

On Fire!

Matthew 16:21-26

Exodus 3:1-15

Awesome God, who flames out eternally, lighting our lives: entrance us by your fire. Call us by name that we may each hear your voice and respond to your claim upon our lives. And grant us the joy, the hope, the love, and the courage to respond... to follow... to yield our hearts and our selves to you, the one who made us. Amen.

It has been an amazing week in the life of our country, hasn't it? I have been fascinated and truly moved by what has unfolded in the political arena: events that mean that every one of us, regardless of which political party we will vote for, will have the opportunity come November 4th to put either the first African American president or the first female vice president into the White House. That is marvelous! Now, I'm not here to debate with you the qualifications of either one of them for their respective offices, but I am thrilled to know that two population groups who have historically been marginalized to the sidelines or oppressed into the back of the bus, are recognized today as full contributors, full participants, full citizens in our nation. It is a momentous time in the history of our country.....

As I've watched the presidential campaigns, I've found myself pondering a great deal about what motivates anyone to run for president. Maybe that's what we listen for most as we try to evaluate who we feel is fit for office: why do they want to serve, how do they sense their call? I wonder, what forms such leaders? How do they emerge from the pack to set their sights on such a lofty goal? Do they wake up one day, and say, oh, I think I'll run for president? Sounds like fun! Or.... do they wonder at their own sense of doubt and inadequacy... but somehow know that they are called to meet their destiny—their moment in history that is somehow greater than themselves? Or are they aflame with fire in their hearts that just won't stop burning?

As far as I know, none of us ever felt called to run for president of the United States, but I believe that every one of us here has experienced a sense of call—some sense of call at one time or another in our lives—to step into something bigger than we are. Who here has not felt that tug at your heart that scares the heck out of you but that you know you simply must answer? We've all experienced it, in different ways in different times throughout our lives. Probably more than once.

Even if it was the very first day you let go of your mamma's hand to walk to school all by yourself. Maybe it was the day you knew that another life was stirring inside of you and you were going to become a parent, even though no one had handed you the manual and you had no clue how to do that. Or maybe it was when someone asked you to fill an opening on the deacons' board and you weren't sure what that entailed. Or maybe it was the day you graduated from law school, or medical school, or seminary knowing that you were still wet behind the ears and weak at the knees and green about the gills but that none of it mattered because in any one of these situations you could not go back, but only forward into this new thing that had put its claim upon your life.

I think for all of us, this call to enter into something bigger than we are, something that calls out the best inside of us we don't yet know how to be, that must be what the presidential candidates experience. But it's not for them alone. It's what any of us experience when we hear that voice that calls us by name, feel that our hearts burn with a fire that will not be extinguished... know the call that brings us face to face with the God who names us and claims us and invites us to become the people God designs each one of us to be.

This is the story of Moses, that comes to us today from Exodus, chapter 3:

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" and he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey... The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt; you shall worship God on this mountain."

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever and my title for all generations."

You remember Moses—the baby in the basket, floating among the bulrushes, discovered by Pharaoh's daughter and raised in the Egyptian court. Moses—a political refugee, born a Hebrew, at a time when the Hebrews were enslaved by the Egyptians. Although raised in a life of wealth, power and privilege, Moses always knew his true identity, and the fire that burned in Moses' belly was the compassion for his fellow Hebrews. Thus it was that one day, witnessing an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave, his sense of justice and his outrage overwhelmed him and he killed the Egyptian. Now a murderer, Moses was on the run. He ran. He ran from the oppressors and he ran from the oppressed. He ran and he ran all the way across the Sinai desert until he found security in the home of Jethro, a priest of Midian.

This passionate, compassionate man of action stopped running to tend to Jethro's flocks, marry Jethro's daughter and settle down to life in the wilderness ... a life that was not particularly exciting, or challenging, but a life that was stable and safe and predictable, comfortable and complacent... He had run far enough that he could no longer hear the cries of his people, or see the hatred of their oppressors. He no longer lay awake nights pondering the push and pull of his passion, or the concerns of his compassion. Until one day, in the routine of his workaday world, going about his everyday business, Moses sees the thing on fire. *Moses! Moses!* comes the call, and after that, it's no turning back—Moses is caught back up by the compassion of God to fulfill his purpose for living.

Isn't that just the way God works? Into our complacency, into our secure, settled lives, into our responsible, respectable, middle-aged, middle-class, mildly meaningful lives (to quote Susan Andrews¹), God gets our attention by setting something on fire... your heart, perhaps... your life... your world maybe... inviting you to turn aside and see what fuels such a flame that just won't burn out.

Oh, we may not see flames of fire shooting out from our shrubbery, but God has not stopped placing his call within us. It's there in every one of us, if we will but pay attention, quiet down long enough to listen to the God who still whispers to us, nudges our nerve-endings, quickens our pulses, sets a fire in our hearts that will not go out... the flame that illuminates who God is and who you are and who we together are called to be.

That's Moses' question: "Who am I? Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and accomplish this task? Who am I, God, that you should entrust me with this mission? What in the world makes you think I can do this thing you have laid upon my heart?"

Moses, like all of us, when confronted with God's call, asks... who am I? And like all of us, finds a million reasons why who he is will simply not measure up.

I am unworthy for such a task, he says..... I will be with you.

I don't know who you are, he says..... I am who I am; I will be who I will be. The God of your fathers, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—lo, I am with you always.

The people will not believe me, he says.... I'll provide signs so they believe.

I—I—I'm incompetent—I stutter! he says..... I will speak for you.

Oh! Send someone else, he says..... I will send your brother with you, but I still call you.

Because, in spite of all Moses' objections, God knew that in fact Moses had been perfectly prepared to understand the Hebrews and the Egyptians, to know the suffering of the slaves and the power of the Pharaoh. God knew that Moses' heart was filled with justice and compassion. God knew that he had perfectly prepared, preserved, protected and positioned Moses to serve God's purpose. Moses knew that he was inadequate and imperfect and terrified; but God held open to Moses the invitation to discover who Moses really was, and as he lived into that awesome invitation—to discover who God really is.

As was evident by the success of the book *The Purpose Driven Life*, each and every one of us longs to hear our call, to know our purpose, the shape of our life's work. This isn't just about your job, but about your design—about who it is God crafted you to be, what it is that you alone can do, how you are called even now to live into your destiny. It's about the call you all have heard to live abundantly into the ways God has prepared and preserved and positioned you—not for your sake alone, but for the sake of the world. For you are formed and named and claimed for a purpose—God's purpose—and your task is to discover what that is and respond.

You see that spark that niggles inside of you—the thing that sets your heart on fire—the flame that smolders even when you try to tamp it down—that's your burning bush. And we meet it repeatedly throughout our lives. The question we all face over and over and over again is the one from Mary Oliver's poetry: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"² For God is constantly calling into being who it is that you alone can be ...

Maybe you are sitting there thinking, well, I've done my part, I've served my time, I will settle down now to live out my old age... No... No, I'm sorry. You have life experience and wisdom and compassion and insight that others need. If you are sitting there thinking, well, I'm too young, I know nothing. I can't be expected to contribute.... No.... you have enthusiasm and energy and the future in your eyes. If you are sitting there considering that you've got your hands full raising your kids, or that finally you have sent them off to college and you deserve a break; if you are rolling around some excuse in your head about why God could not possibly be calling you... let me ask you: are you really ready to settle for being less than you are, less than who you are designed to be? Are you really ready to consider the terrible alternative: living a life that is not called? For that is your option. You can refuse to listen, refuse to turn aside to see, stop your ears to the one who names you and claims you and needs you to fulfill his good purpose.

For that's the odd part of this story—our Almighty, Immortal, Invisible God Only Wise does not work alone, but enters into partnership with us... Our incarnate God claims imperfect, stuttering, stammering, runaway us...and calls us to be the body of Christ... the arms and legs and heart and face of Christ to a world in need. And each of us, each one with our own unique perspectives and experience, our own unique gifts and talents, our own unique passions and compassions—each of us is absolutely essential to be that body, to get the job done.

For you did not choose me, but I chose you, Jesus said, and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last (John 15:16a).

In a few weeks, on September 14th, you are all invited to turn aside to discover what might be on fire—burning in you. As we kick off this Fall, we're holding a fair designed to invite every one of you—young and old, male and female, married or single—to discover your purpose, your position in the body, your perfect part in God's work in this place. For that is why you are here, you know... to lend your deepest joy, your greatest passion, your unique gift to the world's need—to live into who God designed you to be and what God has brought you here to do.

It might well ask something of you. It might ask you to get out of bed a little earlier on a Sunday morning so you can teach Sunday School ... maybe ask you to give up some of your time elsewhere so that you can lend your voice to the choir.... Maybe it will use your compassion to walk with others from Grief to New Hope... Maybe it will send you to the kitchen to make meals for shut-ins... maybe you'll go on mission to Mexico.

I know, it sounds a bit terrifying. I think it's appropriate for us to be a least a tad terrified ... slightly awestruck... aware that we stand on holy ground in the presence of a God who names us and claims us and blesses us for living. Here in this place, you are invited to turn aside and see what burns for you?... what ministry has your name on it?... Where does the flame spark within you? Oh! May we all have the joy and the hope and the faith and the courage to answer God's claim upon our lives and may the Holy Spirit roar through this place and set us all on fire.

¹ Susan R. Andrews. *Do You Dare Turn Aside?* Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church, Bethesda, MD. 8/30/2008.

² Mary Oliver, *The Summer Day*, New and Selected Poems. Beacon Press, Boston, MA. 1992.