

Sermon 11-10-19
Paul Purdue preaching

What's in Your Hand? - November 10, 2019

God's calling of Moses is shaped by forces that fit this moment: me too, immigration, and racial identity. Do we remember Moses' birth story? Remember how Moses' ingenious mother defied Pharaoh's genocide by weaving a little ark? An Egyptian princess drew the beautiful child's basket out of the Nile River. Miriam, hiding in the reeds and keeping watch over her brother, saw the unnamed princess holding Moses. She spoke to the future queen and found a wet-nurse from the Hebrew slaves. So Moses was nursed by his own mother but grew up in Pharaoh's palace. How did these dueling identities, both oppressed and oppressor, shape Moses?

I imagine Moses was about nineteen when he witnessed one of his Hebrew kinsfolk being lashed by an Egyptian taskmaster. Looking around Moses struck down the oppressor. Did it feel justifiable? Was Moses a freedom fighter or an angry young man? No matter, the very next day Moses fled from the palace, leaving behind all his people both Hebrew and Egyptian. Moses, whose name alone represents the law, came across the border with an outstanding warrant (Luke 24:27). What does this story say about God, law, or grace?

In the new land of Midian, Moses quickly becomes a local hero. Every day seven shepherd sisters endured work-place sexual harassment. Misogyny was the local culture. The shepherds bedeviled the female shepherds who defied prescribed roles. It is not hard to imagine why all seven sisters went together to the village well. I can imagine the day Moses showed up at the well like a scene from an old western: handsome slow-to-speak stranger rides into town, sees the injustice, rallies the sisters, and tosses the bullies into a watering trough. As a prince inside a superpower, Moses would have been trained by the best army in the world. They made quick work of the local roughnecks. That day the seven shepherd sisters returned home in record time. Jethro, their father and the high priest of Midian, wondered how they watered the flock so quickly. The sister shepherds replied, "An Egyptian delivered us from the hands of the shepherds and helped us water the sheep!" "Well, where is this guy?" Jethro asked, "Please, tell me you did not leave the Egyptian by the well? Zipporah, go invite that guy to dinner!"

Welcomed to Jethro's congregation, table, and flocks, Moses finds a good life in Midian. Moses would marry Zipporah; she will risk her life to save Moses. Together they have a child, Gershom. Gershom means "I am an immigrant in a foreign land." Moses enjoyed a good life in Midian. He established a welcoming shepherding culture. Zipporah loved him; Jethro respected him. They prospered together. Moses lived a story of immigrant success. Let us notice that in the middle of a safe, settled, and prosperous life God's call arrives.

Exodus notes "a long time (had) passed" since that day at the well. The Moses' adopted father who banished Moses is long dead. Moses is working with the flocks when perhaps divine lightning strikes a tree setting it ablaze. Or did lava light the Burning Bush? After all, Moses receives the Ten Commandments on God's mountain amid rumbling smoke. Seeing the smoke, Moses turned aside. Barbara Brown Taylor tells us "turning aside" is Moses' spiritual genius. Worship begins with a turning aside. Moses turns away from the demands of the flock to investigate what God might be doing. Having turned aside, Moses looked more closely and saw a miracle. Somehow the

burning leaves were not consumed by the fire. Is God not such a fire that burns within us and does not consume us?

The Burning Bush speak,: “Moses, Moses!” Twice God whispers Moses’ name. Often we need that second affirmation to believe that God might really be speaking to us! Like Magdalene in Easter’s garden or those disciples on the Road to Emmaus, we might easily mistake Christ for a gardener or stranger the first time we see Christ. God calls, “Moses, Moses, take off your shoes. Notice this place you stand is holy.” Spot the beauty. Be present. Take off your shoes and feel holy ground. See with apostles the burning blinding light that allows us to see the world with divine perspective. Worship the Lord, love your Creator with all your heart, all your soul, all your senses. Smell that smoke. Feel the sacred soil. Hear the holy wind.

Do we turn aside enough to stand in the presence of God? Paul tells us it defies description (1 Corinthians 13 or 2 Cor. 12). When Moses comes down from God’s mountain with the two covenant tablets his face will literally glow. The people fear this manifest holiness and ask Moses to wear a veil to hide the halo (Exodus 34). If we turn aside and taste such divine glory, those holy moments can forever change us. However, mountain top worship accompanied by the Burning Bush’s miraculous glow is not the point at all. Exodus gives just 2 verses to the Burning Bush out of 55. I fear that many church’s love the aesthetics of worship more than God’s message. Richard Rohr notices that too often we Christians mistake the messenger for the message. We argue and preach about proper understanding of who Jesus is, while ignoring Jesus’ teaching. The Damascus road light, Wesley’s strangely warmed heart, or the glorious light of the Burning Bush did not directly change the world. I am sure the Burning Bush worship service was thrilling... but the message, not the light show, changed the world.

And yet authentic openness to God through worship transforms us. Father Rohr notices, “Apparently, Light is less something you see directly, and more something by which you see all other things. We need to look at Jesus until we can see the world with his kind of eyes... When Christ calls himself, “the Light of the world,” (John 8:12) he is not telling us to just look at him, but to look at life with his all-merciful eyes. We see Christ so we can see like Christ, with the same infinite compassion. (Richard Rohr, The Universal Christ)

Turned aside, tuned in, and looking closer, Moses hears God’s call deep within his bones, “I’ve clearly seen my people oppressed... I’ve heard their cry of injustice... I know about their pain... So get going. God says, “I sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egyptian slavery.” Maybe this is always’ God’s message to us: “I am sending you!” Perhaps, authentic worship always connects with God’s wideness that stretches out beyond ourselves. How can we experience the love of God and fail to actively love the world, for God so loves our world? Oh, it is not enough to enjoy worship, to get saved, to find our sacred worth, or to feel good about ourselves. Following Christ involves answering a call to love for others benefit, to sacrifice, to do justice, to love mercy, to take up our cross, and to risk our lives to save the world! I wish the cheap grace gospel was true. For like Moses, most of us enjoy a safe, prosperous life that we do not want to lose. But once we are awakened to God’s love, then God will ask us, “What’s that in your hand? Who gave you your voice? Will you go?”

“Moses, what is in your hands?” Moses replied, “A shepherd’s rod.” A shepherd’s rod was not some old stick. The staff was the defining symbol of being a shepherd. The staff was a shepherd’s chief defense. Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me.” If some robber steps out from behind a craggy rock seam or a viper coils ready to strike. David used a staff to snatch a lamb from the lion’s mouth. Moses and the seven sisters broke a harassment culture with it. Throw it down? Risk my power? Drop my

status? What is in your hands? What will you do with your education, money, resources, career? Who does not want to hang onto the symbols of our safety? Why leave the good life behind for an uncertain unlikely mission to Egypt?

Right after Peter gets the creed after 3 tries, Mark tells us all, "All who want to come after (Jesus the Christ) must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow (Christ). All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of (the Christ) and because of the good news will save them. Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? And what will people trade in exchange for their souls?" (adapted by changing Jesus' word "me" for Christ; Mark 8:34)

When God's love soaks deep in our bones, restoring the center of our souls, it always asks, "What is in our hands? Where will you go to bring about justice? What will you do with that voice of yours? What will you risk to help heal the world God so deeply loves? Will you lend your hands, your hearts, and your voices to the work of love, compassion and justice? Will we love our neighbors as ourselves? Will love soak deep enough that we love the strangers... enemies?"

A meaningful existence requires we throw down our status symbol and remember that God gave us our voices. Authentic life calls for sacrificial living. Oh, there is much to fear in Egypt and our voices will falter and flutter with fear, but the cries of the world for justice require us to make the journey. Moses could go back shepherding rejoicing in a feast of divine lights, but God wanted to transform that staff and divide the Red Sea. Divine Love awakens us to the needs of the world and empowers us to find our voices. So let us get going, God is calling each of us to lives that matter. Amen.