

Sermon: First Responders
Text: Exodus 3:1-15
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Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

. . . the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush.

Exodus 3:2

In our tradition, that is, in the Reformed tradition, it is customary to preach a given sermon on a given text. Indeed, that is the principle point of the lectionary approach to preaching: to focus on these passages in order to explore them in depth.

On the flip side, the problem with this approach is that these discrete texts cannot convey the full story that's being told. And we miss something in that, which is one reason we're focusing this summer sermon series on the larger stories of the Old Testament.

For example, the passage I just read depicts one of the most well-known encounters in all of scripture between Yahweh and a human counterpart, in this case Moses.

On its face the passage seems mostly to be about God: the revelation of God's name, God's sensitivity and responsiveness to the suffering of the Hebrew people, and the disclosure of God's intention to deliver these same people from captivity in Egypt.

But the events leading up to this moment are essential to understanding the full scope of what's going on in this fiery encounter.

For when we expand the focus to include what's gone before, we then see that this story is also about this man, Moses. About how God meets him right where he is. And calls him for who he is, almost, it would seem despite himself.

Let me show you what I mean.

The opening two chapters of Exodus comprise a kind of origin story, not the origin of the universe, as was the case in Genesis, but the origin of the Hebrews as a distinct people group.

These chapters also lay the groundwork for the rise of Moses, the one-time shepherd and soon-to-be liberator.

Like our own origin story in the New Testament, this story begins with a baby in a basket. Indeed, if you were an observant Jew, the opening chapters of Exodus would be as familiar to you as the story of that night in Bethlehem is to us, when another baby appeared on history's stage, wrapped in swaddling clothes.

But since most of us here today at any rate are not observant Jews, let me summarize the story to this point.

It turns out that Exodus picks up right where Genesis left off. There has been a famine in the land, and to escape its painful effects, Jacob's sons have traveled to Egypt, where there is rumored to be some surplus grain.

What they don't know is that their youngest brother, Joseph, is already there waiting for them. The last they saw of him, they'd left him in a pit to die.

But God had other plans for Joseph. Some travelers first rescue Joseph and then promptly sell into bondage in Egypt. There, in virtue of his unique gifts, and despite starting from a dungeon prison cell, he rises to a place of prominence in Pharaoh's court.

Because of Joseph's status as an aid to Pharaoh, things go well at first for the Hebrew people. But then two things happen in Exodus 1. First, Joseph dies. And then a new king, a new Pharaoh, arises in Egypt, one who did not know Joseph.

This new Pharaoh grows fearful of the large number of foreigners in his land. Driven by this fear, and with the power of the army at his command, he turns this band of, yes, undocumented immigrants into slaves.

He subjects the Hebrews to hard labor and confines them to the mud pits in service of building out the pyramids – giant monuments to his ego.

Despite the overwhelming hardships of slave labor, and the harsh privations that go with it, the Hebrews continued to increase in number. So much so that Pharaoh takes an even more drastic step. He issues an order to have all the newborn Hebrew babies thrown into the Nile.

It is into this moment of crisis that Moses is born. Pharaoh's mandate is, of course, unjust and inhumane.

And so, like hundreds of women activists throughout history, Moses's mother defies it. She deposits her newborn son in a basket of papyrus and strategically places the basket among the reeds along the bank of the Nile, close to where the daughter of Pharaoh comes to bathe.

Sure enough she finds the basket. You can imagine her response when she pulls back the little blanket that is protecting the tiny infant from the blazing sun. It's like finding an abandoned puppy, only better.

She cannot resist the maternal appeal of this little newborn and she essentially adopts the baby on the spot as her own. But being a royal princess, she has much better things to do than to actually raise him. So she farms out the responsibility for nursing and raising the child to – wait for it – to Moses's own mother.

So Moses becomes a child of two worlds and two cultures. By day he learns what it means to be a son of Egypt, a prince in the court of Pharaoh himself. By night he learns the language of his people, learns what it means to be a Hebrew.

This matters because one day, years later, Moses leaves the royal precincts behind to travel out to the mud pits. Evidently he wants to see this spectacle for himself—thousands of his kinfolk, slaving away in the heat and mud to make bricks to feed the vanity of his adopted grandfather.

What he saw on his way, and what he did in response, would alter his life forever.

He came upon an Egyptian overlord beating one of his Hebrew kinfolk. In that moment something snapped inside the young prince. Unfortunately for this Egyptian, Moses' loyalty to his people ran deep, and his aversion to bullies ran hot. Because, looking first one way then the other to make sure he was not seen, he took justice into his own hands and killed the Egyptian slave master.

But it turns out he was seen. And what he did was not an act of justice it was an act of murder. He rightly feared his secret would get out, that his treasonous crime of killing an Egyptian would be made known. He had no choice but to leave. So, trading his royal finery for traveling robes, he fled for his life.

We are now nearing the point where the passage I read earlier begins.

Hot and weary from his journey, Moses takes refuge beside a well. While he's there, the daughters of the local priest bring the priest's flocks to the well. But some unruly shepherds begin to drive the young women away.

We already know that Moses has zero tolerance for bullies, and so he intervenes and comes to the daughters' defense. In so doing he landed himself a wife and a future, as a shepherd in the land of Midian, a land far from the mud pits of his people, far from the royal courts he had known as a young man.

But not so far that God could not find him.

"Moses," he hears a voice call out one day as he's moving his sheep to a remote pasture. It's as if it comes out of nowhere but it's not coming out of nowhere. It's coming from a bush that is aflame right beside him.

Put yourself in Moses' place. Surely your first impulse is to freak out when you realize what's going on here, that this is the very voice of God speaking to you out out of those bright flames.

So it takes a minute but once your heart rate settles back down below 180 bpm and your blood pressure drops below the bursting point, you begin to focus in on what the voice is saying.

"I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt;" Yahweh continues. "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."

Now your interest is fully piqued. You lean in and turn toward the bush. Because you've seen this suffering for yourself. In fact, in a way, you are party to it, because despite all your royal privilege you've done nothing to improve the lot of your fellow Hebrews.

You know how powerful Pharaoh is, with his armies and his chariots. And so you also know how deeply entrenched the problem is, how hard it is going to be to accomplish this feat of mass liberation.

You can't wait to hear exactly how God is planning to do this, to liberate an entire race of people. A band of avenging angels sent to take out Pharaoh's army? A catastrophic earthquake sent to swallow his palace? What's it going to be, you wonder.

Now, if you have never heard this story before, then brace yourself for one of the biggest twists in the Bible.

"So come," the voice continues, "I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

So now imagine you're Moses. You are completely stunned by this preposterous suggestion. And you resist the idea, not once but twice.

You can't blame Moses. This is an impossible task, a fool's errand, an act of sheer folly that will surely put his health and safety at risk. Of course he is going to protest.

But when God calls it's better for everyone, and saves so much time, if you just say yes right away. To his credit Moses does, finally.

Heading this call, he finally leaves his adopted precincts behind and begins to retrace his steps back to Egypt, to confront the most powerful man on earth.

Which brings us to the present moment. Nowadays it seems less like any given bush might burst into flame from the power of God's presence. Instead, it seems more like the world itself is on fire.

We are troubled by the images we see on TV of violence in our streets and in our cities.

We are made to feel anxious by the erratic behavior and authoritarian impulses of a man who has now secured his party's nomination for president and perhaps inexplicably to some of us, remains popular in the polls.

And we think, what is happening to our world? Has everyone gone mad?

But the truth is, it has always been so. We just heard proof of that, didn't we? *I have observed the misery of my people. I have heard their cry.*

The only difference between then and now is that the misery of God's people – and they are found everywhere because we're all God's people – this misery is broadcast daily around the world on a hundred different channels and websites and social media outlets.

The voice of the suffering and the dispossessed, the disenfranchised and downtrodden, is amplified a thousand fold by the time it reaches our ears until its roar is nearly deafening.

The cries of African American mothers whose sons and brothers and fathers have been lost in senseless shootings.

The cries of parents and spouses who have lost children and partners to mass shootings in grade schools or movie theaters or nightclubs, or while they were on duty protecting America's citizens.

And even, it must be said, the voice of our neighbors who fear that their country is changing irreversibly and unrecognizably, and who are giving voice to that fear at campaign rallies – often in ways we do not like.

So as people of faith, people who worship the same God who called Moses, we must ask this question: how might we respond to these cries?

Ten months ago we began a forward planning process here at the Warren Wilson Church centered on discerning the answer to the question of who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do.

And as it turns out, four of our five goal groups are meeting after our service today to engage in the last collective step of this process—to develop a set of specific action steps intended to help us achieve the goals and objectives we have set for ourselves for the next three years. I suspect you are welcome to join them.

And I am confident that finding ways to respond to these cries we are all hearing will be a big part of the final plan that will come out of this process.

But as I was reflecting on today's story, I thought of another way to imagine what it means to be God's people in a world like ours, a metaphor that perhaps underlies at least some of the action steps we will discuss later today.

If the world itself is on fire, what if we thought of the church as God's own firehouse, full of first responders?

Now, I grant that this is perhaps an intimidating idea. Because what do first responders do? They run toward burning buildings, not away from them.

They go in equipped with axes and fire hoses and oxygen tanks, and sometimes, truth be told, they do not come out of those buildings unharmed, or even alive.

Clearly that level of fortitude, training and courage is beyond most of us.

But first responders also turn up with bandages and blankets and lemonade. And who can't bring those?

You don't have to be a firefighter, or a world historical liberator to be a first responder. There are lots of ways to run toward the fire.

When we see our African American neighbors protesting in the streets, and hear their voice calling for safety and justice for their sons and brothers, we can simply join them in solidarity.

Or we can turn up on a Sunday to worship with our African American sisters and brothers, perhaps equipped with a couple of casseroles and an apple pie. I mentioned this idea a couple weeks ago and I want you to know that I did in fact meet with Tyrone Greenlee and we are making progress on it.

Or when a friend is served divorce papers, we head over to her house equipped with a box of Kleenex, a pint of Ben and Jerry's and a shoulder to cry on.

When your brother calls and shares with you that he's feeling unappreciated at work, you drive immediately over to his house and deliver the heartfelt, utterly sincere, completely true pep talk you've written in your head on the way – about how awesome he is, how valuable he is to God, and how much he means to you and the difference he has made in your life.

When your neighbor drops by and confesses to you that she is so anxious about what might happen this November that she can't sleep at night, you grab her hand and the two of you hop into your car. And you make your way directly down to your preferred party's headquarters and you sign up to drive elderly and other homebound people to the polls, starting the very first day the polls open, so that they, too, might cast their vote in in this critically important election.

When we've done what we can do, when we've distributed our blankets and bandages, turned up in solidarity, offered our shoulder to cry on, given our pep talk, and volunteered to help get out the vote, then we'll return to base here in this sanctuary, to be refreshed and rejuvenated.

We will take our shoes off, literally or figuratively, because the place on which we stand is holy ground. And we will join in worship of the God of Moses who hears the cries of the oppressed and the hurting and the fearful, and calls us as partners in bringing them love and hope and freedom.

Amen.