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“Who, Me? Do What?”
Exodus 3:1-15 Matthew 16:21-28
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This story of the interchange between God and Moses is the beginning of the exodus story. Moses has been forced to flee Egypt because he killed an Egyptian slave master, and he has become a shepherd watching his father-in-law's sheep. As the story begins, Moses and his herd have reached the area around Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai.

We have an angel and God calling out of a burning bush that is not consumed, so you know right off that this is not going to be an everyday story. All this drama is impressive, but it is really just the prelude to the heart of the matter, God's recognition of the condition of God's people and God's call to Moses. God has seen the misery of the Israelites under their oppression by Egypt and has heard their cries of pain. God knows their suffering and has come down to deliver them. What amazing good news. God not only knows about the afflictions of the Israelites, but God has chosen to get involved in their liberation. God has come down into history to act on behalf God's people.

And notice that God did not call on Moses to distribute food bags to make the people's slavery more comfortable. God calls Moses to expose institutional failures with the intention that change would occur. God's desire was that the people should not be slaves any more. The new thing God sees is fundamental systemic political change.

God has a plan to bring up the people, out of the land of their oppression, to a land flowing with milk and honey. This new situation will reverse the conditions of oppression ó from slavery to freedom to be in covenant with God, from forced oppressive work and threats to the lives of children to promises of wholeness and plenty in community. God continues to renew the created order, and in the Exodus, we see the character of God as both creator and redeemer. (Birch, 115) God creates a people through their redemption from oppression.

Up to this point, Moses has heard nothing but incredibly good news. The God of his ancestors, the God who is faithful to promises has seen and heard the people's pain in slavery and has decided to intervene for the sake of their freedom and wholeness. But in verse 10, things take an ugly turn. God announces that the people's liberation will be accomplished through the intervention of Moses himself. God announces to Moses, “I will send you to Pharaoh.” All of a sudden, Moses realizes it will be he rather than God who will go to the Pharaoh; it will be he

who must bring up the people to a new land in which wholeness and plenty will replace slavery. It will be he who takes the risks of returning to Egypt. God announces, "I will send you, and I will be with you."

Moses, obviously, is not thrilled, and tries to beg off. "Who me? Do what? Who am I, he asks? No one will listen to me. I am not your man," says Moses, "but wait right there and I will find someone. I know just the person. Don't go away. I'll get right back to you."

When ducking and running did not work, Moses turned to a real conversation with God in which God takes Moses and his input seriously. Moses says that if he is going to get the Hebrew people to go up against the Pharaoh, to engage in massive civil disobedience, they will want to know what his authority is, who sent him. So God gives Moses a personal name that reveals the essential quality of God. "I am who I am," God says. It could also be translated, "I cause to be what comes into being." This is the God who has power to create all that exists. This is *Yahweh*, the one with the power of life and newness, who acts "to bring wholeness to a broken creation." (Birch, 107) That is still God's desire for the discipleship of our lives.

The call to act for the sake of bringing wholeness to a broken creation is at the heart of our passage in Matthew as well. Jesus is beginning to teach his disciples about his call to go to Jerusalem where he will suffer and die and be raised on the third day. He is spending his time on internal instruction now rather than public teaching and healing. He is beginning to develop the new community that will become the church, his body in the world.

Peter objects to Jesus' teachings because he has misunderstood what Messiahship means in the mission of Jesus. Jesus' sharp reply, "Get behind me Satan," reflects the meaning of Peter's challenge, with its parallel to the temptations of Satan in the desert at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It is, "The temptation to accomplish his ministry in the way human criteria judge to be successful." (NIB, VIII, 349) Peter was still thinking about Messiahship the way the world thinks rather than seeing the divine plan for a "radically different way of exercising rulership and authority." (NIB, VIII, 349)

The disciples are not to think about Jesus' ministry and their own discipleship in the terms of cultural concepts of success, which would definitely not lead to the execution of Jesus by political and religious authorities. Each of them is still asking, "Who, me? Do what?" Jesus tells his followers, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (24). The "become" here has an ongoing meaning. Becoming disciples is not a once and for all thing. It is something we continue to do for a lifetime. It is an ongoing process of growth and of action. Understanding and action are linked closely. To be the Son of the Living God is to go to the cross, and to be a follower of the Son is to be willing to take that same journey. Believing and discipleship cannot be separated.

The questions now come to us. Each of us has to answer the "Who Me?" question of whether we want to follow Jesus. Not just to be a fan of Jesus, but to follow him. Our answers show in our actions, the "Do what?" question. Do we live for others? Is the common good central in our decision-making framework? Our values show in our lives. We are told to live by different values than those of the culture in which we find ourselves, where living for others is clearly not

the central force. The wholeness of the burning bush, or of the Gospel, cannot be bought with money or power or prestige.

We are called on to confess our belief in Jesus as savior. And we are called to live a new life that makes the world different. Giving ourselves for the sake of others is God's call to each of us. The call is to live a life oriented toward the common good of all, not toward an idolatrous focus on ourselves. It is a call to the community of faith to live for the sake of the whole community. It is not an individualistic ethic, but an ethic for the community of which each of us is a part. In a sermon from this pulpit, The Rev. Otis Moss, Jr. said to "Judge the faithfulness of a religious community not by its seating capacity but by its sending capacity." With Dr. King, he is calling on us, not to sit here as a thermometer reading and reflecting the moral temperature of our culture, but to go out to be thermostats dialing up the moral commitment to justice and wholeness in this community and beyond.

Here, in the Labor Day weekend, between the Democratic and Republican conventions and just days past the 45th anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, I want to reflect a bit on where we are as a country in our journey toward building a community of wholeness and plenty for all. In his "I Have a Dream" speech, Dr. King was realistic about the corrosive effects of southern Jim Crow laws that mandated racial segregation, about the level of tension between black communities and their police departments and about the wide chasm separating income and wealth between blacks and whites. It was in the face of all this that he declared that he still had a dream of equality and freedom. Certainly, some things have changed, but we still have a long way to go.

For the few people who remember that on August 28, 1955, Emmett Till was murdered in Money, Miss., reportedly for whistling at a white woman, and who spent August 28, 1963 on the Mall in Washington and on August 28, 2008 were in the Invesco Stadium at the Democratic National Convention, evidence of change brought about by the Civil Rights Movement is visible and powerful. And for those who followed Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign and who will watch the nomination of Governor Sarah Palin as Senator McCain's Vice Presidential running mate, the changes brought about by the closely related Women's Movement are also clear. But we still have a long way to go.

Two measures often used as indicators of community health and well-being are life expectancy and infant mortality.

Elizabeth Gudrias reports in the current *Harvard Magazine* that life expectancy is declining in an alarming number of US counties. Between 1983 and 1999, life expectancy for men decreased in more than 50 U.S. counties, and for women, it decreased in more than 900 counties — more than a quarter of the total. Overall, the United States is no longer in the top 40 countries in life expectancy. With regard to infant mortality (the number of children dying before the age of one) the US ranks last among the G7 countries. In 2006, the Tennessee health commissioner, announced that "infant deaths in this nation account for more deaths than all of the other causes of death combined for children up to the age of 18." (20/20)

Gudrias goes on to point out that, "Disparities in health tend to fall along income lines everywhere, the poor generally get sicker and die sooner than the rich. But in the United States, the gap between the rich and the poor is far wider than in most other developed democracies, and it is getting wider." (Gudrais) In the U.S., infant mortality among African Americans in 2000 occurred at a rate more than twice the national average. (CDC) She also notes that tax policy and social welfare programs highly influence the levels of inequality. Our realities result from our choices.

Income inequality is another measure of our common good. One of the most widely used measures of income inequality is the Gini coefficient. On the Gini scale, the United States ranks between Russia and Sri Lanka on the lower side and Mexico and Venezuela on the higher side. (Gudrais)

One of her most disturbing findings is that, "When a society is starkly divided along racial or ethnic lines, the affluent are less likely to take care of the poor." Internationally, welfare systems are least generous in countries that are the most ethnically heterogeneous. Those U.S. states with the largest black population have the least generous welfare systems." (Gudrais)

Vice President Walter Mondale found the same things true in Minnesota. His recent study suggests that a simmering resentment at the influx of immigrants is growing, especially in the suburbs. A great many otherwise politically moderate Minnesotans, the polling found, think immigrants represent a drain on the public schools, are failing to assimilate and get too many government handouts. Mondale warns that there exists "a great deal of ambivalence, if not at times outright hostility, in Minnesotans' feelings toward immigrants." (David Peterson and Dane Smith, *Star Tribune*) In Minnesota, the increase in ethnic diversity and the shrinking of our social welfare programs have happened in the same time frame.

Poverty rates are another key indicator. 36.5 million Americans now live in poverty. Of the 13 million of these whom are children, a majority live in working families. An American child is born into poverty every 35 seconds. (CDF, 32)

Let's look closer to home. We are all used to seeing Minnesota at or near the top of lists of economic and social well-being. When we are compared with other states in overall statistics, we do well. But when we look at the realities within the state or at selected populations, the view is very different. In Minnesota in 2006, "poverty climbed to its highest heights of the decade for many groups. (KIDS, 2)

The realities for individuals and families of color are particularly disturbing. In 2006, "Fully 45 percent of the black children living in Minnesota" lived in (poverty)." That is 10 points higher than the national average. Among the 33 states with enough black children to produce reliable estimates, only three states "Oklahoma, Louisiana and Mississippi" had a higher child poverty rate among black children than Minnesota. (Kids 3,4)

In the face of all this, our nation needs us to be King's moral thermostats, turning up the national commitment to wholeness and plenty for all. But as Marian Wright Edelman says, "too many (of us) would rather celebrate than follow Dr. King. (Too) many have enshrined Dr. King the

dreamer and ignored Dr. King the disturber of all unjust peace. Many of us trivialize or sanitize Dr. King's words and would much rather build a monument or name a street or school after him than build the new nation and world he called for. (CDF, 32) There is much this congregation and its allies are doing in the Twin Cities and beyond. As we prepare to enter a new program year, let each one of us wrestle with the "Do What?" question for our discipleship in this coming year. How will you be a part of our sending from this place to contend with the selfishness and individualism of our culture? To build the new nation and world King has invited to pursue. It is time to believe, to pray and to act.

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