

**Message Delivered at Christ Church**  
**August 15<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup>, 2009**  
**TEXT: Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 28:16-20**  
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

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*The message was preceded by a video of Christ Church parishioners responding to this statement: "One time, God helped me to..." Thanks to Christopher Baugh for creating the video.*

It's good to hear from one another. Part of our worship time the last little while has included some words from us about how God has been moving in our lives. We've heard from different individuals along the way, but today we heard from a lot of us...some small, and some not-so-small.

Because we all need encouragement. We all need a good reminder of how God can help us do things and get through things that we can't do or get through on our own...from giving us peace when we need it to helping us get started in second grade. It's a big question, and sometimes one a little difficult to answer. But still, it's good to hear from others whose lives are similar to ours how God is present and working in real life, and that the things we read about in scripture aren't just stuck in scripture, but happen even today...

Because life is sure filled with stuff, isn't it... Difficult things we have to do; difficult things we may need to listen to, or to say; difficult things for us to live through. Sometimes, there's darkness around the edges, and it threatens to move in to the middle. There are fears, and there are doubts, and things that keep us up at night; and memories we can't get rid of; and sometimes sadness or anger so powerful we can taste it; that we are so near the edge that we feel that we really want, or really need, a burning bush to show up on our way home, or wherever it is we're going.

Well, we all know this story of Moses and the burning bush. It's so well-known that even people who don't know the Bible know what we mean when we talk about a burning bush. We all know how God startles Moses with an appearance so unusual that you think it would be impossible for him to not stop to see what it meant.

But you know, what's just as amazing as a bush burning is a bush talking. And sometimes, I think that's the part of the story we skip over. There's this whole conversation that happens between this bush and Moses. So that what may even be more amazing than a bush talking, is a bush having a conversation. Highly unusual, wouldn't you agree...a conversational burning bush.

Well, there's a reason this conversation takes place. And the reason is Moses.

I want you to stop and think for a second about what happens here: There's a burning bush; that's not being burned up; that is talking; that is, in fact, uttering the word of God in the first person; that finishes the first speech with a very clear statement of direction: "I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt." Wouldn't you think...considering the entire context that I just described...that the appropriate response for Moses would be something like "okay." Maybe "Yes, Lord." "When do I get started?" And then, we're off...

But you know, for some reason Moses can't do that. You see, here's what makes Moses so lovable—at least here—he's convinced God is making a big mistake by asking him to be part of this whole Exodus thing. "Who am I," he says, "that I should go to Pharaoh?" "Who am I?" And for Moses, that is a double-edged question.

Moses was born a Hebrew baby in Egypt when it wasn't safe to be a Hebrew baby in Egypt. Pharaoh had it out for all the Hebrew children, and so Moses' mother hid him. When he got too old to be hid any longer, his mother put him in a basket and let him go down the river, hoping that someone would find him and take care of him. The "someone" who did was Pharaoh's daughter, who saved him from the water. Through a turn of events, it ends up that Moses' mother becomes his nursemaid...which means he goes back to his mother. And when he is grown—which means, presumably, when he is beyond nursing years—he is brought back to Pharaoh's house to grow up as Pharaoh's grandson and the next Pharaoh's brother.

So he is Hebrew, but not really. And he is Egyptian, but not really. A lot of important things happen early on in life, and his "early on" is filled with being tossed around. He is neither fully one, nor fully the other. Even the origin of his name is unclear. Scripture says that it comes from the Hebrew "mashah," which means "to draw out" because he was drawn out of the river. But in ancient Egyptian there was also the word "mose," which meant "son of." His name doesn't even put him in one place.

When he finally decides that he is Hebrew, he does so with disastrous consequences. One day, when he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, he looks to see if the coast is clear and then kills the Egyptian and goes off to bury the body in the sand. He's a murderer, who covers up the evidence. And the next day, when he tries to be part of the Hebrew people by trying to break up a fight, one of the Hebrew men scoffs at him, and challenges his integrity: "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?" he says. "Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?"

There are, of course, all sorts of ways he could respond when he realized his crime had become known, but when we're caught, most of us want to get away. That's what he does. He runs away, and goes into the countryside.

One day in the wilderness, while sitting next to a well, he defended some women from a group of bullying shepherds. Later, when speaking to their father, they refer to him as the Egyptian who defended them. He marries Zipporah, one of the man's daughters, and they name their first child Gershom, which is a play on the Hebrew word "ger," which means "alien." For "I have been an alien residing in a foreign land," Moses says about himself. They are, in his case, plaintive words. Was he a Hebrew alien in Egypt? Or was he an Egyptian alien among the Hebrews?

And so he settles into the comfortable life of a shepherd, and goes about his business, maybe hoping that the second half of his life will be spent more simply than was the first half of his life...happily married, with children, and a steady job.

Everyone's got a story. And sometimes, the stories are complicated. That's Moses' story...filled with questions, and wonderings, and doubts, and violence, and sin, and rejection. And beyond that, read his story at the beginning of Exodus and it appears he has no idea who the God of his ancestors is at all; that he is ignorant of the God who made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There are, in scripture, lots of people with great faith and who know God closely. To this point in the story, Moses isn't one of them. We look at Moses through the lens of the end of his story. But who he is at the end of the story is very different from who he is at the beginning of the story. So at the beginning of the story—with good reason—he humbly asks God, appearing in a conversational burning bush—why it is that God would choose and send him...

All of which is to say that Moses may be just like each of us, except moreso...

Our stories are certainly different than his, but maybe not that different. We may not have such complex origins as him, but we all got our stories; and we all got our sinful places; and

we're all sometimes afraid and run away. And we may all have an inkling of how our life ought comfortably to play out.

And then, a burning bush shows up. Or if not a burning bush, at least smoldering shrubbery; and if not a smoldering shrubbery, at least a moment that may be vaguely warm and light...and God says "Pay attention. Stop for a moment and look over here. I'm talking to you, and I've got something I want you to do." And everything changes, or more accurately, God changes everything. And it's usually not as dramatic as waking up one morning a shepherd of sheep and going to bed that night the leader of a people, but it is at least the gradual awareness that God is working and calling us to a purpose beyond ourselves the fulfillment of which we are not capable on our own.

Just like Moses.

Moses has plenty of good reasons to respond to God with "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

But my point is that there is an inscrutability to the way God works, to which the story of Moses testifies: *God refuses to be limited by us*. The Lord does not make our pasts, or our weaknesses, or our fears, or our ignorance, or our hurts, or our inabilities, or our sinfulness a precondition for working in us, and calling us, and helping us. God looks at us differently than we look at ourselves.

Like many of us, I have a child going off to college this week. He's going where he's going because the admissions board looked at his grades, and test scores, and extracurricular activities, and they decided that he met their expectations and had the necessary qualifications. His record was sufficient. They have some idea of the degree to which past results indicate future performance, and his past results justified their giving him a shot at their institution. That's the way the world works...not just for colleges, but for lots of things.

*It just doesn't happen to be the way God works.* God takes a lost soul like Moses and makes him the leader of his people. Samson is foolish, but God still uses him to witness to the Philistines. Ruth has everything working against her, and still becomes the mother of the Israelite kings. God takes a boy who's too small and turns him into King David. God takes a tender of sycamore trees, and turns him into the prophet Amos. Jonah runs away, but still the Lord relies on him to preach to the Ninevites. A Nazarene girl becomes the mother of Jesus; fishermen become disciples; and persecutors of the Church become apostles.

And our friends and neighbors tell a camera that one time, God opened them up and helped them to see that a family is more than the people who are around you; that God helped them to forgive another, and even forgive themselves; that the Lord helped them to be a loving parent; that God helped them to lead the youth group, or taught them humility, or helped them get through two weeks of camp or ride a two-wheeler. On their own, it doesn't really happen. But with the help of God, the category of the impossible fades to black.

You see, in where we are and where we're going, God wants to help, and promises that we don't go it alone. "I will be with you," is God's first response to Moses' wonderings. And "I will be with you always, to the end of the ages" are the words with which Jesus leaves those eleven lonely, worshipful, and doubting followers who he tells to go into the world to make disciples, baptize, and teach others the way of life he teaches us.

Sixteen years ago this community did not exist, except in the minds of a few diocesan leaders who took what Jesus says here to heart. Mostly, in August 1993 there were about forty people pasting address labels on direct mail pieces, hoping that maybe in a few weeks someone would else show up on the second Sunday in September. Those people knew one thing

powerfully—that this was called to be a Christian community where people who may not have had a church home could find one. To make that possible, they were willing to do some odd things and make some sacrifices. For the purpose of inviting others into a living and growing relationship with Jesus and one another they were willing to walk into the unknown. And that is, of course, still our purpose, and what we do. We know that if all we ever do is try to hold on to something, or protect something, or play it safe, or exist only for ourselves, that that is hardly the life to which a burning bush would call us.

But we didn't know much more than that. Sixteen years ago we didn't know what we were doing. Just a bunch of unqualified “who am I” folks walking with clay feet not quite sure the whole thing would work but willing, eventually, to take a chance and trust that God would show the way and help and make things happen.

On our sixteenth birthday—reaching out to serve others and invite others in; fulfilling those tasks--that's still who we are, and that is a good and godly heritage that we claim, and that goes back at least as far as Moses.

It's not uncommon that all of us along the way hunger for a burning bush. I know I do. But I offer this suggestion: That there may be more burning bushes in our lives than we sometimes believe. It's just that they don't look like a literal burning bush. Instead, they look like an invitation, or feel like a nudge, or are experienced as unsettledness at the bondage others suffer for after all, there is all sorts of slavery and all sorts of powers that still bind people up. I think part of the purpose of this story is not that we leave it asking God to give us a burning bush, but that we leave it asking God where the burning bush is today.

But if that is our prayer, we best be careful. For it will be a burning bush that asks something of us. It may not say “free my people,” but it certainly won't say “as you were.” Most likely, it will say “Come on. I've got someplace for you to be my servant; I've got something for you to do, and I've chosen you to do it. We can keep talking, but still I've chosen you.”

And if it is that we are at all in awe, or the least bit self-aware, we will, most likely, respond to that burning bush with “who am I that you would send me?” And that is where we'll listen for what's next...that the Lord helps; that the Lord gives us what we need; and that always, the Lord is with us, even to the end of the ages.