

Exodus 3:1-15

Journey into God's Presence

Can you think of a time when you went on a journey with someone you didn't really know – at least, you didn't know them when the journey began? Did you learn anything? Perhaps you discovered something surprising about the other person; maybe you realized something important about yourself.

My first summer as your pastor I went on a trip to California with Delre Smith, Deb Reardanz and our youth group. Sleeping for a week on the basement floor of an LA church with 100 sweaty young people, laboring in some tough LA neighborhoods; showering with strangers at a public pool, and navigating LA traffic in the rented 15 passenger van with Delre behind the wheel, we got to know one another in ways we probably never would have if we hadn't traveled together.

Last summer several of us from UniPlace journeyed to Detroit with members of First Christian Church in Gibson City. Again, we slept on the floor of a church basement and worked in some pretty tough neighborhoods. Again, we navigated a strange city, and this time our "getting to know you" experience included getting to know members of another church as well as our own. There is something about journeying with **others** that teaches us what we cannot learn any other way.

In our scripture reading for today Moses is about to embark on a journey that will teach him what he could never learn any other way. He doesn't know it now, but he will be listening

for forty years to cries of “are we there yet” throughout the day and then falling asleep to the musical snoring of thousands of Hebrews every night. In the course of that journey he will come to know a people who are now strangers to him. He will come to know a God he is just now meeting. AND he will, doubtless, learn many things about himself.

It all starts here at the base of Mount Horeb where Moses comes across a bush that is burning but not being consumed. Accompanied by his father-in-law’s flock, Moses is out doing what he does now. The sheep need to be fed and it is up to him to make sure they find safe grazing lands. But while he is out in the wilderness, just doing his job, his routine is interrupted by an unusual site: the burning bush. From the bush he hears the call of God, a god he does not know. God commissions him to return to Egypt with the staggering task of freeing the Hebrew slaves.

Moses' first objection questions *his own* identity: "*Who am I* that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Moses is reluctant to take on the role that God asks of him, implying that he is not qualified for such a job. But really, who better than Moses? His dual identity seems to make him the perfect person for this job. After all, he is by birth a Hebrew, and by adoption, a part of Pharaoh’s own family. Even more, despite his reluctance now, we know that he feels a deep sense of justice and is willing to intervene for the victimized and the mistreated. The reason he is in the wilderness of Midian now is because he intervened on behalf of a Hebrew slave being beaten by an Egyptian taskmaster. That incident ended with him fleeing his home among Egyptian royalty where all his life he had benefited from the prestige, honor, education and security of such an upbringing. And why did he flee? Because he was so enraged by the injustice that he saw and heard that he killed the overseer. Now God reveals

that God, too, **has seen and heard** the injustice happening to the Hebrew people in Egypt. And God too cannot abide it. So again, who better than Moses, who has seen and heard what God has seen and heard? Who better than Moses to go speak to Pharaoh? And yet, Moses asks the question, ***“Who am I?”***

After turning from the question of his *own* identity, Moses turns to the question of *God's* identity. “[When] they ask me what YOUR name is, What shall I say to them?” God's cryptic response is, “I am who I am” (ehyeh asher ehyeh, 3:14). God's answer is an explanation of God's personal name, Yahweh. Another way of translating Yahweh is: “I will be what I will be.” On the one hand God is saying to Moses, “I can be whatever I want to be”. On the other hand, the name God reveals indicates that God is always known through God's actions.

The bible scholar David Lose says that Moses will only truly learn who God is by following God on the path God set for him:

thereby learning first hand the nature, purpose, and truth of this God. Lose continues saying, the thing is, this doesn't stop -- or even begin -- with Moses. It was true of his ancestors -- Abraham taking off [on a journey] for a new land in his old age; Jacob fleeing God in every which way only to be called by God [on that journey] to sire a nation. And it will be true of his descendants, as well, from Old Testament prophet and priest to New Testament disciple and missionary.

“To tell you the truth,” says David Lose, “I suspect that this is the way it always is, even today. To know God, you have to go with God.

Faith is a full contact, participation sport. You just can't sit back and expect to really know God, you have to get up off the couch and get in the game, take a risk, try something marvelous, reach for something you thought unachievable, step out onto the winding road the end of which you can't see from your doorstep.”¹

I contend that God wants the good people of University Place Christian Church to get up off the couch and get into the game. I firmly believe God is calling us out onto the winding road, the end of which we can't see from a comfortable pew. Why? Because God wants us to know one another better – to know our friends in these pews better, to know our community outside these walls better, and to know our God better. Coming to fully know God is not possible if our faith journey stops at making **ourselves** comfortable, kicking off our shoes, and shutting out the rest of the world while we concentrate on our own religious experience. Intimacy with the living God cannot be achieved solely through a mystical moment in front of a burning bush where we exchange names with a deity.

What happens to Moses in front of that burning bush **is** instructive for us, though. First, the burning bush appears to Moses as he is out and about doing mundane work. God “comes down” to him. Take note of that. Moses **isn't** out looking for God! Second Moses makes a decision to “turn aside” from his activity in order to fully “see” what this strange site is all about. Third, because he interrupts his own agenda, Moses “hears” God calling to him and responds, “Here I am.” Here I am. This is an acknowledgement from Moses that he is now fully present to the experience

After acknowledging he is fully present in this place, Moses removes his sandals. In this way *the separation is removed* between his physical body and the earth beneath his feet, ground now made holy by God's presence. Moses' mystical experience is “grounded” in place and time as he digs his toes into the living soil. God then further grounds his call by connecting him to his past, naming his ancestors and

reminding Moses that God has been present in each generation. The God, “I am who I will be” is first and foremost a God of presence. From this spot of holy ground in the midst of a place called “the wasteland,” they will embark on a journey together that will occupy the remainder of Moses’ life.

The journey we at UniPlace are embarking on is a journey of discovery in redefining our place and manner of ministry in Champaign Urbana. The year 2015 is an important one for us as God’s people because we are stepping out boldly to begin a journey of congregational transformation.

Like Moses, we are called to turn aside from our usual activities and take notice of what God wants us to see. We are called to pause, and to listen deeply for what God has to say. And we are called to respond faithfully with “here I am.” That is why we are embarking on this six weeks of intentional prayer and discussion with one another. As we form our Journey Partner groups, we covenant to spend intentional time together listening to holy scripture, to one another, to the cries of those in our community who are in need, and to the God who promises to be fully present in our ministry. I urge you to seek out partners to pray with you in this important time, and to stand with you on this holy ground. You never know what you might learn about each other through the adventure of the journey which is ours.

1 David Lose, WorkingPreacher.org, August 20, 2011 “Get Up Off the Couch”
www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1600