

Nowhere Man

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on August 30, 2020

Friendship Presbyterian Church

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 ... 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 for ever, and this my title for all generations ..."

Then Moses answered, "But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'" The Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff." And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail"—so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand— "so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you" ...

But Moses said to the Lord, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Then

the Lord said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." But he said, "O my Lord, please send someone else."

(Exodus 3:1 – 4:13, selected verses, NRSV)

I have found that great wisdom is often found in the most unlikely places. It may come from the lips of a child or appear on a billboard. It may come in the advice of a stranger, or the reading of a magazine article in a doctor's office. Or It may come from two Englishmen with longish hair with good biblical names like John and Paul, and if they're joined by two others named George and Ringo, then the wisdom is coming through a great song!

One of the Beatles' most famous songs was "Nowhere Man." You may remember how it goes:

*He's a real nowhere man
Sitting in his nowhere land
Making all his nowhere plans for nobody*

*Doesn't have a point of view
Knows not where he's going to
Isn't he a bit like you and me?*

I'm sure that the Fab Four didn't have the biblical Moses in mind when they wrote and performed this, but it's hard to imagine words more appropriate to describe that shepherd who stumbled onto a burning bush beyond the edge of the wilderness.

We usually think of Moses as the great deliverer, the hero of the Exodus, but once, as when we find him in our text for this morning, he was just such a man ... a Nowhere Man ... an obscure shepherd in the far-off land of Midian ... still running from his past, with eyes closed to anything fresh and new.

You may remember that he was born the son of Hebrew slaves in Egypt ... that he was saved from the Pharaoh's order to kill all Hebrew male infants by being hidden in a floating basket and then discovered and drawn out of the water by the Pharaoh's own daughter, who raised him as her own son. The classic movie *The Ten Commandments* gives us a lot of speculative backstory to fill in holes left by the biblical text, but we *do* know that while he was raised in the royal court, he still was conscious of who he was and where he came from.

And so, one day, as he went out among his people, he saw an Egyptian taskmaster mercilessly beating a Hebrew slave, and looking this way and that and seeing no one else, he killed the Egyptian and hid his body in the sand. Thinking that his deed was secret, he went out the following day and saw two Israelites fighting with one another, and he got between them and asked one, "Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?" The answer chilled Moses to the core: "Who made you a prince and ruler over us? Are you going to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?"

In that moment, Moses realized that his secret was no secret, and he knew that he had to flee. When Pharaoh learned of it, he sought to find Moses to bring him to justice. But Moses escaped Egypt, and fled in anonymity to the land of Midian where he would begin a new life in obscurity ... a Nowhere Life.

In this Nowhere life and Nowhere time of self-imposed exile, he marries, begins a family, and works tending his father-in-law's sheep. And so on, and so on ... and just like that, forty years pass. And then, on one perfectly ordinary day, Moses takes his sheep out just as he had done every day, day after day, year after year. He takes them out "beyond the wilderness," as the text puts it: A wonderfully evocative phrase which describes how Moses is transported from the ordinary to the extraordinary, from the normal to the astonishing, because it is here, beyond the wilderness, that Moses treads upon holy ground and meets the living God.

Moses looks up and sees a bush which is blazing with fire, and yet is not being consumed in the flames. And so, he stops and turns aside to see this strange sight, and God calls to him out of the bush: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Understandably, Moses hides his face, for he is afraid to look up as God explains the divine purpose to set a people free from slavery ... and then suggests just *who* should go down to Egypt to carry out this plan.

Something genuinely new lies before him: a call to let go of a Nowhere life and embrace a Newness which would summon him to courage. Is this even possible? Is he going mad? Or could there really be a *purpose* for his life ... a purpose greater than tending someone else's smelly sheep ... a purpose greater than that of a life slowly drifting away in the absence of Hope and with the wreckage of regret?

I wonder how many moments in our own lives pass by without us hearing the call to Newness ... moments obscured by our being imprisoned in the past or the future ... moments wasted without recognition, though always already before us. But then, one day, caught by surprise, we *do* see ... we *do* hear ... and we *know* ourselves to be in the presence of the Holy.

The Welsh clergyman and poet R. S. Thomas relates his own experience of such a moment in his poem "The Bright Field", likening it to that of Moses here:

*I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl
of great price, the one field that had
the treasure in it. I realize now
that I must give up all that I have
to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning*

*aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

But truth be told, encountering Holiness, and hearing the call to newness and to life, isn't usually something that goes very smoothly at first. Moses, certainly, is less than enthusiastic – in fact, one of the *least enthusiastic* called people ever! If God had never considered all the possible roadblocks someone could present when called into new life and purpose, God certainly hears them *all* on this day, and the results are hilarious:

“Who am I ...?” (3:11)

“If they ask ... what shall I say to them?” (3:13)

“But suppose they do not believe me ...” (4:1)

“Oh my Lord, I have never been eloquent ...” (4:10)

And the final plea of a desperate man ... “O my Lord, please send someone else” (4:13)

Of course, Moses' resistance is not exactly unique. Throughout the scriptures, God has a way of calling very ordinary human beings to something more. And almost always, the one called tries to run away. For our part, I think we understand Moses quite well. Perhaps the past still weighs heavily on the heart, and a lifetime spent running away from something is all too familiar. Or perhaps for others of us, the favored fallback is into a *future* fantasy, dwelling in a world which *might* be but *never is*. Or perhaps, as with Moses, all hope is given up and there's no longer any dream at all.

But the One who calls is persistent, and refuses to let go and drop it. And the revelation of the divine name – I AM WHO I AM [or equally, and provocatively, translatable as I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE] – identifies God as that ultimate mystery who is free to be whomever and whatever God chooses to be, in whatever situation or circumstance. And so, Moses' excuses that he doesn't have enough in him to do what he is being commanded to do are about to be *blown away*, as though God himself would sing:

*Nowhere Man, please listen
You don't know what you're missing
Nowhere Man, the world is at your command*

Moses tries to keep it up: “But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you.’” And so, the Lord says to him, “What is that in your hand?”

What is that in your hand?

And Moses says, “A staff.” It was just a staff. There was nothing special about it – just the ordinary tool of the trade of a shepherd. Moses might have added a “So what?” to the exchange, but God beats him to it. God says, “Throw it on the ground.”

So, Moses throws the staff on the ground, and it becomes a snake; and in fear, he draws back from it. Then God says, “Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail”—so he reaches out his hand and seizes it, and it becomes a staff in his hand again— a sign given, as God puts it, “so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.”

What’s in *your* hand? Perhaps it’s the love for music which has always been natural for you, or the solace you find when you start crocheting. Maybe it’s the ease with which you meet new people, or the capacity you have for listening to others’ stories and easing their pain. Or on a broader scale, perhaps it’s a growing boldness and conviction within you that the racial and systemic injustices so manifest in our country today are simply unacceptable, and that silence or evasion is complicity. But like that staff in Moses’ hand, that gift, that talent, that conviction may not seem like anything *special* ... I mean, we *are* talking about *you*, about *me* ... It is just *us*, after all, and what we have to bring to the game.

Will we ever get it that God doesn’t *need* something *special*, for it is God alone who brings power and promise into even the most common things? To convince Moses of this, God transforms the staff to a serpent writhing and wriggling on the ground. Moses’ immediate and understandable reaction is to recoil, and I think perhaps the moment when he obeys God’s instruction to reach out and seize the serpent by its tail is that moment when he truly enters into God’s purpose for the Hebrew people and for himself ... that moment when he realizes that his personal inadequacy is *far* from the whole story ... that moment in which his heart could hear the bells of freedom ringing in the distance.

Each of us holds in our hands experiences, interests, passions, convictions, and energies that contribute to who we are, and position us to impact a hurting and broken world around us. Such things may look ordinary to us, but if we allow it, God can and will transform them and give them back ready for us to use in the service of God’s kingdom of peace and justice as we respond to our own unique calls to ministry.

The God who meets Moses beyond the wilderness continues to meet us, where we are, with transformative power; a power which changes the once-Nowhere Man Moses into a leader for the ages, and just as readily changes us into faithful disciples who hold in our hands the *power* and the *purpose* of the God who brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly, and lets the oppressed go free.

So, Nowhere Man, Nowhere Woman ... what’s that in *your* hand? Something common? Look again. You never know what something that ordinary might turn into.

To the glory of God. Amen.