

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

GOD FINDS US

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March 7, 2010 The Third Sunday in Lent

Exodus 3:1-15

A lot of us think of Lent as a special, marked-out time to give some attention to our spiritual lives and to find God, as if to reconnect with a long-lost friend. But if you look at the Bible, you'll see that that's not the way it works. We don't find God. Rather, *God finds us*.

Right from the very beginning of the Scriptural story, that's the pattern. God finds us. In the creation story, God comes so far into the world that he walks right into nothingness to make Adam and Eve out of the dust of the earth. When they disobey him and hide under a bush, he seeks them out and treats them with tenderness. When Cain kills Abel, God comes to him and confronts him and even though he makes him a fugitive, he preserves him by marking him with a sign that will tell people that he is under God's protection. God comes to Abraham and gives him a calling and a promise. God comes to the prophets and gives them a mandate and a passion for righteousness. God comes to Mary and asks if she will bear His son. Over and over, we see this happening in Scripture. We don't see many stories of people deciding to take a little break from their ordinary lives in order to recharge their spiritual batteries. We don't see people finding God in the Bible. We see God finding them.

And God finds us when we're not looking for him. God finds us in the interstices of life, in our daily round, when we are living our invisible, unnoticed lives. When we are just ourselves. Not when we are trying to be "spiritual" or striving to achieve or be who the world expects us to be.

I think that's what today's reading about Moses is in part about. It's such a famous story, such a dramatic story, that it's become opaque to us. It's hard to look all the way into it to see what's really happening in human terms. But it's a very human story. It's the story of how ordinary people like us come to know who we really are and what the purpose of our lives is. Because God finds us.

Moses was the little boy who was born to a Hebrew mother and father in Egypt during a time when the Pharaoh was afraid that the Hebrews were becoming too many and too powerful in his land, and so he ordered that all Hebrew boys were to be killed at birth. When Moses is born, his mother manages to hide him for a few months, and then when he grows too big to hide, she gives the baby to his older sister and tells her to put him into the Nile in a little basket in hopes that someone might spot him and save him. As Providence has it, the daughter of the Pharaoh does see him and rescues him from the river – hence his name, Moses, which

means “drawn from the water.” He grows up in the lap of luxury in the Pharaoh’s court and for many years watches from afar as his own people, the Hebrews, descend into brutal slavery. Though the Scripture gives an oblique impression that Moses knew he was Hebrew himself, the sense is that he is a kind of displaced person spiritually and psychologically – he is a Hebrew, a poor man, living incognito the life of an Egyptian nobleman in a place far from his personal home and even farther from his ancestral home. He is cut off from his mother and sister and, interestingly, his father isn’t even mentioned.

A turning point comes for Moses when one day he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave. In anger, Moses kills the Egyptian. A few days later, he sees a Hebrew beating a Hebrew. With the same desire for justice, he challenges the aggressor, who says to him, in effect, “Who died and made you God? Who put you in charge? Are you going to kill me, like you killed the Egyptian?” And instantly Moses knows that the murder has become known, and that he must flee from the inevitable wrath of the Pharaoh. And so now Moses is alienated from both Hebrews and Egyptians. He’s a lost person.

And so he becomes, like Cain, a fugitive. He goes far away, to Midian, where once again he witnesses an injustice and challenges it. Some young women are trying to draw water from a well, but they are repulsed by some shepherds who are hogging all the water for themselves. Moses is a hero. He helps the women and scares off the shepherds. As a result, one of the young women becomes his wife – or, as the Bible says, is “given” to him as a wife.

Now if this were a fairy tale, here would be its happy ending. Heroic boy rescues maiden in need and all is well. But it’s not a fairy tale. It’s a story about real life. And so even though Moses marries, he is now even more firmly displaced, because he is living, probably

permanently, in a foreign land, married to a foreign woman, and working for a foreign man, his father-in-law. He’s a long way from his physical home and his psychological home. His life has been marked with flight and violence and a certain impetuosity, however well-intentioned. There is something very modern, very VUCA, about Moses’ story. Or maybe there’s just something very ancient about VUCA.

Anyway, one ordinary day Moses is doing his ordinary thing, tending his father-in-law’s flock. And God finds him. Moses sees a flame bursting up from a bush and he’s curious. He stops. He turns aside to investigate. He pauses. He decides to look further. And the story says that once God notices Moses’ curiosity, his willingness to stop in the midst of his ordinary day, God speaks to him. And almost the first thing God says is, “I am the God of your father,” the father who has never once been mentioned. In other words, God reconnects Moses with his history. He begins to re-place the displaced Moses by sending him back to his own people with a specific task that’s part of God’s plan.

Moses doesn’t want to do what God is asking him to do. He doesn’t want to go back. He’s really upfront about it too. He says, “O Lord, please send someone else.” And God says, “Don’t worry. My power will be with you and I will be with you.” And so Moses steps up to the plate.

Because of that, the world was never the same. Moses, the little displaced boy who was “drawn out of the water” becomes the man who goes back into his history to re-place himself within his people in order to draw them through the water of the Red Sea into freedom.

We are all subject to the exigencies of life. We are all subject to fortune, tragedy, sin, loss, bad decisions, strokes of luck, circumstance, the accidents of birth and the job market. We

are all, in a sense, displaced persons; that's what the story of the Fall is really about. We are all afraid to encounter God, to look at God, just like Adam and Eve were when they were hiding under the bush and like Moses was when God came to him in the fire out of the bush. As modern people, I think our way of dealing with this tragic element in life is to push forward, to go on, to put one foot in front of the other and hope that a better day is ahead. There is something heroic about that.

But we can lose something precious when we obey unreflectively this compulsion to go forward. We can lose the times of confusion and darkness and lostness that mark our ordinary lives and that provide the space and time for God to find us. We forget that to go forward, we first have to go back. Because there are riches there that need to be reclaimed and woven back into our stories so that we can be whole and free. Lost fathers, perhaps. Lost mothers. Lost childhoods. Lost marriages. Lost children. Lost dreams. Experiences of beauty and joy as well as moments of grief and disconnection that we have brushed aside. I read something recently that struck me so powerfully. It's this: "Every person is a person thought worthy to be by God, or else there would be no such person."

And so part of being found by God is understanding that God comes to us specifically. God comes to you specifically, in a specific way, in a way that tastes and smells of your life, not my life. He claims all parts of us, not just the presentable selves we bring to church. And when we let God find those things in us, then God brings them into the light and heals them.

Let me give you an example. I have told you a couple of times, I think, the story of the young man named Michael who had AIDS and whom I met when I worked at NYU Medical Center, that amazing story of his courage and generosity with his family who

had rejected him because he was gay and how during the last hours of his life he brought them together in a really miraculous scene of faith and reconciliation.

But I haven't told anyone in a sermon what happened later that night, after I went home, because it seemed not really relevant to Michael's story. But thinking this week about God coming to Moses in the fire made me think to tell you about it today.

It was well after midnight when I got home that night. My family was all asleep. I was physically tired but mentally and emotionally so wired, so pounded by both the grief and joy of what had happened that I could not sleep. After trying to sleep for a long time, I finally got out of bed and took a bath. Went back to bed. It didn't help. I got up and read some poetry. Still I could not sleep. And so I sat in a corner of my bedroom in a chair in the darkness and just let my mind relax. I did not pray. I didn't try to think about anything or figure anything out. I suppose I just wanted to feel better. The experience in that hospital room had been very powerful and I knew I would never forget it, but I also felt great pain and I wanted to escape that pain. I guess I just wanted it to be the next day.

There was only the darkness for a long time. And then, suddenly, the window across the room blazed with light. It wasn't illuminated as if a light bulb had been put in it; rather, the light came out of the darkness. The darkness held the light. And I heard a voice, not with my ears, but with the ears of my heart. It was very distinct. The voice said, "See my hands and my side, pierced also for you." And then....nothing. Only silence.

That was over 25 years ago, and since then I have spent a lot of time trying to understand what those words meant. For many years, I interpreted them as a kind of general theological statement about the cross and the salvation of the world. Fair enough. That

seemed consonant with the sacrificial gestures that Michael had made that night in bringing his poor lost family back together again, as if God was putting his stamp of approval on what Michael had done that night.

But more recently, it has seemed to me that those words were meant for me too, as in “See my hands and my side, pierced also *for you*.” And that is something that I’ll be thinking about for the rest of my life, how God in his graciousness gave me some intimation of his love for me. Which of course means that I need to understand my life in a different light. No matter what happens, my life will always feel brushed with gold.

That wasn’t an extraordinary experience. It was a human experience. Because God is always coming to find us. For the rest of Lent, let’s all try to stop running. Let’s stop pushing forward with our endless reinvention of our lives. Let’s all just sit down, and let ourselves be found.