

## Moses & His People & Their God II. What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?

(Exodus 2:11-15a and 2:23-3:15 NRSV) One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. 12 He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. 13 When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, "Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?" 14 He answered, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "Surely the thing is known." 15 When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian.... 23 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. 24 God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 25 God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them. 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. 2 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. 3 Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." 4 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." 5 Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 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. 7 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, 8 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. 9 The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. 10 So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." 11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" 12 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." 13 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?" 14 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.'" 15 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."

It's a common question that we often ask children: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" It's not uncommon for children to answer this question in a variety of different ways over the years. For the longest time my mother kept my sixth grade autobiography in which I had said that what I wanted to be when I grew up was a Greyhound bus driver. Well, that may not have come to pass but something of that early ambition has endured: my love of the open road. You can see it each year when I get together with my oldest friend, as I did this past week following my continuing education event, and we do a "road trip" through the west or southwest, re-connecting and solving the world's problems. And while my bus-driving ambition may have surprised my parents, they were probably pleased that I hadn't continued to exhibit the kind of confusion that I had shown when my answer to that same question at the age of three – "What do you want to be when you grow up?" – was "a fire truck." Not, a "fireman," mind you, but a "fire **truck**."

*"What do you want to be when you grow up?"* If Moses' parents had been answering the question *for* him, I suspect that when he was a baby their response would have been simple and poignant: We simply hope he makes it to adulthood **alive!** For, as we saw two weeks ago, as we began this sermon series on Moses, the land of Egypt that had originally been a place of refuge for Moses' ancestors had now become a place of horror. Those ancestors, in fact, had been honored guests in Egypt due to the fact that one of their number, Joseph, had wisely helped Pharaoh manage the harvests and avoid the terrible famine that swept the rest of the near east. But now there was a new king in Egypt "who did not know [the story of] Joseph" and who feared the increasing numbers and success of the Hebrew people. So the king enslaved them and declared that all boy babies were to be killed. But through cleverness and even some conniving, baby Moses' mother managed to hide him in a place that Pharaoh's own daughter would find him, would adopt him, and would ask Moses' own mother – without

knowing her identity – to be his nanny. The fact that Moses managed to make it to manhood was a sheer miracle, given the circumstances!

So Moses is raised as both Pharaoh's grandson **and** as the son of Hebrew slaves. I would imagine this fact made his own answers to the question "*What do you want to be when you grow up*" bounce back and forth. On the one hand, from his biological mother he would have inherited a fierce love of his people and a justified resentment at the way they were being treated. On the other hand, as the saying goes, "rank has its privileges" and being the adopted grandson of Pharaoh would make it mighty tempting to decide to simply enjoy a life of luxury and power. But life has a way of sometimes focusing our ambivalence for us, and that's what happened to Moses. In a moment of moral clarity, he sees an Egyptian beating one of the Hebrew slaves and Moses is enraged, kills the overseer, and thereby throws his lot in with his mother's people in way from which there will be no turning back. A bounty is then put on Moses' head and he is forced to flee for his life. To make a long story short, Moses escapes to the land of Midian, across the Arabian peninsula, gets a job as a shepherd, and ends up marrying the daughter of the man he's working for. Life is good. It is settled. Moses is content. And so Moses' answer to the question "What do you want to be when you grow up" might have been this: a shepherd, a good husband, a good worker for my father-in-law.

But it didn't turn out that way, did it? God had other hopes for him. And notice something, I said "God has other **hopes**." Now, sometimes you will hear folks say that God has other **plans** for you, but we need to be careful here. Human free will is just that: free. If that weren't the case, then all this business about how important it is for us to decide, to take responsibility for our actions, to choose well and wisely, to seek to try to be a certain kind of person would all be a sham if God were simply pulling the strings as if we were ventriloquist's puppets. But that's not the case. We do have freedom.

And we can use it for good, or we can use it for ill. But God hopes we use our freedom for good. And that is why, from time to time, God tries to get our attention, in the hopes that we will both recognize God's hopes for our lives and say yes to those hopes. In fact, that leads me to say that the greatest miracle in this story is not the burning bush that wasn't consumed by that fire, but *the fact that Moses stopped and paid attention* to it and then seriously engaged God in a struggle about what he should do and be and become, about how he should use the free will that God had indeed blessed him with. The miracle here is that he stopped; he noticed; he paid attention. **That's** the most important miracle here, for it could have been otherwise. Barbara Blaisdell comments on the miracle of paying attention in these lovely lines:

After all, the world is afire with burning bushes and gorgeous rainbows and stunning beautiful smiles a-light with the shining love of God and we walk right past these things every day without paying them a lick of attention. So God makes the color purple and sets it right in front of our faces or makes a child giggle or an old man guffaw and says "Hey, just try to ignore that!" Still, we do. The miracle is that God keeps on trying until finally, finally, until like Moses we will stop and be quiet long enough to look and listen for what God might be trying to tell us in this most luminous and lovely and sacred moment.

The miracle here is that Moses indeed stopped and looked and listened. He struggled. He argued with God. In other words, he took God's hopes for what he would do with his life, with his talents, with his abilities and he contended seriously with what he indeed should do next with his life.

But that's when it struck me. Not only do children sometimes **tell** us what they want to be when they grow up, but sometimes – at least in those intermittent stages of childhood when children think their parents actually know something and are not hopelessly antiquated and antediluvian – they **ask us**: "What do **you** think I should be

when I grow up?” And reading this story and reflecting on it once again, it struck me that the answer I sometimes gave my children to that question was simply wrong. For I sometimes said to them, “I want you to be whatever you want to be, so long as you’re happy.” Wrong. Why? Well, I’m not against happiness, and I quickly tire of being around folks who seem to make a mission in life to seek out and wallow in unhappiness. Happiness is a lovely thing. But it’s not the most important thing, and it’s not the value, not the goal, that is or should be the most important when we ask “what should we be when we grow up,” or when we ask – at whatever age, whether 8 or 80 – “what should I do in this or that situation?”

No, what I realize now – after a life of trying to understand God’s ways and God’s hopes – is that that answer to my children was wrong. Instead of saying that what I wanted most was for them to be *happy*, what I should have said is what I wanted most was for them to be *fulfilling their purposes*. That’s a very different notion, isn’t it? I learned the difference between being happy and fulfilling one’s purpose from stories like this in the Bible, and, again, from my wife Barbara – for no one writes and preaches better or more eloquently about the fact that what God has for *every* life is a *promise* and a *purpose*. Moses’ job, then (and this is also your job and my job) is to not turn aside from God’s calls, and nudges, and lures, but to stop and try to recognize what **God’s** hopes are, and to struggle faithfully with those. Now, it must be said, that *I* don’t get those nudges and lures as dramatically as Moses did; God’s hopes don’t get disclosed to me in burning bushes or via email or text messages. God doesn’t Facebook me. And, in fact, I am always skeptical – and I think you should be too – of people who too easily and facilely claim “Well, you know, God was talking to me, and....”

But, at the same time, God does try to communicate God’s hopes to every one of us. A pastor by the name of Francis Wade writes very eloquently and aptly about

this; listen to what he has to say: With Moses, he says, “there was a fire that would not go out. In other words the presence of God that just would not go away. Something nagging [and you] can almost hear Moses saying ... I don't need this. I've got a good life. I've got no problems. But there was something more of God that was reaching for him.”<sup>1</sup> And it is the same with us too. Again, here's how Rev. Wade puts it:

...something comes reaching into [our] good life, something of God that reaches in and disturbs our tranquility. Sometimes it is a sense that something isn't right. Something that everybody else seems to accept or dismiss that you just can't let go of. ... Something missing.... It nags at us. A fire that won't go out. Something about race and the assumptions of our community. Something about the way that wealth and poverty connects or does not connect in our town. ... Something about our own relationship with God ~ a predictability perhaps; something gone flat, like a soft drink with a loose cap.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, it's not just un-settledness and discontent that can be a hint about God's hopes. Sometimes that “something” is something very **good** in our lives that we need to pay more attention to. Rev. Wade continues:

Or it may be something that seems **right**. A **joy** that calls to us...; the **purposefulness** that wants to be sought after.... [S]omething about a **place** that makes it holy, draws us back to it again and again. Something about a **memory** that makes it life giving and calls out the best in us. Something about **people** we admire who make us want to grow up to be like them. <sup>3</sup>

Something, something, something. In every life, yours and mine, there is something, something, something that God is trying to use to nag us, lure us, entice us to ever

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=395>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=395>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=395> Emphasis mine.

more fully fulfill our purpose.

And so God saw in Moses a contented man, whose life was pretty good. God also saw a man whose unique upbringing and unique abilities – even if Moses kept trying to downplay them – could lead his people away from the awful situation that were enmeshed in. And so God said: Moses, you are not fulfilling your purpose. There is something more I hope you will be when you grow up! Something, something, something. My friends, there is also something in **your** life today that God is wanting you to pay attention to, something that is of God, something that ought to be nagging at you with the thought that you can do even more. And please notice something, that question of what God is calling, nagging, luring you to do to even more fully fulfill your purpose is not just for young folks. We ought never stop asking that question of what we can be, what God might want us to be when we grow up. For there's always room to grow more.

What is it for you, my friends? What is that something, something, something that nags and lures, that will not let you go? What bush for you continues to glow, to shimmer, to sometimes burst into flame but simply will not go out? God has given you talents and abilities and asks you never to stop “growing up,” as it were, and to use those talents and abilities to further God's purposes and hopes for you. It's your question, and nobody can answer it for you. An 18<sup>th</sup> century rabbi named Zusya once said this: “In the next life, God will not ask me: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ No, God will ask me: ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”<sup>4</sup>

What bush burns for you and will not go out? What purpose is God calling you to fulfill? What do you want to be when you grow up?

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<sup>4</sup>[http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/loving\\_4705.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/loving_4705.htm)