

Sermon – September 22, 2024  
“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Exodus 3:1-15

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Bless those who hear them, use them to fan the flames of our continuing transformation into Christ’s image, and lead us out into fruitful labor in Jesus’ mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you and brings us together in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! “I was glad when they said to me.” “Let us go to the house of the Lord!”

For those not yet reading along in Exodus, let me encourage you to read this pivotal book of the Bible. Before we arrive at the burning bush this morning, let me fill in a few items for background. Moses has been raised in Pharaoh’s palace and does not know firsthand what it means to be a sojourner in a foreign land. He has not been subjected to the cruel labor the Hebrews in Egypt have experienced. At some point in Moses’ life, his heart is stirred towards justice and when he is out in the land, he sees an Egyptian beating an Israelite. Notice that when Moses sees this mistreatment, he acts. Biblical seeing is not just observing but moving to appropriate action in response to what is being witnessed. In this case, Moses responds to the Egyptian with the same force being used on the Israelite. The beating that the Egyptian was

giving to the Hebrew was a beating to death and when Moses intercedes that is the outcome for the Egyptian.

Moses' desire for justice between people is not limited to conflicts between people from different nations. When he sees two Hebrews in conflict, he tries to intercede and bring peace between them. They reject his efforts and the justice he seeks for them. The killing of the Egyptian is known and when Pharaoh becomes aware of it, Moses flees into the wilderness and resides in Midian. There Moses sees shepherds drive off the daughters of Ruel, the priest of Midian, and their sheep and his seeing again becomes action. He defends the priest's daughters and in response, he is not rejected for his efforts as with the Hebrews but is rewarded and given the oldest daughter as his wife and he lives in Midian as a sojourner in a foreign land. Moses comes to know what it means to be one living among people as a foreigner. We also get a clear idea from his actions that Moses has a sense of justice. It is his nature, a gift from God the creator.

Then the Pharaoh of Egypt dies, and the people groan and cry out to God in their slavery. At this time, God hears their groaning, remembers His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, sees the people of Israel, and God knew. God does not suddenly hear the cries of the people; nor do they just begin to cry out. God has been with His people in their suffering but now God is responding in a new manner. God is not remembering the Hebrews as if they had been forgotten but is entering a time of actively attending to the people of covenant, God is honoring a prior commitment to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When God sees, He is not suddenly turning His gaze to Israel and seeing them and their situation. Seeing for God is as it is for Moses. When God sees, God is moving. God's actions in sympathy for His people have begun. Finally, we come to the verb "knew" as in God knew. The Hebrew is often translated with a direct object such as "God acknowledged them" in the NKJV translation or without a direct object but with a prepositional phrase following the verb such as "God took notice of them" in the NSRV translation. But the Hebrew verb is "yada" or "knew" and it takes no direct object, as in the ESV translation: "God saw the people of Israel—and God knew." Knowing is one of the themes of Exodus and in our text this morning, it is God who knows His people. God knows their suffering in their cruel slavery. God is part of their suffering. As Jesus tells Paul on the Damascus Road, Paul is persecuting Jesus when he persecutes the followers of Jesus. So also, God is and has been

experiencing the suffering of the Hebrews. The idea is that God knows of their suffering and now is shifting His response move to above the surface, no longer to be hidden.

When Moses sees the burning bush that is not consumed by the flame, we should notice we have fire and will soon have God speaking. The fire is more than a bush that burns with flame but is not consumed. The burning bush that is not consumed is a theophany, a moment in time when the unseen God speaks. We will see this again at Mt. Sinai, and again on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus when the bright cloud comes and the disciples hear God's voice.

Moses sees the flames and is drawn by curiosity to the sight. God uses our curiosity to draw us into the places of calling. As Moses approaches the burning bush that is not consumed by fire, he hears his name called twice: "Moses, Moses." The doubling marks a time of importance. As in the times when my mother used my full name and I knew I needed to pay attention to what she was about to say, the doubling of Moses' name marks a time when God seeks Moses' full attention. Moses' reply to the voice from the burning bush is the same reply Abraham gave when God spoke his name, calling him to go and sacrifice Isaac. The Hebrew word is "henehie" or "Here I am." Moses' reply carries the idea not only of hearing but that the hearer is ready to respond with the actions requested of him. Notice that God's first order is to stop Moses where he is. God commands him to come no closer but to remove his sandals, for Moses is standing on holy ground, ground made holy by God's presence. God has an impact on creation. Ground that was just ground is made holy by God's arrival. Moses is told to remove his sandals as a sign of respect and acknowledgment that he is in a holy place.

Notice that God tells Moses who He is. He says, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." The connection of the voice coming from the burning bush to the patriarchs changes Moses' curiosity into fear and he hides his face, fearing that if he sees God he will die. God has drawn Moses to this place and will begin to transform Moses from a shepherd in a foreign land to an instrument God can work through to deliver Israel. As God explains to Moses why He is speaking through the burning bush to him, we should notice two key phrases in God's explanation: God has come down and He will bring his people up. The idea of God coming down means God is going to act to deliver His people. We see this same idea when Jesus comes down from heaven to earth to become our deliverer. When God comes down, God will act decisively in the lives of His people. The bringing up of His people is to move them from Egypt to the Promised Land. Israel will be delivered out of

cruel slavery. Through Jesus, humanity will be delivered from bondage to sin and death and brought up to eternal life reconciled to God. A question we might ask ourselves is if God has come down, why doesn't God take care of Pharaoh? The answer is that God acts through people and creation to accomplish His will. God is seeking people who will cooperate with Him to bring about His kingdom, to bring to completion the covenants made with the patriarchs and to complete the work of His kingdom.

What God tells Moses next is one of the most challenging statements of the Old Testament. God tells Moses, "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." Think about what God has just asked of Moses. God tells Moses that He is calling him to go from being a father and keeper of sheep in some remote, empty wilderness of a foreign land to stand in front of the most powerful leader of the world and tell him, "The God of the Hebrews sent me to tell you, those slaves you have been holding onto and exploiting, set them free." Pharaoh believes he is God. Pharaoh is the king. His word is action. There is no discussion with a king. Your life is in his hands when you are in his focus. This would be like us being told to go to the leader of Hamas and tell him to let the hostages go. If we think about that request, we know our life would be at stake, and we might have a few questions and objections for the one who wants to send us. Yet God tells Moses that he is to go and confront Pharaoh and lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. Moses might be afraid to look at God, but he does not like this call of God. In the midst of the fear of dying from looking at God, while standing on holy ground, Moses understands what this call might mean, and he has a few objections. We might expect Moses to jump up and say to God, "Thank you for choosing me. I am your man. I am going to go head off to Egypt to confront Pharaoh." But Moses has lived in Pharaoh's house. Moses has seen firsthand how a pharaoh works, and he is not ready to accept this call from God. Moses resists God's call. Moses who is hiding his face in fear is able to talk with a God who has told him what He is asking him to do. Moses is trying to understand how a shepherd, a wanted man in Egypt, could become a deliverer of Israel. Moses is yet to understand that God is the One who will do the work through him. Moses' reply to God is "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"<sup>1</sup> God has called Moses to do an impossible task, one that will demand Moses' life. Moses is an old man with lots of responsibilities, a family, and his father-in-law's sheep to watch. Yet God has called him to deliver His people. Moses is not sent to Pharaoh with superhuman strength or abilities, and he will discuss that with God. The key

for Moses is that God has told Moses that He will be with him. Moses will speak but God will act in His creational power to bring about God's will. If God is for us, who can stand against us?

An important aspect of the exchange between God and Moses for us today is the concept of calling. As Moses was called by God from the burning bush, we are called by God today. Through the actions of Jesus, we are all first called to salvation. Jesus died on the cross so that we might be reconciled to God. We are called to enter the kingdom of God. We as sinners, unholy people, are called into a new relationship with a holy God. God shines light into our dark hearts and enables us to move into belief in Jesus. Many of us will recall a moment in our lives when we experienced God's call. It may have happened in a conversation with a friend, or maybe a grandparent or other relative was used by God as the burning bush, the place of God speaking into our lives. Perhaps we heard God's call as a young child at a Vacation Bible School or as a teen at a church camp when God called us into a new relationship with Him. These moments in our lives are times when a burning bush that is not consumed by the flames draws our attention and we follow our curiosity and hearts to a place where we hear God's voice and accept the steadfast love of God. There are many burning bushes God uses to call people to Him but they all have the cross where Jesus suffered and died and an empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection as their enabler. The key point is that just as Moses is called by God to be one who is in a new relationship with God, changing Moses from a shepherd to a deliverer, we also have been called to step into a new journey with Jesus to God. We who are believers should all be able to see in our lives a change of the trajectory from what we once were, a sinner in need of grace, to a new trajectory, one that through grace is constantly moving us towards who we are to become through Jesus. If we cannot look at our lives and find a transforming moment and trend, then we need to realize that we may yet need to accept the loving call of God for our life, to surrender to Jesus and follow him. We may, like Moses, resist God's call. We may have questions that we need to have answered before we accept it. We may be counting the cost of what it will mean if we follow Jesus fully. We may also be seeking to find Jesus in our own strength instead of allowing the presence of God to work in our lives to bring transformation.

Today is a day for discernment. It is a day, a moment, when we are called in this place through a burning bush of the proclamation of God's word to look at our lives and discern if we have accepted God's first call and if not, to turn to God now, to believe in Jesus as our savior and enter into the transforming relationship God is calling us to. If you find you lack this experience

of knowing Jesus as your Lord and Savior and the resulting transformational life, then meet me in the back of the church after the service and let's talk.

Just as Moses is called from being a shepherd to being the one through whom God will deliver the people of Israel from Egypt, we also receive a second call from God, a call into kingdom service. We don't just become a citizen of the kingdom of God and live our lives as we always did, die, and go to heaven to be with Jesus. When we become a citizen, we have responsibilities of kingdom citizenship. Coming to church for worship is not kingdom service. Worship is coming together with the body of Christ to be before him and praise the God who has brought us from death to life. Kingdom service is a call to be servants in the now of God's kingdom. We will still struggle when we are called into our second calling, just as Moses struggled to accept God's call to go to Pharaoh. Yet in our struggles we should recall that Jesus has promised to be with us until the end of the age. As citizens of God's kingdom, we receive the indwelling presence of the Lord through Holy Spirit that draws us into our calling and empowers us to be about the work of the kingdom.

Let me caution us that our second calling is not service in the church. Yes, we are in the season when we are looking for people who will serve in the church using their gifts and graces to enable our congregation to have a place to worship and to be a beachhead for kingdom advancement into the community. Like Moses, who will spend time teaching, guiding, correcting, and growing the people of God, we should expect that God will use our gifts and graces to build up the body of Christ through service in the church we attend. But, once we receive salvation, our call is to be active citizens in God's kingdom. We are to be salt and light in all of the places we are sent. We are to be a body of Christ living out the great commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." We are commissioned by Jesus to be his witnesses. We are to be at work in the kingdom doing our part in the great commission. Each of us is to be a witness for Jesus, to be salt and light in the world. We may be called like Moses to use our gifts and graces that we have developed throughout our life circumstances. We have seen Moses' gifts in our reading of Exodus: a desire to bring justice, knowledge of the ruling class of Egypt, and access to Pharaoh. For us, the work God calls us to may use capabilities and desires we have. We might want to see a burning bush and hear God's voice to confirm our own call. But remember we have Jesus with us and in us.

The burning bush for us will most likely not be like the one Moses experienced but will most likely be a burning desire in our hearts to be used by Jesus to reach the lost in our lives. When we find someone on our hearts, an old friend, a new friend, family member, acquaintance or even a stranger, we should realize that the Spirit of Jesus is burning in us and calling us to go and share the Good News of Jesus with that person. When we experience a burning bush, we are being called to go to that person and be Jesus' witness to them. Most of us will not be sent to a Pharaoh to demand the release of captives, but all of us are to respond to the burning bush we encounter, a burning heart for the lost in our lives, and to seek to use our gifts and graces for God while recalling that God is with us as we go. When we are called by God, we will be empowered by God and strengthened by God to bring people into His kingdom. Those who come into God's kingdom receive the gift of salvation first and then are also sent to use their gifts to witness to other people. We are to be a church that is living out the great commission. We are to be a group of disciples who are witnessing as we are led and then teaching those who come into the kingdom how to be a witness for Jesus. As Christ's followers, we are not just church goers, or those who serve in the church structure, both of which are good things, but we all are to be witnesses for Jesus, and we need to endeavor to be found about the work God has called each of us to as we follow Christ.

I am going to offer a prayer of openness for our hearts and then ask us to pause and be quiet before Jesus. We will sit in silence for just a moment and ask Holy Spirit to place on our hearts those we are to go to. Let our minds go blank and see who comes to mind. If we find someone there, then understand that God is asking us to go and be His witness to that person. When we leave here today, be attentive to those we see and who come to our minds and try to be aware of those we encounter as we go about our activities this week. As we go out, see if you find someone burning on your heart, a lost soul whom Jesus is leading you to that you might be a witness to that person. If you find people on your heart, pray for them, and then let Holy Spirit guide you to reach out to them with the love of Jesus. When we experience such a burning in our hearts to share Jesus, we are experiencing the prompting of Holy Spirit seeking to guide us to be a deliverer for a person who is lost, separated from God, and in cruel bondage to sin and death. Pay attention to where God leads us in the wilderness of our community and let us go as we are led, sharing with them the Good News of Jesus Christ. Today, God hears the groans in our community, He remembers, sees, and knows the suffering of the lost now and forever and calls

us through the burning in our hearts to help Jesus to seek and save the lost. Will we see the burning bush in our hearts and reply to God's call with "Here I am" and then go and be Jesus' witness?

*Pray with me: Jesus, we have heard your first call and seek to follow you. Lead us to those in our lives who are burning bushes that we are to go to and share your love with so that they also might become citizens of the kingdom of God. We ask and pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Go forth into Jesus' mission.

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<sup>i</sup> Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 155). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.