

Clarity About Your Calling

Matthew 16:21-28, Exodus 3:1-15

“But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’” Exodus 3:11

The Reverend Joanna Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, Georgia
August 28, 2005

Last Sunday evening, millions of Americans took out their handkerchiefs and sat down to watch the final episode of *Six Feet Under* on HBO. I was among them. I confess to having been addicted for five years to *Six Feet Under*, a quirky drama set in California that told the story of members of the Fisher family, proprietors of a funeral home, and the Fisher’s various friends, lovers, and acquaintances. The eldest son in the family was named Nate. He was a mess but a very lovable one, and his death, at the age of 40, in the next to last episode, broke everyone’s heart, including my own. And then, in the last episode, Nate reappeared. He came back as sort of a spiritual advisor to his family and especially to his twenty- something sister Claire, who was a big mess in her own right and was torn between staying in CA and following her passion and moving to New York to be a photographer. He says to her in that sweet, loving voice of his, “Claire, “I spent my whole life being scared, not being ready, not being what I should be, and where did it get me?”

The next scene shows Claire, her red hair flying, driving across the desert on her way to Manhattan to discover whatever life had in store for her next. How does one go about deciding one’s life direction if one does not have a brother who comes back from the dead to tell you what to do?

Ethicist Andy Fleming at Emory's Center for Ethics suggests that you ask yourself three questions: What do I like to do? What am I good at doing? What needs to be done in the world? Where those questions overlap is what Fleming calls "the sweet spot," that is, the place where you and I are meant to be and where we live out our destiny at its fullest. That's a pretty good decision making- process, I think, when it comes to deciding what to do next, but in the Old Testament account of the commissioning of Moses, there is the clear indication that another decision-maker is at work in the process of human destiny. The name of that actor is God, YHWH, the Hebrews called him, an early form of the Hebrew verb "to be." You would think that God's name would be a noun, but no, God's name is not a noun. It is a verb, the verb "to be." God is all about being and doing, and what God does to Moses is to put him into whatever is the opposite of a sweet spot. In fact, Yahweh drags Moses into the most conflicted moment of his life thus far.

For starters, what a mismatch of skills! Claire, the artistically inclined photographer, heads off to pursue that which will best use her skill set. Moses' skills lie in the area of shepherding. That is what he's doing, tending the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro in the land of Midian, where he had fled from Egypt after he had killed an Egyptian overseer who had mistreated a Hebrew slave.

I don't want you to get lost in the plot, so let me give you a brief review of this Biblical family history. The heirs of Abraham and Sarah had included a man named Joseph. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt but then Joseph became the Pharaoh's right hand man when a great famine hit the land. The Book of Exodus, where we are today, begins with a brief review of the family tree,

and then we come across these haunting words, “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” He oppressed the Israelites with hard, forced labor. Moses was an Israelite. You remember his story and the great adventures of his early days, how he rode down the Nile in a basket made of bulrushes. (Yes, Mardee, I’m trying to get people to come to Sunday school and hear these stories all over again!) And how he was the object of a very well- planned rescue, and how he ended up in the Pharaoh’s palace. His golden life ended when his anger got the best of him, and he committed that murder and had to flee. When we come across him today, he is far away from all of that. He has gotten his life back together. He is married. He has a baby. He is enjoying herding his father-in-law’s sheep. He has no aspirations whatsoever other than finding sweet grass for his hungry flock.

And that is precisely what he is doing, going about his business, when God appears to him out of the blue and says, “Son, I have plans for you.” Of course, it wasn’t that simple, but that is the gist of it. God spoke to Moses, called to him from a nearby bush that was ablaze with flame. You would think that the Almighty might choose something a little less ordinary than a bush to be the divine loudspeaker, but throughout the scriptures, we find God over and over again using that which is close at hand, right exactly where we are, to reveal divine presence and will.

I know what you’re saying. “I have never had a burning bush experience.”

“I have never heard God speak to me.”

“I am still waiting for my Damascus Road,” referring to the place where Saul, was going about his own business, which was persecuting the Jews, when he encountered a sudden light from heaven and heard the Lord speaking to him.

Well, I respectfully disagree that God has never spoken to you, or that you have never had a message from God. I believe that there is not a single person here to whom God has not spoken somehow, somehow about where God wants you to go and be and do in the next chapter of your life. How does God speak? Sometimes it comes in the form of an “A” in your favorite course in college. But sometimes God speaks through the “F” as well. God has not left you alone to find your way. The question is whether you and I are listening to the ups and downs in our lives, to the people around us who believe in us, to the surprising developments that truly come out of nowhere. I think often about the disciples of Jesus and how there they were, each going about his own business. And then the voice, “Follow me.” No command to go home and figure out your life plan. Just, “Follow me.” And how gladly they responded, and how in doing so, they discovered the true purpose of their lives and the deepest gladness and meaning they had ever known. Why? Because they paid attention.

I know a fellow. Some of you know him too. His ears happened to be open one day in a Sunday School Class at another church in our city. I was serving as community minister there. We were focusing on mission that day. We had invited a man named Ron Sider, author of a book called *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* to speak to the Sunday school class. On Tuesday of the next week, a member of our congregation, a married, father of two, a promising young attorney who had played on America’s team at Wimbledon, called me and said, “I’m in a mess now, Joanna. What that Sider man said really got under my skin. I mean, how can you go back to regular life after hearing what he had to say?”

To make the story of John's new vocational life short, let me say that he left his law practice and started the first non-profit organization in the state of Georgia to help poor people in terms of criminal defense. The organization continues to thrive because one young lawyer decided to say "yes" when God's word got under his skin.

Sometimes God reaches out and grabs us suddenly and unexpectedly. Sometimes God answers when we ask. I love the way Barbara Brown Taylor speaks of her call as she wrestled with what direction she should go. Teacher? Priest? Professor? She kept being drawn in all sorts of directions. "Around midnight, one night," she writes in her book, *The Preaching Life*, "I simply said to God, tell me as plainly as possible what I am supposed to do."

Here is what she heard, as clear as a bell. "Do anything that pleases you and belong to me."

(p.23)

God is at work in our lives, sometimes using the tactic of a surprise ambush, a la Moses, and sometimes in a gentle but clear word of direction.

"Moses, Moses!" Yahweh called out to the young shepherd from a bush that was blazing and not consumed. Moses was so taken aback, he answered as a school boy might: "Here!"

"Don't come any closer," the Lord warned. "Take your sandals off. Where you're standing is holy ground." Now listen, I don't want to emphasize this point too strongly this morning, but the ground had, just a moment before, been ordinary ground, just as the bush had, a moment before,

been an ordinary bush. You do not have to go away to a designated sacred place to have an encounter with the Almighty. You do not have to buy a plane ticket and fly to the island of Iona or drive out I-20 and go to the monastery in Conyers. God will come to you where you are.

The first thing God did with Moses was to make sure Moses understood that the one who was speaking to him was the same God who had guided his ancestors. Then, God got down to business with Moses. It becomes immediately clear that God is interested in more than Moses' individual destiny. The fate of desperate people was on God's mind. "I have observed the misery of my people in Egypt. I have come to deliver them from bondage and to bring them out to a land flowing with milk and honey."

Just as Moses was thinking, "Well, isn't that good of you, God," God goes on to say, "So, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out."

"Me?" Moses asks, in disbelief. "Who am I to do that?" Moses really 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," the Lord said. "You are mine. I am going with you all the way." Note there is no guarantee of success, just the assurance of God's unfailing providence and care.

Sounds like enough to me. But, it was not enough to Moses. He continued to object. "If the people ask me who sent me, what am I going to tell them?"

The Lord answered, “Tell them I AM sent me to you.

Moses is not so sure that would be a satisfying answer. The conversation goes on back and forth like this for the rest of the third chapter of Exodus and first of the fourth. Remember who the participants are in this conversation: The holy God, whose glory fills creation and a man named Moses who clearly has the most chutzpa ever recorded in human history.

On he goes with his argument, “What if they don’t believe when I tell them you sent me?”

“Then I’ll give you some signs that you can show to them. And if the signs with the snake and the hand turning white with leprosy don’t impress them, take some water from the Nile river and pour it on the ground, and I will turn into blood”

The promise of the signs was still not enough for Moses. His heels were dug in deep against his destiny. “You have forgotten something, Almighty God. You have forgotten that I am a very poor public speaker. When I open my mouth, it is as if I have marbles in my mouth. I am slow of speech, my tongue doesn’t work.”

The Lord had only one nerve left, and Moses was standing on it. “You forgot, Moses, that I am the one who gives speech in the first place! I’ll be with your mouth. I’ll tell you what you are to say.”

Moses still would not give up. He said, “O my Lord, please send someone else.”

Astonishingly, God says, “Alright. 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 are waiting for you, and only you. You’re the one.”

Finally, Moses does what the Lord commands, because with the Lord’s help, he is finally able to push through the wall of his self-doubt and sense of inadequacy. God knew Moses would be fine. The problem was Moses didn’t know it. God knew that Moses would have every thing he needed to fulfill his mission. The challenge was helping Moses come to the place where he could trust God to work in, through, and around his human limitations.

We spoke last week about our call here at Morningside to be a vital spiritual center in one of the most exciting intown communities in the United States. That is a formidable call for our little church, but listening to the story of the commissioning of Moses reminds us that the God who calls also equips. Don’t worry about it. The risky part lies in whether we will say yes, whether our sense of inadequacy, our tendency to want to tread water right where we are, whether all that will overcome us. But giving in to staying where you are is simply no way to live. Jesus showed us how to live. One day he laid it all out for his disciples. “I know what I must do, I must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and be killed and on the third day I will be raised.” He knew who he was. He knew what he had to do, and he knew that God would give him what he needed to fulfill his mission in life, which was not just about him. It was about the salvation of the world. Whatever you do in this world, whether you teach or work in an office, whether you

are beginning your career or are in the middle of it or whether you are retired, if your only goal in life is to get your needs met, or to get glory for yourself or to make a name for yourself, than I guarantee you that you will miss out on the life God intends for you. The purpose of human life has never been about any of that. It has always been about being a part of something that is larger and more enduring than oneself. God's claim is on everyone's life in that sense.

Was Moses life a bed of roses after God got a hold of him? Actually, the day that happened was the day that his real troubles began. Pharaoh's army tried to kill him. The people whom he liberated griped and complained for forty years, and when he and they finally arrived at the Promised Land, God decided that someone else, Joshua, would take them over to the other side and not Moses. Moses died in the land of Moab without ever reaching the Promised Land. Those people he had shepherded for all those years grieved for him for about a month and then went right on without him. But oh, what a life he led, beginning with that fateful day he left the house a shepherd and returned the deliverer of a nation.

Remember, friends in Christ, this life you're living now, it is the only one you've got. Don't spend it being sacred, not being ready, not being what you should be. The bush is burning. It burns for you. Pay attention. Look, listen. Amen.

The Prayer of Teresa of Avila

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
No hands but yours;
No feet but yours;
Yours are the eyes through which His compassion will look upon the world;
Yours are the feet with which He will go about doing good;
Yours are the hands with which He will bless others now.

