

Who am I?

A Sermon Preached by Anne Westrick
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
Exodus 3:1–12; Psalms 148; Luke 2:22-40
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I first prepared this sermon for a Sunday last August. Then a hurricane hit and trees were down and the church was out of electricity and I never preached. Some of us joked that a blizzard would hit this weekend, postponing me again. But no blizzard yet. Here we are. And it's good to be here. Happy New Year!

Today I'm reflecting on the story of the burning bush, and I have to tell you that when I first re-read it, I thought the sermon could go in any number of directions because the story is so rich. A fire that burns without consuming. The removal of shoes on holy ground. The promise, "I will be with you." But the more I mediated on the text, the more I was drawn to Moses's question, ***Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?*** I thought, yeah, that's *my* question. ***Who am I?*** Who am I to get up in this pulpit and preach a sermon?

This wasn't the first time the ***Who am I?*** question gnawed at me. The question loomed large thirty years ago when I was a seminary student. I had every good intention of becoming a Presbyterian minister, and I was under care of the session of Swarthmore Presbyterian Church in Pennsylvania. But along the way, my studies raised more questions than answers. I struggled with a sense of calling. I was drawn to the Bible and to people of faith, but I did not hear a still, small voice guiding me. I did not see a burning bush. I wasn't sure where God was or who God was.

After seminary I became a college administrator and a mother and a writer. And now, thirty years later, I still find myself asking, ***Who am I?***

So, with that question on my mind, I turned to the story of Moses. You know the story: Moses was the baby his mother hid in the bulrushes. The baby found by Pharaoh's daughter and raised in Pharaoh's house. Picture that. A Hebrew boy growing up in a wealthy Egyptian household in which many of the servants and all of the slaves were Hebrews. And here was Moses getting special treatment. He knew he'd been adopted and knew he belonged with the servants and slaves. We know this because Exodus chapter 2 tells us, ***One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens.*** His people. The slaves.

Did Moses decide then and there to go to Pharaoh and demand that he let his people go? No, he didn't. But we know that Moses stewed over the treatment of his people. More than stewed—Exodus 2 tells us that Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, and Moses killed the Egyptian. Then he fled town. That's one of the little details that sometimes gets lost when we tell Moses' story. Moses murdered an Egyptian.

Now fast forward a number of years. Moses fled to the town of Midian, married Zipporah, became a shepherd, and tended the flock of his father-in-law. The pharaoh who had been his adopted father died and a new pharaoh came to the throne. Exodus 2 tells us that the people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and God heard their groaning.

Then we come to the wonderful passage about the bush. While tending sheep, Moses saw a

bush that was burning, [yet it was not consumed](#). Think about it. What could possibly burn but not be consumed? What does it mean for something to burn and not be destroyed?

Bible scholars suggest all sorts of interpretations for this passage. Some have seen the burning bush as a symbol of the Israelites in bondage in Egypt—cast down but not destroyed.¹ Another suggested that it represents the “state of the Jews...or the Church generally in the world.”² Scholar Davie Napier reflected on how difficult it was and still is for anyone to describe a moment in which he or she encounters the Holy, how in this case, Moses’s “tiny space, the world of a moment [was] exploded by the Fullness of Time.”³

When I meditated on the image of a burning bush, I found myself thinking about a sense of calling. About a person’s drive to do something or follow a path. About a yearning so strong that you cannot find any sense of satisfaction until you take action. About passion so intense that it burns but instead of consuming, it creates focus. Direction. Out of the heat comes a call.

Scholars think that Moses lived as many as forty years as a shepherd. And whether it was exactly forty or some other amount—you know, the Biblical writers loved the number forty—you get the point. It was a long time, and we can call it forty. Forty years for Moses to think back on his life. Forty years to mull over the fact that he was raised in a privileged home, then killed a man and ran away. Forty years to stew over the bondage of his people, over the wrongs he had seen as a child. Forty years tending sheep on the side of a mountain so that when the time came that an angel of the Lord appeared to him in the form of a bush that burned but was not consumed, Moses was ready. The injustices inflicted upon his people had been burning inside him for forty years, and when God finally appeared in a flaming bush, Moses responded.

The Bible doesn’t tell us how many other times God might have tried to get Moses’ attention. We can imagine that God might have tried a still, small voice. Or an angel in a dream. Or a shining star. If there were other attempts by God to call Moses out of his complacency, they were not recorded. Nothing worked until God lit that bush on fire. Nothing worked until Moses was ready to respond.

And how did he respond? Moses said, [who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? *Who am I?*](#)

In his classic study of ancient stories, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell talks about the *Who am I?* question. He calls it “the refusal of the call”⁴ and he details example after example of heroes who began their journeys with reluctance and fear and trembling rather than acceptance and commitment and conviction. Campbell notes that “often in actual life...we encounter the dull case of the call unanswered; for it is always possible to turn the ear to other interests.”⁵

¹ Matthew Henry’s Complete Commentary on the Bible, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/>

² Jamieson, Fausset & Brown’s Bible Commentary, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/jamieson-fausset-brown/>

³ Napier, B. Davie. *The Layman’s Bible Commentary Volume 3: The Book of Exodus*. (John Knox Press, Richmond, VA, 1963), p. 29.

⁴ Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. (Princeton Univ. Press, 2nd ed., 1968), p. 59.

⁵ Ibid.

You have to wonder how many times we are presented with opportunities to make a difference, but instead of acting on them, we decide we're too busy. That opportunity would require too much. Or someone else is doing it.

You know, it's hard to change our routines. Look at where some of us are sitting. It's the same pew where we sat last Sunday and the Sunday before and the Sunday before that, right? It's human nature to seek out the familiar. We find comfort in routines. And we can be sure that Moses had a pretty familiar routine with those sheep day after day on the side of that mountain. But I think we can also imagine that a sense of passion—a yearning, a desire, a call—was smoldering inside him. It was burning, but rather than consuming him, eventually it provided focus.

Of course, Joseph Campbell's point in referring to a thousand faces is not simply to say that he analyzed a thousand ancient stories (although he probably did). But it's to say that a thousand people—everyone—anyone—can make a difference. Ordinary people can respond to a call. In Campbell's words, "The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the beast, stand this afternoon on the corner of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change."⁶ Anyone can hear a call if she is listening.

I think that God probably calls to many of us in many situations, and depending on what's been burning inside us, sometimes we hear that call, and other times, not. It might take some of us a long time to hear God's call. Forty years even. And when the call comes, it's human nature to react with the question: *Who am I?* It's human nature to want to resist change and avoid risks.

If something has been gnawing at you and you've been avoiding it, I guess what I want to tell you this morning is that you're normal. And if you dare to get past that *Who am I?* question, and answer the call and take the next step on the journey, here is the good part: in the next step a mentor will come along. In Moses' case, as in so many cases, the mentor is God. Here God says to Moses, *I will be with you*. Moses will not be alone on his journey. And if we dare to move past the *Who am I?* question to respond to something burning inside us, we will not be alone, either. God will journey with us.

For me, another reason the *Who am I?* question loomed large was that last year, a writer-friend asked me to get involved at a local middle school that serves a troubled population here in Richmond. She asked if I would participate in an initiative to bring writers to the school to mentor children. Immediately, I thought: where will I find the time to add tutoring to my schedule? Isn't there a school closer to me where I might give a few hours of my time? *Who am I?* to make a difference in the lives of these kids? I'm comfortable sitting in this pew where I've sat Sunday after Sunday.

But after wrestling with this sermon, I told my friend, yes. Sign me up. I'll come. And I ask you, *Who are you?* What are the fires burning inside you? What are the New Year's resolutions that you've considered, then crossed off your list? What are the calls to action that you may have refused? I ask because you might encounter a burning bush. Just as heroes have a thousand faces, so burning bushes may take a thousand forms.

⁶ Ibid., pg. 4.