

## Holy Ground, Holy Radiance, Holy Calling

Exodus 3:1-15

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*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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." <sup>4</sup>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." <sup>5</sup>Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." <sup>6</sup>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, <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup>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?" <sup>12</sup>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." <sup>13</sup>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?" <sup>14</sup>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.'" <sup>15</sup>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.*

"When did you first feel called to ministry? How did you decide to become a pastor?" Sometimes it's an idle question, small talk from strangers trying to be polite and seem interested, while they scan the room for someone safer to talk to. Sometimes they are probing questions, asked by someone honestly wondering how people decide to go into this profession.

There are many stories of call in the Bible. Moses saw a burning bush. Isaiah experienced an earthquake in the temple. Paul was temporarily blinded and thrown to the ground.

And from the early church, eleventh century mystic Hildegard of Bingen (a favorite of mine) describes her experience as: "a burning light of tremendous brightness coming from heaven

poured into my entire mind. Like a flame that does not burn but enkindles, it inflamed my entire heart...just like the sun that warms an object with its rays...All of a sudden I was able to taste of the understanding..."(1)

I always feel my own story of call pales in comparison. No special effects. No big light. I grew up in a Presbyterian church in downtown Santa Ana. A big church, and yet a church family. Adults knew me, knew my name, who taught me and encouraged me in my life and faith and spiritual walk. I went off to college with a clear calling to be an elementary school teacher with a plan to become a reading specialist.

I was part of a campus ministry group at the University of Oregon led by Presbyterian pastor Rev. Doug Huneke. We met every Sunday at his house for homemade soup and homemade bread. Manna from heaven for college students eating dorm cafeteria meals. One day Doug invited me out for ice cream. And he said, "Have you ever thought about going into the ministry? You could combine all the things you love - teaching, writing, speaking, music, listening to people, sharing biblical stories, serving other people, working on social justice issues - and get paid for it. I think God might be calling you to the ministry." Was I standing on holy ground?

I don't remember exactly what I said. What I knew was I had always wanted to be a teacher. I was sure that was my calling. But God used Doug to plant a seed. I wrestled with the thought of changing direction. I was comfortable thinking about being a teacher. It took me about a year to come to slowly see myself in a different way, as a different kind of teacher, a different kind of leader. No burning bushes, no drama... just thinking and praying and talking to trusted friends. I have many flaws. I had my doubts. I had a different plan. I kept wondering and prayed to remain open to the Spirit. Eventually the call to pastoral ministry became my path.

How do we know our callings in life? Our callings change at different points in our lives. Maybe there is a sense as a young person to think about vocation and calling and training and education. But there are also times of calling then our job ends or we lose our job. God calls us in new chapters of our lives like moving or retirement or our health changes. Or when our spouse dies or we go through a divorce. And callings come in the life of the church or volunteer in an organization and those also evolve. Some experience a sense of call as a mother or father or grandparent or mentor or coach.

How do we listen for God's call? Ethicist Andy Fleming at Emory University's Center for Ethics suggests that you ask three questions:

- What do I like to do?
- What am I good at?
- What needs to be done in the world? Or my community?

Where those questions overlap is what Fleming calls your "sweet spot," the place where you are meant to be. That's a pretty good decision-making process. However, in our story today there are very different questions and a very different progression.

The main character in that drama is God. YHWH, the Hebrews call him, an early form of the Hebrew verb "to be." You might think that God's name would be a noun. But, no, God's name is a verb, the verb to be. The one who was and is and is to come. The Holy One puts Moses in whatever is the opposite of his "sweet spot." God, in fact, drags Moses into the most conflicted moment of his life.

Having grown up in Egypt, Moses had to flee across the border to Midian, in order to escape from the long arm of the military. He made a speedy departure because of well-founded rumors that he had killed an Egyptian guard because he was beating a Hebrew slave. Moses ran and eventually was able to fade into the Midian woodwork, marry a Midian woman, and start to rebuild his life.

And then, just when things have wound down and he can begin to relax, the God whom Moses supposed he had left behind in Egypt, reappeared. The voice comes out of a bush in the desert that is burning, but not burning up. This is a tough detail of the story to talk about this week because so much of CA has been burning in wild fires. The smoke has been thick. People have lost homes and beloved forests have burned. As we imagine this story, maybe the bush is burning with radiance, with untrimmable light, with holy heat.

There are 3 main parts to the divine message. God's first word is a reassuring word, designed to give comfort to Moses, **"I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their suffering, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians."**

God has "heard the cry of the people"—a cry for justice in a situation of injustice—and promised to "come down and deliver them." God is a God who is not aloof from the plight of people suffering injustice and oppression.

Moses must have smiled and taken a deep breath. He may even have gone on to think, "And when God gets all that done, maybe it will even be safe for me to go back to Egypt and settle in with the family once again."

But God hasn't finished. There is more to the message. God continues: "Moses, Moses!" God called out to the young shepherd. Moses was so taken aback he answered, "Here I am!" "Don't come any closer," God warned from that burning bush. **"Take your sandals off. Where you're standing is holy ground."** Maybe I should take off my sandals.

Remember, just a second before the ground had been ordinary ground, just as the bush had been an ordinary bush, a reminder that we do not have to go away to a designated sacred place to have a divine encounter. Be mindful as Mary Oliver reminds us in her poem.

God made sure that Moses understood that the voice Moses was hearing was the voice of the God who had guided his ancestors forever. "And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, **I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people.**"

"Me?!" Moses asked. "Who am I to do that? They won't listen to me. I am just shepherd. I can hardly keep my sheep from wandering. I am no leader. You have the wrong guy." Moses did have an identity problem. Was he a Hebrew? Was he an Egyptian? He had married into a family of Midianites. It was hard for him to know who he was or where he belonged.

"Don't worry," said God. "I'm going with you all the way." That was no guarantee of success, but it was the assurance of God's presence." He kept arguing with the Almighty. "If the people ask me who sent it, what am I going to tell them?" God said, "Tell them I AM sent me to you." And God tells Moses he can even do some special signs to prove it.

Still not enough for Moses. His heels are dug in deep. "You have forgotten something, Almighty God. You have forgotten that I am a very poor public speaker. When I open my mouth, I sound as if I have marbles in there. I'm slow of speech. My tongue doesn't work well."

"Moses, you have forgotten that I am the one who gives speech in the first place? I will be with your mouth."

Moses presses on. "O God, please just send someone else."

Astonishingly, God answers, "All right. I'll send that silver-tongued brother of yours-Aaron, the Levite. He'll do your speaking for you. Now pick up your staff. The people are suffering. They're waiting for you. And only you. You are enough and you are not alone."

Finally, Moses stops talking and starts moving. Finally, he pushes through the wall of his own self-doubt and sense of inadequacy.

We can stay on the path we are on and ignore the radiance coming from an ordinary bush.  
Or we are turn aside and look as Moses did to notice, to be open, to listen.  
We hear cries for justice and hope and liberation.  
We choose to look at our inadequacies, make excuses, resist changing  
Or We can see that we are standing on holy ground. Be open. Be amazed. Be mindful

The invitations that come to us are not always as plain as a burning bush. Or sometimes—in the midst of a pandemic, say, or a hurricane, or wildfires, or the pain and shock of events happening nationally and internationally or right in our own homes—the burning bushes can

be difficult to perceive. In the midst of it all, may we be given vision to see what it ours to see, and courage to do what is ours to do. May we hear the voice that says to us, "I will be with you." Close with a blessing by one of my favorite writers – Jan Richardson. (2)

Blessing at the Burning Bush by Jan Richardson

You will have to decide  
if you want this—  
want the blessing  
that comes to you  
on an ordinary day  
when you are minding  
your own path,  
bent on the task before you  
that you have done  
a hundred times,  
a thousand.

You will have to choose  
for yourself  
whether you will attend  
to the signs,  
whether you will open your eyes  
to the searing light, the heat,  
whether you will open  
your ears, your heart  
to the voice  
that knows your name,  
that tells you this place  
where you stand—  
this ground so familiar  
and therefore unregarded—  
is, in fact,  
holy.

You will have to discern  
whether you have  
defenses enough  
to rebuff the call,  
excuses sufficient  
to withstand the pull  
of what blazes before you;

whether you will  
hide your face,  
will turn away  
back toward—  
what, exactly?

No path from here  
could ever be  
ordinary again,  
could ever become  
unstrange to you  
whose seeing  
has been scorched  
beyond all salving.

You will know your path  
not by how it shines  
before you  
but by how it burns  
within you,  
leaving you whole  
as you go from here  
blazing with  
your inarticulate,  
your inescapable  
*yes.*

Amen.

1) *Hildegard of Bingen: Mystical Writing*, Bowie & Davies, editors, Crossroad, 1990, page. 10.

2) Jan Richardson, 'Blessing at the Burning Bush,' Painted Prayerbook, posted 8/24/14  
<https://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/08/24/blessing-at-the-burning-bush/>