

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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October 8, 2017
5th Sunday in Called to Life
Exodus 3:1-12

Called to Courage

In our *Year of Call* that we're undertaking this year, we have chosen to develop our own schedule of scripture readings for each of the Sundays through next May.

Some of the most obvious Bible stories that we're including are the actual events in which God called a particular individual for a particular task or role in an event or occasion that then fits into the larger overarching biblical narrative. There are dozens of such stories in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Some of them are familiar because of their central importance in God's story. Some that we're quite familiar with include those that we read each year in the season leading up to Christmas. The story of Mary being called by God to be the mother of Jesus is at the top of that list. And guess what, this story will be prominently included in this special year of call focus.

Today, we're focusing in on one of the greatest of the call stories in the Hebrew Bible—the Old Testament. The call of Moses by God, marks one of the most important turning points in the history of God's people. This call story that we've just read from the third chapter of Exodus contains many of the elements of the way in which God calls people to serve.

But before a closer look at his call by God, let me review a few things that we already know about Moses from the second chapter of Exodus.

Moses was part of the Israelites—the Hebrew people who were living in Egypt who had become slaves of the Egyptians several generations earlier.

At the time of Moses' birth, the king, the Egyptian pharaoh had become so concerned about the growing strength of the Hebrew people in Egypt that he declared that every boy born to Hebrew women was to be killed. Moses was saved from this fate when his mother hid the infant Moses in a basket and placed him in the bulrushes of the Nile River where she knew the pharaoh's daughter would come to bathe. And sure enough, when she did, she took pity on the infant boy crying in the basket so that she took him into her own household to be raised.

Later when he was older, Moses, who was living in the context of the privilege of the royal family became acutely aware of the plight of his people in slavery under the tyranny of the pharaoh. Moses became so enraged over this situation, that in an impulsive moment, he killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew. From then on he was on the run for his own life and fled from Egypt to the land of Midian to the east of Egypt on the northwest part of the Arabian peninsula, where he sought refuge and where he intended to live out his life. He even married and had a son.

But Moses, with his new life in Midian, where he lived in safety, was surely aware of the oppression of his people that he had left behind in Egypt. While the Bible is silent on the details, Moses who was a bright and educated man, was surely haunted by this knowledge. I imagine that his sleep was often tormented by visions of his people suffering under bondage and tyranny. While Moses himself was spared this tortuous life, he was keenly aware of this severe injustice back in Egypt. This then was the Moses who was called by God in a special way.

It's helpful to read the 3 verses that precede the story of God calling Moses. "After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their

cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.” (Ex. 2:23-25)

So on that day that Moses was out tending his father-in-law’s flock of sheep, when he encountered that very strange sight of a bush that was aflame and yet not burning up, Moses was not just some random person who happened along. No, this encounter with the burning bush was specifically intended for Moses.

First of all, Moses was a man of faith who while perplexed by this phenomenon nevertheless recognized it as a holy moment. For he realized that this event was a theophany when God appears before a human in visible form. We know this because Moses knew that he needed to look away and avert his gaze so as to not look directly at God for fear of dying.

Second, Moses had the history, background and understanding of the plight of his people. And while he had run away from it all, he was now being called to re-enter the fray and to carry out a history-changing task.

God called out to Moses from the burning bush, “Moses, Moses!”

Moses said, “Here I am.”

“Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. 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.

God then goes on to proclaim that he has heard the cry of his people and that he knows their sufferings. So much so that God is determined to deliver them from oppression in Egypt and to deliver them to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

This must have sounded like incredible good news to Moses. It is what he knew needed to happen. It was an answer to his middle-of-the-night prayers when he was kept awake by insomnia from the injustice he knew was continuing in Egypt. How wonderful that his God and the God of his ancestors was now ready to act. This must have sounded wonderful to Moses, at first.

But Moses’ sense of relief was surely momentary and transitory as he heard the next words from God—words that Moses’ surely hoped were a figment of his imagination.

“So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites out of Egypt.”

It’s at this point that we can almost hear the shaking in his knees and the uncertainty in his voice when Moses replies, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

What a conundrum he was in. Moses knew as well or better than anyone the suffering of his people. He knew as well or better than anyone that it would take an earth-shattering act of the God of the universe to bring about the needed change and redemption of the Israelites—the Hebrew people. Moses knew as well or better than anyone just how difficult this would be to face up to the Pharaoh and deliver this word of God.

And, then, Moses thought he knew as well or better than anyone, that the person up to this task was not Moses. It just had to be someone else.

But God would have none of that. “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.”

Well if we go on to read further in the story, there continues to be a series of conversations between God and Moses where God meets Moses at every one of his objections with a response of encouragement and provision that in essence gives Moses the courage to proceed and carry out God’s history-changing delivery of his people from the bondage of slavery and oppression in the land of Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land—a land flowing with milk and honey.

The end result is that Moses becomes the greatest of all God’s prophets to God’s people. Moses goes down in history as the one who had the courage to go where he knew he needed to go by the power and encouragement of God.

My friends, how often do we today find ourselves in a similar conundrum as Moses? We know that all is not well.

Just this week, for example, we have witnessed yet another mass shooting where a single gunman inflicted 59 deaths and over 500 injuries within a matter minutes. Furthermore, each day in our nation there are between 90 and 100 gun-related deaths—over 30,000 per year (wikipedia). Like Moses, we know that something is awry. And also like Moses in Midian we can find that we are at a safe distance where we may feel paralyzed, thinking that there is nothing that we can do.

Like Moses, we know that all is not well. Today, 1 in 6 people in America face hunger. 49 million Americans struggle to put food on the table. More than 1 in 5 children in America is at risk of hunger. Among African-Americans and Latinos, it’s 1 in 3. (www.dosomething.org) Like Moses, we know that something is awry. While we try to do our part in alleviating hunger, we seem to be paralyzed at doing what is needed to be done to end hunger for good.

We know that there are problems and challenges and injustices that are in dire need of change. We see these all around us and can sometimes even identify the root of the problem.

While our theophanies today, where we meet God, may not be as overt and in your face as a burning bush, God nevertheless continues to call us to follow where he leads. And like the case of Moses who felt ill-equipped, God continues to be a source of courage for us as well.

God is calling you. God is calling me. It is a call to courage—courage to follow, courage to carry out God’s call.

Dr. Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston writes, “Courage is a heart word. The root of the word courage is cor - the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage meant ‘To speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart.’ Over time, this definition has changed, and today, we typically associate courage with heroic and brave deeds. But in my opinion, this definition fails to recognize the inner strength and level of commitment required for us to actually speak honestly and openly about who we are and about our experiences—good and bad. Speaking from our hearts is what I think of as ‘ordinary courage.’” (www.goodreads.com/quotes/737201-courage-is-a-heart-word-the-root-of-the-word)

When God called Moses to change the time line of history, he was calling Moses to courage—to speak from his heart.

When God calls us to tasks as perhaps yet unknown, he is calling us to courage—to speak from our hearts.

A special place where this is embodied in our world today is in Northern Ireland's Corrymeela Community—both a people and a place. The place is where some of us here have traveled to enter into the call to courage to the task of reconciliation in many different ways and in many different places. In recent years, the Corrymeela Community has developed a prayer that is regularly prayed by those who are gathered in the worship space at the Corrymeela Ballycastle Centre. The name of that worship space is the Croí which is the Irish word for heart. I invite you to turn to the cover of your bulletin where the Corrymeela Community's Prayer of Courage is printed. Please stand, as you're able, and let's read this prayer together.

Courage comes from the heart
and we are always welcomed by God,
the Croí of all being.
We bear witness to our faith,
knowing that we are called
to live lives of courage, love and reconciliation
in the ordinary and extraordinary moments of each day.
We bear witness, too, to our failures
and our complicity in the fractures of our world.
May we be courageous today.
May we learn today.
May we love today.
Amen.