

Exodus 3:1-12:

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. ²There 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. ³Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' ⁴When 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.' ⁵Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' ⁶He 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.

⁷Then 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, ⁸and 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, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' ¹¹But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' ¹²He 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.'

1Corinthians 12:4-11 POINT: OUR WEAKNESS IS SOMEONE ELSE'S STRENGTH

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Luke 10:17-20 POINT: CHRIST EQUIPS US TO DO MORE THAN WE CAN IMAGINE

The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' ¹⁸He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. ¹⁹See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. ²⁰Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

What the Church Is Really All About

At our last worship planning meeting Karen Jensen shared some amazing news with us. As many of you know, Karen is the Chair of our Finance Committee, and usually about this time of year that committee is meeting to discuss ways that we can address our budget deficit, but Karen said that according to her last calculations we are \$100 ahead on our giving! When you consider recent additions we've had to our giving, money to fight malaria this spring, and the amount that was raised to support our first mission to Haiti, the fact that we're ahead of the game is pretty astounding. Our church has consistently given 100% of our apportionments to the United Methodist Church to support missions, ministries, and administration, and four times a year we take special offerings to support more specific ministries – just last week we collected \$125 for World Communion Sunday. Church, let's give God some more applause.

But money is only one dimension of Christian stewardship; aside from tithing of our finances we give our time and our talents, our presence and our witness. We are reminded of this kind of giving by looking at our kitchen, which the Women's League as well as Vicky and Joe Rivelli have spruced up considerably. We are reminded of this kind of giving

when we remember the mission team that spent a week sleeping in bunk beds, taking cold showers, teaching and sharing and serving meals to a community in a mountain village far from Staten Island. We are reminded of this kind of giving each week as our Sunday School teachers offer their time and talent to show our children the amazing truth of God's love and grace. We're reminded of this kind of giving each time people meet to pray and plan and reflect upon the ministries of the church. And I'm reminded of all of these kinds of giving as I prepare for our annual Charge Conference on October 19th and I reflect upon the "state of the church" and how I will communicate that to our district superintendent. And I applaud God for giving us so much to celebrate.

If you asked me what a church *does*, a worship service is a very small part of "church." It's important, but it's only a fraction of what church really is. Church starts with people who are called. Perhaps your calling at this time is simply to tithe more, to give more money to the church. But quite often God takes you further than that. Our Old Testament lesson finds Moses "beyond the wilderness" (Ex. 3:1). I like that expression: *Beyond the wilderness*. To say you're in the wilderness already says that you're out of your comfort zone, like being alone in a car out in the desert where there are no other cars in sight and your cell phone doesn't work and there are no gas stations for miles. You may feel that you're not just *in* the wilderness; you are "BEYOND" the wilderness. That's where Moses was. He had taken a side road and gone off the map, *which is the place where we often meet God*, way outside the ordinary routines of life. The way that Moses runs into God is the way we always meet God. We may not see a burning bush, but we do experience something out of the ordinary, something unexpected and often in an unfamiliar place – one thing you may notice about people who have had some form of religious experience is that they lose their anxiety about being in the wilderness. Perhaps they were predisposed to adventure, to wandering beyond the wilderness in the first place. Or perhaps God has taken them out of their comfort zone while they're kicking and screaming in order that they may finally hear his call.

I think Moses was predisposed to going into the wilderness. He had begun his life in an adventurous way, set in a basket in crocodile-infested waters, he had killed a man and run off into the desert. Now as a shepherd he decides to go into new places, and that's where he sees a burning bush. But we see that Moses doesn't just *see* something; he *hears* something, and that something is his own name. I think there are a lot of people who wish that they could "experience" God like they experience a fireworks display, that they could passively watch and go "ooh" and "ahhh." But that's not God's M.O. We don't just *witness* God from a distance; we *hear* God calling us *by name*.

And our first impulse may be to run away; that may have been Moses' first impulse. We can sense that we are treading on holy ground while we ourselves are not holy, and the image of a frightful, judging God may cause us to flee in terror. But God invites him to take his shoes off and stay awhile. Notice that there is no judgment in this story; God doesn't call Moses out and say, "I haven't seen you in church lately, Moses." God doesn't throw things in Moses' face. The fact is we all have things that God could throw in our face, but God is not trying to drive us away; he's trying to draw us in. The first thing God communicates to Moses is his compassion – he sees the suffering of his people and he tells Moses of his intention to do something about it. But then God pulls a fast one on Moses, saying, "I'm sending YOU to do something about it." This is where our calling comes in. It's nice to watch God from a distance and imagine what he's like. It's nice to hear God say, "Hi. How are you?" But God doesn't stop there. He calls US to step up and act. And not in a small way, but in HUGE way. "Moses you, a Hebrew shepherd with a murder rap, are going to the most powerful and dangerous man in the world, and you're going to tell him to release his slaves because they are my people, not his."

Okay, NOW is where Moses should run away. Now is where a lot of us would run away. "God, you can't expect ME to do that. That's suicide! Look, I'll give a little bit more to the church and I'll remember to pray before meals, but don't ask me to do anything dangerous." But if we run away from God when he calls us to act, we lose out on life. That's right; we lose out on life. Because when God calls us to act, he is giving us our very reason to live. Let me say that again; When God calls us to act, he is giving us our reason to live. He is answering for us the question that nags every human being from the time we become aware of their own being; *Why am I here? What is my purpose in life?* God doesn't want to leave us scratching our heads or living a life that is anything less than complete, and so he tells us what our purpose is. God gives Moses a specific; "You are going to send you to Pharaoh to get my people out of Egypt." I'm really glad we had this little chat, Moses, but now it's time for you to move out and get some work done; I'm really glad you came to church today, Bob, but now I need you to go out and feed the hungry and advocate for justice and bring smiles to a lot of poor children and...you get the idea. And that's what church is mainly about. It's not just coming and taking our shoes off and listening to God for awhile and leaving and scratching our chin and saying, "Hmm, that was an interesting

sermon.” Church is about doing. God has plans for us, just as he had plans for Moses. He doesn’t simply absolve us of the sin we’ve accumulated over the weeks or months or years; he doesn’t say to Moses, “Okay, bow down and make your humble confession and go home and have a nice day.” NO! He says, “Go do as I told you. I don’t want to hear your confession right now cuz WE GOT WORK TO DO, and don’t worry about how you’re going to accomplish this because I’M GOING WITH YOU.” God is not confined to a sanctuary; he is wherever you happen to be and he is involved in everything you happen to do.

But he doesn’t just send us out as individuals. Moses had Aaron, and a lot of other help along the way including the skills of a lot of good generals and some very good advice from his father-in-law. God doesn’t expect us to change the world singlehandedly. It’s interesting how so many people are fascinated by superheroes – Batman, Superman, Ironman, Spiderman, and while there are Superwoman, Wonder Woman, and a few other women (and you are all super in my book), it seems that men dominate the superhero fantasy world. It fits with our ego-driven mindset that “I alone can save the world.” That’s a fantasy! And that’s not how God created us. Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. We were created to work together. We shouldn’t try to do everything by ourselves. Have you ever tried to do everything by yourself? Can’t be done, can it? I used to think I could fix my car by myself – I usually ended up spending hours or days changing a \$100 fix into a \$500 fix. I gained a great appreciation for good mechanics, and I realized that I was not one of them. It makes sense to concentrate on what we’re good at and let others help us by doing the things that *they* are good at. That’s what Paul is getting at in our Epistle lesson; we all have gifts that work together toward a common good. Richard has a great voice – not all of you have great voices, do you? I can stand up here and preach; some of you I think would have a heart attack even approaching the lectern. But the point is that WE ALL HAVE SOME GIFTS, AND WHEN WE COME TOGETHER AS ONE BODY TO USE THOSE GIFTS TO GLORIFY GOD WE ARE THE CHURCH. All of us have gifts, but we don’t have ALL gifts. Have you ever thought about thanking God for what you’re not? Thanking God that you are NOT Superman or Wonder Woman? Because in order to do the will of God you HAVE TO work with other people and rely on THEIR gifts just as they rely on yours in order that TOGETHER you can accomplish something that is greater than anyone can accomplish alone. That is the beauty of the church.

And when we come together as a body to accomplish what God has called us to accomplish, we accomplish more than we ever thought we could. Jesus sent out seventy disciples without purse, without money, *without shoes!* “Like lambs in the midst of wolves,” he says. Not exactly encouraging words, are they? But they go out, not solo but two by two. And when they return they are amazed at what God has empowered them to do, by what they have been able to accomplish “in Jesus’ name.” It is amazing what we can do together “in Jesus’ name” when we heed God’s call as a family in Christ.

Stewardship is about more than our whole individual being; it is about our collective being, about a community being that hears God’s call and acts together as one body to accomplish what God has ordained us to do. We certainly have a lot to celebrate, and I am convinced that we will have a lot more to celebrate over the coming years. We are about to have something called an altar call. All of you are invited to draw close to this altar which represents HOLY GROUND. If you would like to, take your shoes off as a gesture of reverence toward God. You may come in a spirit of repentance if that is what you’d like, though Moses did not come to God that way. Mostly I’d like you to come just to be near God. If you have already experienced God’s calling in your life, come forward in thanksgiving because God has given you a sacred purpose. If you haven’t heard God’s calling, pray that he would speak to you here and now. If you’ve heard him call but fled from him out of fear, pray that his Spirit would embolden you, encourage you, and remind you that God asks for your participation in establishing his kingdom in this world, and you are not facing that task alone. You are among friend and allies, partners in ministry. So come. Let your heart draw near to God.