



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON CRISTI CHAPMAN, CANON FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND STEWARDSHIP
THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 17A, AUGUST 30, 2020
EXODUS 3:1-15; PSALM 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; MATTHEW 16:21-28

DESERT CALL



Three years ago, Chris and I hiked on one of our favorite trails in the Glacier Peak Wilderness Area. It had been years since we had been there. Despite that and being out of shape, it didn't take us long to settle back into familiar rhythms. Two miles in, while we were minding our own business, lost in our own thoughts, we saw it. Immediately, we came to a dead stop. Shivers went down my spine, and for a split second, I thought about running. Then it dawned on us what was happening.

About a hundred yards in the distance, a large black bear was playing in a marsh. Now, hikers know that when you see a bear, the last thing you should do is stop and watch. But this was different, and instinctively, we knew it. For about a minute, we stood there in awe, marveling at the beauty we had been allowed to witness. One of God's creatures was basking in the sun and frolicking in the water like this was the most important thing in the world. And of course, it was! It was also an intimate glimpse into a world we had never seen. What was already a special place for us

became holy, sacred ground. It was exhilarating, and we tried to stretch that minute as long we could before we got the heck outta there.

I wonder if that is how Moses felt when he saw the burning bush? He was also minding his own business, on a walk with his flock. Before he knew what was happening, a flame leapt up, out of a bush and started talking to him. In a split second, Moses had to decide what to do. Arguably, one responsible thing might have been to flee with the sheep. But Moses chose another path. He stayed long enough to notice. He leaned in and wondered what was happening. And that curiosity changed everything. His life transformed. He was given a new purpose. He became God's partner in ministry.

Biblical scholar Terrance Fretheim says that, "curiosity leads to call."¹ Moses didn't set off that morning to become the most important human agent of God in history. While God initiated the encounter, Moses got to choose how to respond. God waited for Moses and then God responded only after Moses noticed. Only then did God know to use Moses and that tender curiosity to further God's purpose.²

That is what Jesus wanted Peter to understand. Immediately before today's Gospel, Peter confesses to Jesus that he is all in. Peter's confession is also the cue for Jesus to give a fuller truth about what is coming.

But the path to the future is not what Peter expects, and rather than leaning into the difficulty that lies ahead, Peter tries to stop it. He shuts himself off from the pain and possibility that come with a better God-centered future. Rather than being curious about that future and his role in it, he rejects it. So much for being all in.

The Celtic poet John O'Donohue says that vocation does not steer you clear of a path without difficulties. "Vocation does not relieve [you] of the travail and turbulence of being human. Indeed, being true to one's vocation often requires a level of generosity and risk that will cause great suffering."³

That's the thing about ministry. Without some growing pains, ministry is not ministry. Instead, it is a fairy tale. Peter was about to discover that. So was Moses. If we are honest with ourselves, at some point in our own lives, we discover that truth, too.

While encounter and vocation are important, so are the places where they happen. Moses meets God in the wilderness. But this isn't just any place where wild things are. It is the Sinai wilderness -- sandwiched between a place that offered a life of luxury for some people and another place that would become home for all of God's people. That wilderness was also where God's mountain was located, deep in the desert, far away from people and other basic necessities of life. In Hebrew, the

¹Terrance E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 54.

²Ibid.

³John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 133.

word “Horeb,” as in Mt. Horeb, means “dry” or “desolate.”

And what a fitting place for Moses to recognize God.

By the time Moses meets God, he has exiled himself, both from the foreign family who raised him and from his own people. His only company now are flocks of sheep and the immediate family who claim him. Moses recognizes God not at the pinnacle of success. Instead, it is at a low point in his life. Only then can Moses hear God, see a way forward, and know how to hope for a future. Ironically, the one whose name means drawn up out of the water, discovers God, and discovers his own call, in one of the driest places on earth and at one of the driest times of his own life.

What does it mean to meet God in the barren and parched places of life?

Moses knew. So did Jesus. Jesus healed people when others found excuses to ignore them. He forgave people when others would rather hold a grudge. He fed people, even when his closest companions couldn't figure out how there would ever be enough to go around.

Jesus knew something else: even in the shame that comes from carrying a cross, God would be there. Jesus trusted God enough to know this. The question is, can we?

In Godly Play stories, right before something really important happens, the storyteller says that, “God comes so close to us, and we come so close to God.” Because it is an expressive

storytelling method, motions are just as important as words when making a point. If you watch carefully, there is a space between God and everyone else. That is by design. Every time “God comes so close and we come so close to God,” there is *always* a space in between. When I have told stories in the past, that space almost feels like a magnetic field that is generated when opposing ends of two magnets are put together. Maybe you can feel it now, that space in between?

While this is one of my favorite parts of Godly Play, it also bothers me. Every time, I wonder if God has to do something to be present. I know better, but I still feel it. The reality is that God is already so close, waiting patiently to catch our attention long enough for us to notice. God is waiting to draw each of us into that space in between where transformation happens. God's name is fixed and unchanging for all generations. So is God's presence. Our task is to stop long enough to notice, and then to respond.

God is up to something right now: in the difficult conversations we are having with each other about race, in the grief we feel over the steady stream of changes that impact us and those we love, and in the suffering that comes with everyday life. Those are just some of the places where God meets us.

When God calls Moses, God seeks out a partner in ministry -- someone to help accomplish God's purpose. Jesus asks that of his disciples, too. The God we worship is not a God who blusters that “God alone” will do it all. Instead, God who believes firmly in the

“we together” approach to ministry. That God longs to work together with all creation

to bring something new and better into being. Where do you notice God waiting for you?

EXODUS 3:1-15 *[Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.]*

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.” But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’:

*This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.]*

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