

“THE MAKING OF A PEOPLE: READY TO HEAR”

Exodus 2:11-25, 3:1-15

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Moses is just minding his own business – or, rather, his father-in-law’s business, or to be more precise, his father-in-law’s *sheep* – one day, when a something odd and out-of-place catches his eye... and he goes to have a look at it. Imagine if he hadn’t been at all a curious kind of guy! The story might have been different. But because he goes to see what’s going on with this bush burning-but-not-burning-up, he has this life-changing encounter with God. It’s such a powerful encounter that it changes not only the course of his life but the course of history. And it also becomes one of the most iconic stories of human-divine encounter in the history of Jewish and Christian faith.

This story shapes our understanding of what it is to experience the presence of God: sacred space, in a natural setting; an often unexpected and unlooked for encounter; awe or even fear; a deep sense of the holiness of God – otherness – that cannot be too closely approached; questions and wonder; some revelation about what God is like; life somehow changed by a new call or responsibility.

Our experiences of God’s presence probably have not involved hearing a voice from a burning shrub, but I think we do mostly read this story of Moses and the burning bush from the point of view of people thinking about what it means for any of us to encounter God. That’s not wrong, but when we consider the story as part of the larger story of the God’s people (or even the larger story of Moses’ life) it looks a little different.

When we hear just this part of Exodus 3, as we often do, without what came before, the burning bush encounter seems like it happens “out of the blue.” When we hear it without what comes after, it can seem like primarily a personal spiritual experience – more dramatic, perhaps, than many of us have, but a “mountaintop moment” of awareness in sacred time and space.

But this is far from “just” a spiritual experience; it’s a *call*. And while it’s definitely not generic – it’s clearly *for Moses* - it’s not personal or private. It’s for the sake of his people. And in the context of the larger story we have been exploring, it is not at all “out of the blue.” All this time, though Moses didn’t know it, God was watching over him. And all this time, Moses’ experiences were bringing him to this moment, helping him become ready to hear the call.

Here are some things that Moses (and we) learn about God in this story:
God recognizes the oppression of the people, hears their cries, knows their suffering.
God remembers that these are God’s own people.
And God, out of compassion for these vulnerable and hurting people, is ready to defend them.

What God says *must* have resonated with Moses... because (did you notice?) Moses' own experience mirrors God's intentions?

Though he was adopted into Pharaoh's household, protected and privileged and shielded from the harsher realities of the Israelite's slavery in Egypt, he eventually went out and saw what was going on. He witnessed the forced labor and the cruel treatment. He recognized the oppression of the Israelites, heard their cries, began to really understand their suffering. He remembered that these were his own people, the people he came from. And (though his actions may have been wrong and unwise) we see him defend one of his vulnerable relatives from abuse. It all goes wrong, but for better or worse he's chosen a side. And that means he has to flee.

He settles in a new place and that looks like the end of it. But the seed has been planted. Now Moses has seen the injustice his community is experiencing, and he understands how much they are hurting. He also feels connected to them. Though he's safe in Midian for the time being – has even married and started a family - he feels himself to be an alien there. Part of him feels the pull of connection to the slaves in Egypt who are his people.

So though it might be strange and it might be unexpected, this encounter and the call are not entirely out of the blue. Moses' experiences have prepared him, so that he is receptive to this encounter with God. He's ready to hear God's call. Ready to listen when God says, "I've heard; These are my people; I will defend them." Ready to make that same commitment himself.

Well, *sort of* ready. As ready as he can be. As ready as anyone ever can be, maybe.

God calls, but Moses – like nearly all the other prophets and leaders in the Bible, like nearly all of us – Moses puts up some resistance. Notice that he doesn't argue at all about the reality of the situation, or about his own relationship to the suffering Israelites, or about the necessity of the work. He has already aligned himself with God's perspective, God's compassion, God's sense of justice.

But he says, "I'm just not equipped for the task."

God's response is: "I will be with you."

That should be enough. It will, in the end, be enough. It will see him through. But at this point, Moses still has more questions: Who should I say sent me? Is he really still not sure who he is talking to? Or is he just not sure of God yet? Is he perhaps afraid that God who seems so present in this sacred space isn't going to have any relevance out there in the harsh realities of the world?

"I am who I am," God says. I am the God of your ancestors. I am the God who has always been with your people. God's power and commitment to justice and compassion for these beloved people is not going to change. God is faithful.

God is also patient. Moses is slow to embrace the call to return to Egypt and lead his people out of slavery. There's much more beyond the part we read: Moses is afraid the Israelites won't believe God has sent him to lead them. He argues that he is not good at speaking (although for someone who claims not to be eloquent, he certainly manages to argue with God quite a lot!) He doesn't think he has what it takes to face Pharaoh and persuade him to free the slaves.

God eventually responds to one of Moses' concerns by including Moses' brother Aaron in the plan, as "spokesperson." Moses will come back to God later with more arguments about his own inadequacies, especially when the first efforts to persuade Pharaoh to release the slaves are unsuccessful, and when the whole process takes a long time and involves many ups and downs. In fact throughout his whole life, Moses will struggle with self-doubt. He will feel incapable of carrying out the leadership responsibilities that become his. He will tell God he wants to give up and he will argue with God about a number of things.

You'd think the burning-bush, holy-ground encounter would have resolved all of that for Moses. You'd think he'd leave that place completely transformed and energized and practically invincible – ready to conquer all. It doesn't seem to go that way, though.

But that's one of the things that makes Moses' encounter with God so compelling.

Theologian Terrence Fretheim says that "divine holiness is of such a character that it invites rather than repels human response, inviting Moses into genuine conversation. God does not demand a self-effacing Moses, but draws him out and works with him, 'warts and all.'" (p. 52) This is a great affirmation to the majority of us who are not gifted with great self-confidence, who have questions and doubts, who just don't quite understand what God might want with us ... but who find ourselves once in a while on the holy ground of awareness that God is present and calling to us.

The burning bush encounter is just one little moment – an important and pivotal moment, certainly, but one step in a long journey that sometimes seems to be one step forward and two steps back. Just when we think God is about to raise up a hero to save the day, Moses turns out to be a flawed human being who needs a lot of help. Just when we think all is well, a new danger threatens the future. Just when we think it's all over, unexpected help arrives. Just when we think we are on sacred ground and completely immersed in, in tune with, God's presence, we have to go back out into the world where there is danger and suffering, uncertainty and work to do. Just when we think God has disappeared, there is God again, making things ready, moving the story along, holding the community together, calling out leaders, opening the way to freedom, speaking a word of hope.

It is such a long, long process, this making of a people. But maybe that's the very reason it has held so much resonance through the centuries, especially for individuals and communities struggling under various forms of oppression or injustice or alienation. Because our human reality isn't like the superhero movies: change often comes slowly, or in fits and starts, or after a long struggle. It's hard to be patient. It's hard to keep fighting on. It's hard to keep faith when new obstacles keep popping up. It's hard to

trust that God is working in and with us to ready us for what's next. It's hard to be ready to hear God's voice or to see ourselves as people God might actually call. That's why the messiness of this Exodus story speaks so powerfully still: it says to us that others have walked the road before us. It reminds us that God knows our struggles, that God desires our freedom, that God goes with us. This story invites us onto the holy ground of encounter of encounter with God, so that, somehow, inadequate and unprepared as we are, we can be part of the work God continues to do for human freedom, dignity, well-being, and justice. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Resources:

Terrence Freitheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation Commentary)