content to live out his days in Midian. At this point he will not be famous, but God has other plans in Exodus 3:1-15.

At Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God, the theophany (the appearance of God) happens in two parts. First, there is the visible element, a burning bush which does not burn. It gets Moses' attention. The second part of the encounter is the speech of God. It contains three elements.

First, there is the sovereign summons. God calls from the bush, “Moses, Moses.” That would surely get my attention. Moses response is “Here I am,” indicating readiness to submit and obey. The exchange establishes the right relation of sovereign and servant.

Second, the commanding voice in the bush asserts an awesome limit, caused by the reality of God’s holiness. The key term is holy. The voice in the fire asserts that God’s presence is here. That presence transforms everything, including the place and the conversation. God’s presence is a critical element we must always consider in our calling.

The reality of God's holiness requires respectful distance. The removal of sandals by Moses is an act of willing submission.

God speaks a third time, offering God's own identity. This connects Moses to the promises offered to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses' response is abrupt. He hides his face. God is visible but must not be seen, for to see God is to impinge on his holiness and freedom. Moses realizes this is the same God, the voice of God of Genesis, the one who made faithful promises to Moses' ancestors, the one who guards fugitives like Jacob, the one births babies in barren mothers.

This is God's first speech in Exodus. He uses several verbs. I have seen, I have heard, I have known. Israel is

the object of God's intense attentiveness. God acknowledges and engages the troubles of Israel, afflictions, cries, sufferings. What is critical is the fourth verb, "I have come down." God is now physically mobilized to be present in the midst of the trouble. For Christians, the statement of "I have come down" echoes the incarnation of Jesus Christ when God came down into history in bodily form. In Jesus God saves humanity from the oppression of sin. In Moses God uses a human being to free the Israelites from oppression.

God coming down to earth is followed by two other verbs of enormous power. These are deliver and bring up. In delivering, God snatches Israel from the destructive power of Egypt. The verb bring up is regularly used for

the exodus to the promised land. God’s speech anticipates the new land, which in every way contrasts the present land of oppression and bondage. The new land that God promises is “good.” It is filled with the power of blessing rather than curse, filled with plenty. This promise once again makes us think of the new life offered to all because of the resurrection of Jesus and the freedom from the bonds of sin.

God knows Israel’s present circumstances and is prepared to counter it decisively. God is the only alternative to the situation of oppression in Egypt. When hearing God speak, I am sure Moses thought that God would just snap his fingers and make everything alright. But then God said to Moses, “I am sending you to

Pharaoh and to bring my people out of Egypt.” This was a radical and decisive break for Moses. It must have stunned Moses when he heard it. It is Moses who will take the risks that Yahweh seemed ready to take. The connection of God and Moses, of heaven and earth, of great power and dangerous strategy is all carried in the statement, “I will send you.” It is Moses, not God, who will meet with Pharaoh. This is the odd joining of human history done through the vulnerable risk taking of the body of Moses.

In the narrative that follows, Moses voices a series of doubts and resistance to the summons delivered to him by God. He has been summoned to a remarkably dangerous deed. He has to return to the dangerous conflictual arena

of Egypt where his identity is at risk and must frontally challenge the status quo of the enormous imperial power.

He also still faces a murder charge from the time he fled forty years earlier. He faces possible death or imprisonment.

Moses' resistance to the "call" is not unusual. He realizes he has been called to be a liberator but that this is a threat to his life. So it is with God's call. We see the power of call in the life of faith. We must appreciate the dangers of a call from God. In our time, the notion of call has been trivialized, often limited to "obedience" and to "ministry." But a call is much broader than that. There are risks when we are called, especially when we are called to go up against the status quo and to work for

freedom from oppression and injustice. We must appreciate what God is calling us to do. A right sense of call (and its danger) derives from a sense of Yahweh's intention.

Moses offers several objections to his call, which is typical of prophets. The first resistance is that he is a genuine nobody. "Who Am I?" Moses see himself as nobody important and lacking in authority. He does not give himself enough credit. He learned skills in his years in Pharaoh's court. He learned skills as a shepherd. His killing of the cruel Egyptian taskmaster and his saving the women at the well in Midian shows that he has compassion for those who are harassed or oppressed.

These stories also point to the fact that he has courage to act on behalf of those who were being mistreated.

When you are called by God to do something, you may believe that you do not have the skills. You will be surprised. When I was first called into pastoral ministry, I wondered if I had the skills needed. As I began my journey, though, I realized that I had leadership skills I had not recognized. I realized my speaking to juries as a trial lawyer gave me public speaking skills. I realized my work in family court, social services, and probate had given me knowledge of family matters I would deal with as a pastoral minister.

Moses sense of his own inadequacy is not met with an assurance of his own adequacy but by an assertion of

Yahweh as God who will always be present. When Moses lacks confidence in himself, God says “I will be with you.”

Moses then asks the name of the one who authorizes such a dangerous mission for Moses and the Israelites. They will be engaging in civil disobedience. Moses feels like he deserves a personal name. The response is “I am who I am.” At first this might seem like a non-answer, but those who know Yahweh realize when they hear it that it means the power to create, the one who causes things to be. “I am” means the presence of God to make possible what would otherwise be impossible.

The name Yahweh derives from the form of the verb “to be, “so that God is the power for life, the power

of being, the power of newness. It is a God who will be present and decisive for Israel. Israel receives of God what can be told and retold.

When we are called and do not know if we can do it, let us take this story to appreciate that God will be present with us. Moses is also assured that he will have the resources he needs to perform his calling. He does not know what all these resources are but he will get them.

When I was called into ministry, I had concerns about resources. I would be giving up a law practice. I would not have any income for three years while I went to divinity school. I had two children getting ready to go to college. Could it be done?

God provides the resources when it is his will. My son Will received a full four-year academic scholarship to the University of South Carolina. My daughter Catherine was admitted into the honors college at the College of Charleston and had about one-half of her tuition and board paid for by scholarship. I received scholarships and grants which paid for almost eighty percent of the cost of my tuition, board and books. God was there with me!

When you receive your call from God, remember that God's will is always done. You may be scared; that's normal. You may feel that you are lacking; that is normal. But God will be with you and provide you with what you need. Moses' objections did not overcome the intentions of God. Yahweh was resolved to bring about the

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liberation of the Israelites. Yahweh's great resolve would
also be uncompromising with Pharaoh. Do not fight
whatever God is calling you to do. He will be
uncompromising as well. Just be ready to have quite an
adventure in life!