

Moses Get's a Life
(Exodus 3:1-15)

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Prelude to his Call

Since Labor Day Weekend is for celebrating working people, I think it is appropriate that our first reading is about how Moses came to his vocation; how he came to be the leader who led his people out of slavery in Egypt. How this came about was anything but straightforward. And so I think it is instructive for us to see how it began.

Moses had an unusual and probably disorienting childhood. He was born to a Hebrew mother in a time when Egypt was under the dictatorship of a cruel and insecure Pharaoh, who treated them as slaves. You may recall that at his birth Moses's mother and sister put him in a basket and hid him in the reeds by the river in order to save him from a death sentence which Pharaoh had imposed on all Hebrew male infants.

That same day, the Pharaoh's daughter came down to the river to bathe and found the baby Moses and took him into her care, knowing full well that what she was doing was in defiance of her father. She had him raised by his actual mother, and then, when he was a little older, she

had him brought to her, presumably in the palace, where she raised him as her own son.

So, by the time he was a young man, Moses would have experienced life at the bottom and at the top of the social order. And we can speculate that he had some strong feelings about the vast difference between the way his two mothers lived and the way the people around them lived. And this may help explain why, one day, as a young man, as he was on his way to visit his real mother, he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, and murdered the Egyptian.

He tried to conceal what he had done. But there was a witness. It all came out. The Pharaoh heard about it and decided that Moses must face the death penalty. So he fled and came to a remote outpost called Midian. Not a good start!

In Midian, he ran into another scene of injustice. Several young girls were trying to water their sheep at a well, when another group of shepherds came along and tried to chase them away. Even though despite Moses had no-one else to back him up, he intervened on their behalf, and they were able to water their sheep. It was a risky move, but this time things turned out well. He ended up going to work

tending sheep for the grateful father of the girls and marrying one of his daughters, a woman named Zipporah, (which means “little bird.”)

In some ways Moses’s life must have seemed to him like a botched affair. He had begun his life in a situation in which he might have been someone of consequence. He identified with the plight of his mother and his Hebrew kin. And he was also someone who was accustomed to walking the halls of power. So he had been well placed to be an advocate for his people. But now he was hiding out in sheep herding country, looking forward to the life of a humble shepherd, raising sheep alone in the wilderness.

It seems that he was also a victim of his own personality. It is clear that he had a strong sense of justice, because he could not bear to see people being mistreated and that he felt some inner compulsion to step in and do something about it. And the fact that he did act in the two cases we mentioned, shows that he was not afraid to act boldly in some very dicey situations.

His first intervention was a disaster in every way. His second intervention turned out well. His life was a mixed bag. But hidden among these mixed results were the basic ingredients for the kind of leader God was looking for to lead the enslaved Hebrews out of their

bondage under the Pharaoh. And what is clear, in today's reading is that God was watching the developments in Moses's life with interest.

The Burning Bush

Now, in this morning's reading, we pick up with Moses out in the wilderness tending his father-in-law's sheep. He has entered a period of reflection in his life, with time and space to think a lot about his past and his future. If he is honest with himself, he sees what a mixed bag his life so far has been. And he must also see how lucky he is to be alive. He must be aware that he has only been able to survive, because he has been surrounded by people who have been willing to take serious risks to protect him.

He must be wondering whether this is the life he should be leading? Is it his destiny to be a shepherd from Midian? Why not settle for this quieter life with a father-in-law who is well established and who admires him and coming home to the free-spirited Zipporah and their little son Gershom. There is a lot to be said for the prospect of a long and peaceful life, away from the spotlight and the dangers of power politics.

All this time God had been keeping one eye on Moses as he herds his sheep in the wilderness, and the other on the plight of the Hebrews in Egypt. And now God decides to act.

God sets a bush on fire near where Moses is herding his sheep and causes it to burn in a way in which it is not consumed, but continues to burn. Moses turns aside from his shepherding duties to see what this strange occurrence is about. And then God calls to him out of the bush. And Moses responds, "Here I am." God describes the suffering of his people and tells Moses that he must lead his people out of their suffering and bondage to a land of promise.

Moses is taken aback by having this challenge set before him. He feels inadequate to the task. And the idea of advocating for his people in front of Pharaoh, who wants him dead, sounds very risky. But then his characteristic boldness takes over and he asks "How?" By whose authority shall he say he is acting? And this is when God reveals the name, 'Yahweh', "I am," a name which is so Holy that some Jewish groups forbid themselves to even say it aloud.

This part of the reading is worth of a lot of reflection, and contains way too much to consider here. But I can suggest that the name of God

highlights a unity between the heart of Moses, who said “Here I Am” and the heart of God, who calls himself “I Am”; in other words, that when we are our true selves, we are somehow a reflection of God, wanting what God wants and wanting to do what God wants us to do. We are “made in the image of God.” And this is what should give Moses authority in the eyes of Pharaoh, and gives us authenticity in the eyes of others.

Signs of being Calling

For Bible scholars this story of how Moses got his start and other stories like it are known as “call stories.” And call stories are important because they help us understand how people through the history of our family of faith first came to their true vocations, through some kind of encounter with God. God chooses the moment and calls. The person says “Here I am.” God presents the person with a task or vocation. The person initially feels inadequate and doesn’t want to do it. And then God signals that he will be there to provide.

The Call stories are also important for us, because they help us make sense of our own lives. Few of us have been chosen to be figures on the scale of Moses. It is fair to say that, God also keeps an eye on each one of us and at the same time, an eye on the suffering of the people around us and that what God wants from us will test us, because it will

go beyond the humble and more comfortable expectation that we have for ourselves.

Having taken a good look at us and recognized our potential, (potential that may even be hidden from ourselves), God chooses the right moment to come to us with a challenge that will give our lives purpose and address the suffering God seeks to prevent.

And hopefully hearing the call story of Moses, is also good way on this Labor Day to consider and appreciate the efforts of American workers and labor organizers, who have stepped up to meet the challenge of creating a work environment that is good for everyone. We are the beneficiaries of their efforts; efforts that echo Moses's struggle to find his true vocation and to free his people from their enslavement under the Pharaoh's regime.

Two Signs

I'd like to highlight two aspects of Moses's call that I think are good signs for each of us, that God is calling us.

One is the presence of a burning passion. That there is a fire that burns within you, that doesn't go out. It blazes with mesmerizing beauty, the way a maple tree blazes with color in the fall. It crackles and pops as it burns, and yet is not consumed or reduced to ashes.

One way to think of the burning bush in the story of Moses , is to see it as a supernatural event, an actual bush burning and not being consumed. Another way is to see it as a way of talking about and visualizing something that we can't actually be seen with the eye, that happens in our hearts; that the burning bush is the outer representation of an inner experience; the experience of passion that burns in our hearts, when the people we love, come to our mind.

The other sign I'd like to draw attention to is the message that comes forth out of that burning bush. It is a message of love, combined with a specific kind of task or work to be done. It is a task that is intended to free others from their suffering and bondage.

Love is a passionate fire. It is not the only passionate fire. Self-idolization can be a passionate fire, greed can be a passionate fire, hatred can be a passionate fire. All these passions burn until nothing is left but ashes. But there is one passion that burns without destroying, it is the fire of God's love; the Spirit of Compassion for others that comes from God to dwell in our hearts, when we have the time and space to recognize what is truly important in our lives.

The One Calling

It seems to me that what the story of Moses's call communicates to us is really about what lies at the core of every legitimate occupation. It is core of what we should drive us, regardless of our job titles. Every job requires a particular skillset and a particular knowledge base. And some are better suited to certain tasks than others. But no matter what it is we are called to do, it should be animated by our relationship with a God who comes to us in a burning bush, that burns but is not consumed.