As our passage for this morning begins, we find Moses tending his father-in-law’s sheep in a desert field. It’s a place that the earthy Hebrew text describes as “the backside of nowhere.” He’s out there by himself, taking care of a bunch of smelly animals. He’s a fugitive, having left Egypt many years ago as a young man. Scripture tells us that he once killed a man in the heat of the moment and fled the scene of the crime. He settled down in Midian, married into a quiet family, and tried to forget all that mess that he left behind in Egypt. No great heroes out here.

But even running to the ends of the earth could not get Moses away from the plans that God had in store for him. God’s people, Israel, were suffering terribly under the yoke of slavery in Egypt, the most powerful nation in the world. Theirs was a terrified and marginalized existence, slavery under a people whose lust for great monuments demanded labor of the most demeaning and back-breaking sort. But God heard their groans and their suffering, and for reasons no one could understand, God decided to set things right through this nobody named Moses.

The Exodus story shifts abruptly from the cries of God’s people in Egypt back to Moses in the open country. One day, while still out on the “backside of nowhere,” Moses sees something unusual out in the open fields. A patch of dry brush smolders and bursts into flame, but it does not burn out quickly. It does not go out at all. The flames keep licking up toward the sky, a pillar of fire beckoning to this wanderer. His curiosity sparked, Moses walks toward that strange fire.

Suddenly the voice of God thunders from the flames and calls, “Moses, Moses!”

“Here I am.”

“Take off your sandals; you are standing on holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

Moses hears about the suffering of his people in Egypt, and God calls him to action, to respond to this divine call, to go and confront Pharaoh at the risk of his own life! Moses will be God’s agent of deliverance, the one who will lead Israel out of oppression through parted waters, and into a good and broad land known as Canaan. An unexpected call indeed.

It’s too much to ask of one person, and Moses isn’t up to the task at all. Terrified, he hems and haws, coming up with excuse after excuse as to why he should not answer God’s call. He’s not cut out for public life, the people won’t listen to him, Pharaoh’s had it out for him ever
since he left Egypt. Moses is just too uncertain, too fallible, too afraid for such a task. He cries out in fear, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

God’s answer is not about Moses’ charisma, or his commitment to the cause of Hebrew liberation. The call of Moses was never about how capable, or courageous, or determined Moses might be. It is rather about how loving, determined, and mighty to save the God of Israel is and always will be. Perhaps the LORD has chosen Moses just to show that God can work through even the humblest of circumstances to transform the destinies of many. So Moses doesn’t get an answer about his own identity that question “Who am I?” Instead, God responds, “I will be with you.”

Those words are God’s promise for all ordinary people who hear a voice calling them to follow God in the wilderness of this life. The promise “I will be with you” is what sent Moses back to Egypt to demand justice for his people from Pharaoh. “I will be with you” comforted the Apostle Paul when he was in prison for the sake of preaching the Gospel. “I will be with you” sent the women who loved Jesus from the empty tomb to proclaim the resurrection on Easter morning. The words “I will be with you” became flesh and dwelt among us when Jesus was hanging on a cross, gasping final words of love and acceptance to the thieves dying next to him in shame.

God gives us the unexpected call with an even more unexpected promise. There is a demand for everything we have, so that God might use us to preach Good News to those who are suffering. But these words “I will be with you” also give us life; they make us able to live for God and neighbor instead of for ourselves. That word of love for us goes out from God, justifying us sinners and proclaiming us ready for service. It is God who made us, redeems us, and equips us, not we ourselves.

The words “I will be with you” have not lost their meaning for us today. Just last week, a woman in line at the bank asked me what I do, and when I told her that I’m a pastor, she said, “Oh, I used to go to church a lot as a kid. I kind of took a break in college, and then I just started living my life sort of differently. I still believe— don’t get me wrong— it’s just that I usually feel like I’m not good enough for God most Sundays.”

Before I could catch myself, I blurted out, “Who told you that lie?” There was an awkward silence. “My parents,” she said. “They told us as kids that if we weren’t going to get up and go to church every Sunday, we might as well not go at all.” I cried out, “That’s not in the Bible, that’s not the Good News at all! Nobody’s good enough for God! That’s the point of it all! God loves us, sinners though we may be! It’s not about how good you are, but how loving and gracious God is!” Most days I just nod my head and let comments like that go; I’m a busy man! But on that day, for whatever reason, I just went off on her.

She said, much to my surprise, and maybe to hers, “I know. I forget it all the time, but it’s true. I know.” She’s not the only one who forgets; I forget it too. I try to justify myself every day, proving to God and others that I count because of my achievements, that my work makes me a
worthwhile person, that what I do in this life is more important than who I am—someone created in the image of God.

I think this is where the Gospel is a kick in the teeth to people like you and me, folks who more often than not follow the rules. God loves and justifies sinners, people who screw up big time, who don’t deserve a second chance. We convince ourselves that we aren’t one of those people. We, on the other hand, do our very to attend church every Sunday, we pay our taxes on time, we don’t overstay our two hour allotted time in Davidson parking spaces. Sometimes a false hope quietly festers in my heart that I can justify myself, make myself good enough for God. And if I’m really, really good, or at least good enough, then God will be pleased with me. If I follow all the rules, then I’ll receive blessings in life, right?

I hate to tell you that’s not what happens in the Bible; life with God is not earned by how good we are; life with God is always a gift given freely. Remember that even Moses—the great hero who parted the Red Sea and ascended Mount Sinai—he was not good enough, strong enough, courageous enough for the enormous task to which God called him. He lived and died by the gracious promise, “I will be with you,” the truth that God enables us to do things we cannot accomplish by our own strength. Perhaps we have to examine ourselves and come to the realization that we too, rule followers though we may be, cannot earn or demand the love of God. God loves us as an act of complete and utter freedom, unbound by our inability to respond in kind.

We have an unexpected call, an unexpected gift, really, because none of us deserve it. God loves to choose the down-and-outers, the chumps, the burnouts like Moses. We don’t know what will become of anyone in this life because God is God, and we are human beings. Who then are we to judge when we see some other sinner following Jesus and screwing up in the process? Jesus commands us not to judge our neighbor. God just might use that judged person to do something extraordinary. Are we really ready for that new reality of God’s kingdom, where the worst of sinners will carry the name “a friend of God” alongside us?

We all must ask ourselves this question daily. It is a question meant for you and me whether you might be a returning Davidson student, or an enthusiastic participant of youth group, a longtime member of this church, a brand-new youth pastor fresh out of seminary, or somebody else entirely. Don’t judge the freshman who’s been wasting his time partying too much and making all the wrong choices. Don’t judge the high school flunky who runs with the wrong crowd. Don’t judge the status-obsessed materialist, or the co-worker who lives and dies by getting the next promotion, or the screw up trying to get his or her life back together. Don’t judge the washed-up shepherd tending flocks on the backside of nowhere. Love them as God loves them, and do not judge. They may receive the unexpected call one day to confront the Pharaohs of this world, or to lead God’s people to a Promised Land of justice and peace. They may hear a voice uttering the promise “I will be with you” when the rest of us only hear silence and despair. You just might see one of those miserable sinners standing in a field alone, taking off their shoes, walking toward a tree that is engulfed in flames, and yet is not consumed.