

Labor in the Pulpit 2014, Aug. 31 at Sherman Avenue UMC

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On Exodus 3:1-15

Exodus 3:1-15. And Moses was shepherding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, priest of Midyan, and he drove the flock into the wilderness, and he came to the mountain of God, Horeb. And an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire, in a bush. And he saw, and look, the bush was aflame in the fire, but the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, "Let me turn aside that I may see this great sight. Why is the bush not scorched?" And the Lord saw that he turned aside to look, and he called to him from the bush saying, "Moses, Moses." And he said, "I'm here." And he said, "Don't draw closer! Take off your sandals, for the place on which you stand is holy ground. I am," he said, "The God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," and Moses hid his face, for he feared to look at God. And the Lord said, "I have surely looked upon the oppression of my people in Egypt, and I have heeded their cry because of their taskmasters. Yes, I know their sufferings. And I came down to deliver them from the grip of Egypt and to bring them up from that land, to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite. And now, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression by which Egypt oppresses them. And now, go, and I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring out my people the children of Israel from Egypt." And Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should

go to Pharaoh and that I should bring out the children of Israel from Egypt? And he said, "I will be with you, and this will be a sign for you that it is I who sent you. When you bring out the people from Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain." And Moses said to God, "Look, I'll come to the children of Israel, and I'll say to them, 'The God of your fathers sent me to you,' and they'll say to me, 'What's his name?' What shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I am as I will be," and he said, "Thus you will say to the children of Israel, 'I am' sent me to you," and God said further to Moses, "Thus you will say to the children of Israel, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and this is my memorial from generation to generation."

Who has seen God appear to them in this way? In a burning bush? My hope is that by the end of our service, all of us will answer that they have seen God's burning bush in Madison.

Our reading from Exodus today is rich with significance for Labor Sunday. Moses, an undocumented immigrant, was recently chased out of Egypt as a criminal. He has a humble, low-wage job, sheep-herding. As Moses leaves the sheep and goes to the Mountain of God to pray, God encounters him in a way that he's never seen before. Moses can see the flames and feel the heat of God's anger against Egypt, and he can see the light and feel the warmth of God's compassion for the Hebrew people. God talks to Moses about the suffering of the children of Israel, abused by Pharaoh, the ruler of their country of residence. Pharaoh saw potential in Israel, dangerous potential to grow strong and overcome Egypt. So Pharaoh devised a plan to keep the Hebrew people down by conscripting them into hard labor, building storehouses for Egypt's abundance of food. Do you hear the labor of Roman*, and of other fast food workers? Pharaoh

demanded high quotas of brick-making and back-breaking labor to keep the Hebrews busy and weary. Do you hear the labor of the construction worker, not paid his or her due for today's work? Pharaoh appointed harsh taskmasters to ensure that the Hebrew people and all their potential would be kept tightly under his control. Do you hear the authority of the foreman or the CEO? Things didn't go all as Pharaoh planned, though. Do you remember how it went? The more taskmasters and labors that Pharaoh set over the Hebrew people, the more they grew in strength and numbers. But Pharaoh was stubborn and determined. He came up with bigger and badder schemes to press Israel down, even slavery and murder. Through all of Pharaoh's tyranny, God was the one sustaining and strengthening the Hebrews, fortifying them against Egypt, but the more God strengthened God's people, the more outrageous Pharaoh became. God would have to intervene to get Israel out of Pharaoh's hands.

Enter Moses. When Moses takes a walk on Mount Horeb, God gets his attention with a sign that is like Israel's oppression: The bush is in the heart of the fire, yet it is not consumed by the flames. The Hebrew people are lashed by the flames of oppression, but they are not destroyed. Moses himself is a sign of God's providence and Israel's perseverance, as he survived Pharaoh's mandate that all boys born to the Hebrews be killed. So, being the saved man that he is, Moses knows exactly what to do when he receives God's call. He's willing and able and ready. "Go to Pharaoh! Free the children of Israel! That's the job for me!"

No?

Actually, Moses seems a bit befuddled. He answers neither "yes" nor "no" to God's plan. Moses' response to God is a question: "Who am I?" ... "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and free your people?" Now I can't blame Moses for feeling daunted by the call that God

entrusts to him. We can all relate to that, right? God has given you big dreams, too, and the way to achieve them is not usually easy. On this day of worship, we also celebrate and pray and advocate for another group of God's people, a new generation of Israel, our sisters and brothers who labor in low-wage jobs, often in unjust, unsafe, and uncompassionate settings. When we check in with the Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice or the Workers' Rights Center we hear of myriad offences by the taskmasters of Madison's labor sector against the workers who are the foundation of their businesses. Take a moment to think of a person or business who is on your heart when you think of the oppression of your working neighbor. In a moment of silence, let us pray for the people and situations we have in mind. ... Amen

When we turn aside to see the plight of our neighbors in Madison alone, how can we dream big enough to achieve justice here? As well as in our state, our country, and our world? Now that you've stepped into Moses' sandals, let's be like Moses and take those sandals off as we enter the holy ground of God's words to Moses from the fiery bush. I wonder why God asks Moses to take off his sandals. Some of the Rabbis who've commented on this passage say it is because the bottoms of Moses' sandals would be unclean. He's been walking all over who knows where, stepping in the paths of the sheep for instance. God wouldn't want those unclean things on holy ground. If you remember, Moses responded violently to the oppression of the Hebrew people earlier in his story; perhaps that is an unclean act that God does not want brought into Moses' conversation and work with the Lord.

Another aspect to taking off our shoes is that it makes us vulnerable. Our feet are exposed to the dangers of what's on the ground. We might step on something sharp. We remember, though, God's response to Moses' question. When Moses asks, "Who am I [...]?"

does God answer, “You’re the hero, Moses”? “You’re strong enough to do this”? “You’ve done this before”? God’s answer to Moses’ “Who am I?” is “I will be with you.” This is the heart of Moses’ mission with Pharaoh and the children of Israel. “I will be with you.” God tells Moses, “I came down to deliver my people.” God hasn’t waited at a distance to see what would happen to Israel. God appears to Moses in such a way that he can see signs and feel the warmth of God’s presence and hear God’s voice. “I have heeded the cry of my people,” says the Lord, and “Yes, I know their sufferings.”

God’s knowing is important for Moses because Moses himself does not truly know the suffering of his own sisters and brothers. There is a lot we don’t know about Moses’ growing up, but we do know that he was taken in by Pharaoh’s daughter and raised as her own son. He had a different life from the other Hebrew people, perhaps a softer environment. Who knows how long Moses had seen in passing the Hebrew slaves waiting on his adoptive mother and on Pharaoh. Perhaps he took walks in the garden where he caught a glimpse of their hard labor. But one particular day is significant in Moses’ life in Egypt. On this day when he is struck by the oppression of his people, he strikes out and murders one of the Egyptian taskmasters. He acts instinctively against the violence that he sees, and in so doing, he becomes estranged from Pharaoh and Egypt, and even from his own people. When he tries to resolve an argument between two Hebrews, they mock him for the crime he committed. Moses had to flee Egypt because of the action he took against oppression, but that was when he acted on his own, without consulting anyone from his community, without consulting God, without prayer. Now God tells Moses, “I will be with you [in your work].” The God who sees and hears and knows the people’s suffering will be with him, and not only God but also Aaron, also Myriam, also the elders who will be gathered from the family of Israel. God’s response to Moses’ “Who am I?” is, “You will not be

alone. Who God is and where God is, is more significant than who Moses is; who God is, is more significant than who you are.

So why does God choose Moses? Moses is the one who turned aside. When Moses notices the bush, he says to himself, “[This is no ordinary wildfire!] Let me turn aside to see this great thing.” I wonder if others encountered the burning bush before Moses. Maybe some passed by without turning to see. Maybe others came who ran away in fear. Moses turned to see and hear what God would say. God reopens Moses’ eyes to the sufferings of Israel in the bush, showing him that the Hebrew people were burning, yet not consumed by the oppression of Egypt, showing him that God would not wait far off or allow Israel to be consumed. God is also setting fires in our city. At the Workers’ Rights Center on Park Street there is a burning bush of workers who come to voice and address injustices in their workplaces, who come to send a message to their taskmasters: We will not be abused; we will not be overlooked. On the Isthmus there is a burning bush of workers whose testimonies make up the Just Dining Guide, shedding light on both the taskmasters and the compassionate employers. On East Washington there will be a burning bush of workers this Thursday: Join with Roman*; join with us, uniting our voices to fight for a living wage. At Labor Fest tomorrow there will be a burning bush of workers who come to celebrate a holiday and be honored. There will be another burning bush of workers whose taskmasters will keep them in their workplaces tomorrow, who will receive no thanks or recognition for their labor.

When you turn aside to see these fires, these sisters and brothers, take off your sandals. Be vulnerable to the ground on which they stand. Be vulnerable to their sufferings. Listen to hear God say, “I will be with you.” God does not want you to stand alone against injustice. God will draw us into community and into God’s work. The workers are not alone when they are denied their rights or when they fight for

them. You are not alone when you turn aside to see and love and serve your working sister or brother.

God is with us. Amen.

*Roman Fletcher is a worker at McDonalds. He gave a brief testimony of the low wages of McDonalds' workers and invited the congregation to join him and other workers in the Fight for Fifteen rally on East Washington, Thursday, Sep. 4, 2014.