

A Lectionary 22 9.3.23

Exodus 3:1-15

Focus Statement: God is doing a new thing through us.

Moses is an example of why we're doing this God Sighting exercise friends. What Moses had in our text this morning was a God Sighting. His eyes were open and tuned to see God's movement in the world, and he didn't miss the appearance of the divine in front of him.

Last time we saw Moses he was just a little baby in a papyrus basket, so let's play some catch-up between then and now. He grew up, obviously. And even though he was raised in the house of Pharaoh, he knew himself to be an Israelite, he identified with his own people.

One day, chapter two tells us, "He went out to his people and saw their forced labor." He saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite, and he stood up to the Egyptian and killed him.

Pharaoh was none too pleased with this, and Moses was forced to flee Egypt. He settled in the land of Midian, to the east of Egypt across the Red Sea on the Arabian Peninsula. There he married Zipporah and started to work keeping flocks for his father-in-law Jethro.

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, the former Pharaoh died, and a new king took over. This new Pharaoh was no nicer to the Israelites than the former one. It wasn't part of our reading for this morning but let me read to you the last few verses of chapter two. "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out... God heard their groaning, and—and this is the important line right here—and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." This is the key verse because God doesn't remember the way we remember.

Remembering for God isn't an intellectual exercise, it is an active one. When God remembers, stuff happens. This verse screams, pay attention, something is about to change.

Enter Moses. Just hanging out, minding his own business, keeping his father-in-law's flock. The text tells us he led said flock "beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God." The text doesn't tell us if he knew that was the mountain of God, or if he just ended up there accidentally because that's where the sheep went. But pretty soon it becomes hard to miss, as the text throws at us like all the favorite "look, here is God" things at us. First there's an angel of the Lord, which one of the commentaries I was reading pointed out, never says or does anything other than just be there as an attention seeker. Then there is fire, always a popular God image. But this fire is coming out of a bush, and the bush was blazing but not consumed. And oh man, the bush seems to be the exciting part of the story, doesn't it. How is this bush burning and not burning at the same time? What are the physics behind the bush? Was it even burning? My mother-in-law showed me a picture she'd taken few weeks ago of the sun setting through a clump of trees, and the fiery red through the branches looked blazing, is that what Moses saw? Or was this legit fire, like Moses could have roasted marshmallows off this bush in the middle of nowhere? Guess what guys, none of this matters. Just like it doesn't matter if your God Sighting is some giant miracle or the everyday stylings of a turtle. What matters is it caught Moses's attention. What matters is his eyes were drawn to the scene, he was open and aware for the moment as it was occurring. What matters is Moses saw God.

Moses saw God, and when God saw that Moses was paying attention, God spoke. First by calling his name, "Moses, Moses." Then demonstrating God's physical presence, transforming the spot into holy ground, and finally by anchoring Moses' story to the larger

story. Remember how I was super involved in the lives of your ancestors, God said, how I called and made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Well, guess what friend, here I am again. And Moses, appropriately, hid his face, a sign of respect, “for he was afraid to look at God.” Remember in scripture that the word for fear is the same as the word for awe. When it tells us that Moses was afraid, this isn’t like Halloween or scary movie fear. This is the awe and fear you might feel if you’ve stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon, watched a storm blow in across Lake Superior, or stared up into the Milky Way on a clear and moonless night. The kind of awe and fear when you are brought face to face with the size and scope of the universe and your own small place in it.

Moses hid his face in respect, and God continued speaking. Remember what we talked about earlier about God remembering, about how when God remembers action follows, and listen to the power in God’s words. “I have seen the misery of my people... I have heard their cry... Indeed, I know their suffering.” I have seen, I have heard, I know. These are action words. Words that imply God’s continued knowledge of God’s people, but Israel is the focus of God’s attention. And it goes on from there. I have seen, I have heard, I know, “and I have come down to deliver them.” Remember how I said when God remembers, stuff happens. I have seen, I have heard, I know, and now, I have come down to deliver. God isn’t just blessing and calling any longer. Dear people of God, this is the God who called Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, that they might be blessed to be a blessing to the whole world, the world which God spoke into being with a word, this is that same God physically entering into the human story.

And God keeps going with the action words. I have come down to deliver them, to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have seen how the Israelites oppress them. God is just layering promise after promise on Moses of all the big, bold, grand, saving moves God is going to make on behalf of God's people, now that God has come down, physically, in the flesh, in a bush, to God's people. And the contrast between the old land and this new land couldn't be more stark. The land of the Egyptians is a land of oppression, scarcity, danger, this new land is broad and good, flowing with milk and honey. It is a land of freedom, plenty, and safety. This is the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, but none of that matters, because God is the God over any and all existing power structures. The Israelites have groaned, and here comes God in response with this rush of power and promise and deliverance.

That is, until verse ten. Listen to this how we get into this verse again. I have seen, I have heard, I know, I have come. The cry of the Israelites has come to me, I have seen... "So, [Moses], come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt." Uh oh. Dear people of God, do you see what God just did there? God just said all these big and bold and cosmic and salvific things God is going to do, and then placed them square on the shoulders of poor, human, Moses. God is the one who sees and hears and responds decisively, God is the only one who can and will create a different reality for Israel, and God is going to create that reality, through Moses.

And Moses, understandably, was like, wait, what? You're sending me to Pharaoh to lead your people out of Egypt? Moses countered with all sorts of good excuses as to why Moses

was not the guy for this project, why God should at worst pick someone else and at best just do the work Godself. Moses had five reasons, our reading gave us two of them, and God had an answer and a counter for each and every one. God's responses varied based on the question, but they all can be summarized like this, I am the God of your ancestors, of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, the God who is and who was and who is to come, and, guess what, you won't be doing this alone, I will be with you. I will be with you, just like I was with all who came before you, just like I was with all who will follow after you. Because, dear Moses, I am who I am, I am being itself.

The commentary pointed out, humorously, I thought, that this declaration of God to Moses that God is who God is, speaks of power, faithfulness, and presence, while at the same time telling Moses almost nothing at all. And maybe this feeling, this experience rings familiar to you because, guess what, dear people of God, this is still who God is. This is how God acts in the world, not just in the life of Moses, or Abraham, or Isaac, or Jacob, but in our lives as well. God's Work Our Hands turns out to be not so much a cute marketing gimmick for the ELCA as an actual description of how God is bringing about life and hope and redemption to a world very much in need. And maybe you're thinking, that's all well and good, but one, I've never seen a burning bush, and two, I'm not Moses. I can't exactly call up Pharaoh and get an audience. But, dear people of God, let me offer you this counter. First, ok, sure, you haven't seen a burning bush. But you've seen something. I know, because I have to cut you all off every Sunday morning when we do the God Sightings part. You've seen God in the world. You've been practicing focusing your eyes, turning your attention, keying in to say, like Moses did in verse three, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight." And second,

Moses wasn't Moses at this point either. He wasn't a great leader of people, he didn't have Pharaoh on speed-dial, he was just a guy in a field, an exile at that, keeping an eye on someone else's sheep. Moses becomes Moses because God called him to come and he followed. Followed, but first put up a big stink about it. And, let's be real, will keep putting up a stink about it for the entire rest of the journey. Get ready for the rest of the fall, every reading from here on out is just Moses being grumpy because God called him to do a thing he didn't really want to do with and for people he didn't really like. Moses followed because God is stupid persistent, not because Moses was particularly good at following.

I hate to break it to you, dear people of God, but you've seen the bush. And you'll see it again, another one, a different one. Here you are, here we are, the ones God has called to come. I'm into sharing poetry with you right now, here's another one I stumbled across this week. This is called And Yet by Kate Baer:

There comes a time when you stop hoping / for one American Hero / and realize there is only you— / picking up trash from the neighbor's yard, / hauling jars to the recycle bin, / calling your great-aunt Susan even though / she's not just your aunt Susan and / this is not just your godforsaken earth. / It is depressing to know the war is coming. / Worse to know it will always be in you. / Little cauldron, little tender loon. / Take comfort in your bold heart / where hope and fear are mingling.

You've seen the bush, dear people of God. What now? Amen.