

First Presbyterian Church
Greenfield, Indiana
Pastor John J. Paulson

August 28, 2011

11th Sunday After Pentecost

Can We Talk?

Exodus 3:1 – 15

Psalms 105:1 - 6, 23 - 26, 45c

Matthew 16: 21 – 28

Romans 12: 9 – 21

A burning bush talks!

Remember the wonders of God!

Take up your cross and follow!

Paul gives some rules for living!

Informally before the sermon: As we continue to follow the early years of the descendents of Abraham, we find Moses, who we first met last week, talking to God. Not just talking to God, but listening to God call him to action; giving him a mission that on first hearing to Moses, and to us, sounds impossible. God tells Moses: "I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."¹ God's people are slaves. They are leaderless, weak, and beaten down. They are probably resigned to their fate. Yet, God is calling Moses to wake them up and motivate them to leave Egypt and finally head for the land that God has promised them.

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer! Amen

The fact that Moses is alive and able to talk to God is a miracle in itself.

Born to a Levite woman in the days when the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt had ordered that all Hebrew baby boys be thrown into the Nile river, Moses miraculously survived. Through a ruse, he was raised by his natural mother until he was a young man, then taken to the king's palace to live and grow up as the Prince of Egypt, the son of the Princess, the daughter of the Pharaoh.

We know nothing of Moses' life in the palace. We don't know about his education or who his playmates were. We can only guess that he wore fine robes as the prince and received the education that would one day prepare him to assume the position of Pharaoh. After all, he was being raised as the prince of Egypt, one of the elite, one of the powerful, one of those holding the Hebrews in captivity.

Before he moved into the palace, when he was in the care of his mother, he must have learned about his Hebrew heritage and clearly developed a respect for the one true

¹ All quotes are from Exodus, chapters 2 and 3 unless otherwise noted.

God. He was ready when God called; he knew who God was. He may have been surprised when he heard God's voice, but he recognized who God was.

After he moved to the palace, his religion had to have been kept a secret. We know that Hebrews were despised by the Egyptians.

Moses' first appearance in the Bible after being taken to the palace is when he is probably in his early twenties. He is out walking through the town and sees an Egyptian slave-master beating one of the Hebrew slaves; one of his own people. Making sure there was no one to see him, he gets involved on the side of the Hebrew, and kills the Egyptian, burying him in the sand.

The next day when he was out and about again, he sees two Hebrews fighting and steps in between them. One of them, in a very prophetic statement, asks Moses: "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?" We don't know what Moses' reaction is or what he did. Some day God will make him ruler and judge over the Hebrews, but not this day.

Somehow Pharaoh hears about what the prince has done, and issues a order for his arrest and execution. Moses flees.

He flees into the wilderness, the desert where he will live for about forty years. Where he will marry and father two children, learn the trade of shepherding and learn how to survive in the desolate land that makes up a large part of that area of the world. Lessons he will need in the years to come as he accepts God's offer to lead the nation out of captivity.

The offer, as we know, came in a very strange way. It came from God speaking through a burning bush on a mountain near where Moses was caring for his father-in-law's flock. As improbable as anything we may ever hear, God decided to appear to Moses and tell him of God's plan for him. He is being selected to lead God's chosen people from captivity and slavery to the promised land; the land that God has promised to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob long before Moses came on the scene.

The story, as improbable as it is, shows us a side of God we haven't seen before. Before when God spoke to people and called them to action, he did it through visions or through angels appearing to them. This time God does it in person; God appears and speaks to Moses in a fiery bush.

Lots of questions are raised by this story. What did this bush look like. Was it the only bush in the area? What did God sound like? Did God really convince Moses that he was God by telling him that he was the God of Moses' father, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Did the voice of God really come out of a burning bush? Was there an angel standing next to the bush when God was talking to Moses? God asked, or told, Moses to take off his shoes. Does that mean that we should be worshipping in our bare feet? Why did God choose Moses, he was a murderer? How come it took God so long to finally hear the cries of the Israelites? What's up with God's name? "I AM WHO I AM" How would that convince anyone that Moses was sent by God?

And so the story of the chosen people continues. They are enslaved by the Egyptians, forced into hard labor; beaten ruthlessly. Their lives are miserable, yet they continue to believe that God, the one true God will come and rescue them. They continually cry out to God.

And, finally, God has heard them. Why did it take so long? We don't know and we may never know. Maybe God was hoping that someone would step forward and assume leadership of the people and plan their escape from Egypt. Maybe God needed that time to develop Moses into a leader who was prepared for leading a large group of people into and eventually out of the wilderness. Maybe Moses needed all those forty plus years to develop the leadership and survival skills that he would need.

It appears that during all those years after Joseph died, nobody stepped forward and assumed the leadership of the Hebrew people. The leadership went from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Joseph. Then there was the leadership gap that lasted at least 40 years when there apparently was no leader. Now it is time for Moses. God has entered the picture once again and there is finally some movement to help the Israelites. Of course God was never completely out of the picture; God was always watching over the people, just waiting for the proper time to get involved. Now is that time.

And, God chooses when that time is.

That is God's right and privilege isn't it? We know that one day God will send Jesus back into the world to save all of us. We know that one day God will bring God's Kingdom to earth and give us all a wonderful place to spend eternity. We also know that God is the only one who knows when that will be. God is the only one who will decide when the time is right for Jesus to appear once again. We know this because Jesus told us when he

said: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even **the** angels in heaven, nor **the** Son, but **only the Father.**"²

I think several issues are raised by the story of Moses and God talking on Mount Horeb that sunny afternoon.

First, are we ready for the time when God calls us?

Second, will we, like Moses, answer "Here I Am, Here I Am."

Third, will we question God's choice of us to do something?

Fourth, is God preparing you for some special task in the future?

Let's take a look at each of these issues:

Are we ready for the time when God calls us? How have we prepared? Are we familiar with the scriptures so we have some idea of the way God has acted in the past? Do we talk with God on a regular basis? Do we pause in our talking to listen to what God may be saying to us?

Secondly, will we, like Moses, answer "Here I am, Here I am." It might be tempting to pretend we don't hear God's call or to just try to ignore it. Of course there is very little likelihood that God's call will come from a burning bush. It is much more likely that it will come on the telephone from someone calling you to get involved in helping someone. It is more likely that it may come from the nominating committee asking you to serve your church as an Elder. It may come from the chairperson of Riley Days asking you to give up four hours or so during the first week of October to enable us to serve our chicken dinners and raise money for local charities.

Third, will we question God's choice of us? Will we wonder why we were chosen? Will we think that we are not capable; that we don't have the gifts that it takes to carry out whatever we are asked to do? We need to remember what we heard from Paul last week about spiritual gifts. Everybody has them, and not everybody has the same gifts. Paul tells us that "we have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully."³ It is amazing how others can identify the gifts

² Matthew 24: 36 (NIV)

³ Romans 12: 6 – 8 (NIV)

that each one of us has. When we are called, we can be pretty certain that, as God was with Moses, our gifts match the job we have been called for.

And fourth, but certainly not last, is God preparing us for something in the future? As members of the church and the body of Christ, we have the obligation of look to the future. Think about what is going on in your life right now. Are you being tested? Are you being trained? Are you being prepared for the future? There is no way that Moses could have known that the forty years he spent in the wilderness after he left Egypt the first time was preparing and training him to deal with Pharaoh and then to lead the thousands of Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. It may well be the same for us; God may be preparing us for something and we have no idea for what or when. Our job is to be open to God's call, to listen for God to speak to us through the scriptures or through others, and to be prepared to answer, "Here I Am, Lord, Here I Am.

Amen.