

**Please send someone else**  
**September 3, 2017**  
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“Tell me your call story.” Any inquirer or candidate for ordination to ministry in the Presbyterian church will be asked this question roughly one thousand seven hundred and thirty-two times. Or something like that. They are asked on seminary application forms, scholarship applications, presbytery paperwork, in session meetings, in committee meetings, by their terrified spouses in the middle of the night, on airplanes, in the checkout line at the grocery store and so on. Those of us in the ministry biz use like to use words like “call” and “discernment” to the point of cliché -sort of like how “core competency,” “keystone,” and “bandwidth” are used in the corporate world.

But this need to hear the call story is understandable. People want to know why one would leave comfortable, fulfilling and even lucrative careers in business, medicine and law to pursue a “call” into ministry. It seems crazy, and 9 years on this side of ordination, I can affirm that it is, indeed, crazy. Many days go by when I question my sanity, which is why I’m particularly excited about this morning’s text.

Today, we are talking about the call of Moses and the burning bush, another crazy call story. It is a story that most of us have heard roughly one thousand seven hundred and thirty-two times. Or something like that. But today, we are going to pay close attention to the details leading up to and following this call story in a way that might cast the idea of “calling” in a new light. So before I read our scripture, I think it is important to refresh our memories of some of the highlights of Moses’ life up until this point.

At the end of the book of Genesis, the Israelites were living in Egypt. A few weeks ago, Peter preached a sermon on one of the sons of Israel, Joseph, and I encourage you to go check it out if you missed it. Without going into all the details, relations between Egypt and Israel were stellar. Joseph has taken very good care of the Egyptians when they needed it most, and as a result, they welcomed Joseph’s extended family when there was a famine. Happy times.

Fast forward a few hundred years, there were several generations of kings and the current king seemed to have forgotten how awesome the Israelites were. The Hebrews were growing rapidly in number, and Pharaoh felt threatened. He enslaved the Israelites thinking this might slow their growth and increase Egypt’s productivity; but even in enslavement, they continued to grow in number. Pharaoh then commanded that there be a mass extermination of Hebrew babies by the midwives, but the midwives did not follow his command. He then commanded that all male Israelite babies be thrown into the Nile.

In the midst of this horror, Moses was born. His mother managed to hide him for a few months and then took a chance and placed him in a basket in the reeds on the Nile river, in hopes that someone would find him, take pity on him and raise him. As fate would have it, Pharaoh’s own daughter found him and raised him in the palace.

When Moses was an adult, he witnessed an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, so he intervened and killed the Egyptian. When Pharaoh heard of this incident, he sought to kill Moses, so Moses fled to the land of

Midian. At this point, Moses had no identity or life's purpose. He was not raised as one of his own people, the Israelites, and he was no longer one of the Egyptians. While he was in Midian, however, he met and married his wife Zipporah, who was the daughter of the priest of Midian, and was welcomed into Jethro's family. Finally, after such a history of violence and brokenness, Moses had an identity and a family. He was safe, he was loved and he was secure. And this is the point where we pick up the story in today's text, Exodus 3:1-15. Listen now for God's word to you today:

*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.*

*<sup>7</sup>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." <sup>11</sup>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.*

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

A few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of taking my three girls on some college tours. Our oldest, Amina, is a senior this year and is in the midst of that terrifying process of figuring out where she will go, what will she study, and how she will support herself after college. I took my two sophomores along as well to give them a taste of what was on the horizon. We had a lot of fun, but it was also a little stressful. One of the takeaways from the experience is the immense pressure to know and commit to at the age of 17 exactly how you plan to spend the rest of your life. Who can do that? It is a rare story that someone knows exactly what they want to do with their lives at such a young age. In fact, two-thirds of your clergy took some radical leaps in an entirely different direction mid-career.

One of the quotes that comes up again and again when talking about vocation comes from the famous preacher and author, Frederick Buechner. From his book, *Wishful Thinking*, he said, "the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."<sup>1</sup> It is actually a very helpful quote when trying to match one's gifts with the world's greatest needs to create fulfilling work;

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<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. Harper & Row, 1973.

but I think through the years people have misconstrued or misunderstood the concept behind deep gladness. That concept has come to mean happiness and comfort for many people. If a line of work drains someone or it is not perceived as life giving to them, they consider that perhaps it is not where God is calling them to be after all. And truth be told, discernment is tricky. It is hard to know to which voices we should be paying attention.

In the best-case scenario, we identify the gifts that God has given us, and it gives us great joy and connection to offer something that both makes us feel successful and at the same time, is useful to the world in some way. And call stories can definitely play out that way. Someone is miserable in their job, so they begin exploring other options. They discover something of which they have deep passion and are set on a path to live out their new vocation in exciting, fruitful ways. It just feels right, and it is evident to family, friends and co-workers that this person is finally doing what they are meant to do. And I confess, that certainly resonates with my own call story.

On the surface, Moses' call story looks a little like that. God was calling him to use his gifts to deliver his brethren from slavery. We know how the story ends – the Israelites are freed. So this call story can appear formulaic or just a minor detail in the big picture. It would make sense to us that Moses would be motivated to pursue this call, because he was ripped from his family only to be raised by his oppressor and subsequently displaced from the land where he was raised. But that was not the case with Moses. Our common lectionary reading for this morning only delivers to us part of the story.

If you keep reading on in the book of Exodus, you will learn that Moses turned God down flat not once, not twice, not three times, but four times! In 3:11, he said, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” In 4:1, he said, “But suppose [the Israelite elders] do not believe me or listen to me, but say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you.’” In 4:10, he said, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” And finally, in his most bold push-back, he says, “O my Lord, please send someone else.” These are not the words of a confident, revolutionary leader.

Who can blame him? He finally had some peace. He finally had a family where he was loved and claimed. And he was supposed to go back to the land where he is wanted for murder? He was supposed to speak, which we are told he doesn't do too well, first to the Israelite elders who don't know him from Adam and convince them that a burning bush told him to set God's people free? The Israelites, these so-called chosen people of God, have been ignored by God for hundreds of years. They don't know who this YHWH is. So Moses was to go play the part of a crazy person, mount a movement to overthrow a government and lead this pack to the promised land. Something tells me this vocation would not be the source of Moses' deep gladness. This is not a Buechner-style vocation. This is another kind of call story entirely. Darn That Burning Bush.

I wonder if Moses regretted pausing, turning aside and looking at that darn bush. I'm sure somewhere among the plagues of Egypt, he thought, “if only I had kept my eyes firmly fixed to the ground, focused on the sheep.” But like all calls from God, the Burning Bush is un-ignorable and irresistible. Somewhere around his third objection, I think he knew this was not going away.

It turns out there are burning bushes all around us too. I think of our school teachers who have been called by God to educate our young people only to be underpaid, under-resourced and berated by parents. I think of our police officers who show up shift after shift even while brothers and sisters do both positively heroic things as well unthinkable things wearing the same badges. I think of conversations a

parishioner shared with me about an African American colleague who was in an interracial marriage. She had endured many forms of discrimination her whole life, but for the first time in her life in the shadow of Charlottesville, she fears for her safety. I think of a local Jewish colleague who has been put on target lists along with her children by a white supremacist organization. I think of our school social workers trying to find homes for countless Cabarrus county families when there is only one emergency family room in the whole county. I think of the homeless transgendered teenager that a clergy colleague was helping recently, because she was thrown out of her house and had nowhere else to go. I think of the thousands of people whose bodies and possessions are soaked to the bone at the hand of Hurricane Harvey. These are just a few of the burning bushes that I've noticed in the last week or so. There are countless more. If we follow Moses' lead, if we turn aside and behold the burning bushes, it won't take long before we realize our world is on fire.

The hard reality of taking in all these burning bushes is that it is exceedingly uncomfortable, it is overwhelming, it is exhausting, and it is costly. Moses knew all too well what the wrath of Empire looks like if one dares speak up and call it out. He grew up in it. So why did he do it? Why did he leave the safety and comfort of his new home and risk his life and the lives of his family to save others?

For one, when Moses finally accepted God's call, negotiating through four objections, he left with a magical staff, several tricks up his sleeve and a mouth piece in his brother Aaron, because God met every objection with resources. He did not go alone. God promised to be with him and empower him in every way he needed. That is not to say that Moses felt just fine after that. He had many ups and downs along the way, experiencing the pain of frustration, fear and hopelessness. But he was never ever alone.

Second, I believe that deep down, Moses knew that he could never feel truly comfortable, safe and whole until his people felt comfortable, safe and whole. While he was not enslaved and Pharaoh's rule wasn't hurting his children directly, he would never sleep soundly knowing that his people were suffering and dying. These burning bushes matter to us because they matter to God. As people who were created by and in the image of God, we are inextricably linked to one another. We see ourselves and we see God in the faces of others, and therefore we cannot rest until all are comfortable, safe and whole.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it is tempting to remain safe and comfortable while the world is on fire, to say "My Lord, please send someone else." I can relate. In case you were wondering, ministry is not a lot of fun right now. We are not popular people. But we are all Moses. There is a burning bush out there for every single one of us, regardless of our fears, regardless of our doubts, regardless of our inadequacies. God has chosen each one of us to do God's work. And we do not go it alone. God will guide us, God will equip us and God will set all of his children free. We need only to look for the burning bush and respond, "Here I am." In the name of the Father, and the Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.