

**Proper 17A – August 30, 2020, St. Anne’s
Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28**

Some of you will picture today’s story of Moses and the burning bush under the influence of Cecil B. DeMille production from the 1950s, starring Charlton Heston. If you’re of a younger generation it’s probably Dreamworks’ Prince of Egypt that you see in your mind’s eye. But in either case, these shows encourage the mistaken idea that God is made known to ordinary humans like us, only in ways worthy of a Hollywood blockbuster. In the *Hollywood* version of the story we picture this scene as one of awe and wonder. And we think "Boy, if God ever spoke to **me** out of a burning bush, THEN I'd know for sure what God wanted me to do and I'd get right to it!" But that isn't *quite* the story the *bible* tells us and certainly not the *whole* story. Forget Charlton Heston - this passage isn't about a timid exile's reverent first meeting with the God of his ancestors. Rather, this story is about a no-holds-barred encounter between a wily, even conniving outlaw and a God who's *more* than up to the challenge of transforming him into an instrument of salvation.

The lectionary has skipped over a big chunk of Moses’ life. After having been rescued from the Nile by the Princess he was raised as her adopted son. But then his life takes a sudden turn when he kills a cruel overseer for beating a Hebrew slave and he flees Egypt. Forty years pass as Moses lives an unremarkable life. As we rejoin him in today’s reading it’s another seemingly ordinary, hum-drum day like thousands of ones before it. Moses is looking after his father-in-law’s sheep when he notices that off to one side there’s a bush that’s burning, *without* being burned up. And so Moses wanders over to see what’s going on. Moses’ willingness to wander off the path leads him to a holy conversation with God where he experiences an intimacy with the divine that marks Moses for the rest of his life.

It's worth noting that the burning shrub clearly **doesn't** seem particularly *awesome* at first glance. More of a *curiosity*, really. But enough to catch Moses' attention. I think we all imagine *we* would go have a look if confronted with something like a burning bush. After all that's what you *would* do, isn't it? Go and have a look? I mean, **I** certainly would. Well, at least, I *think* I would...

But, if we're honest with ourselves we know that we all have an almost endless capacity to keep going and *not* stop to see what God is up to. We've got things to do. We're tired. Surely someone else will look into it and let us know what's happening. We'll come back later.

There are **plenty** of *sound* reasons to keep walking and ignore those bushes.

But this story reminds us that the mission field *isn't* always *right in front of us*.

Sometimes we need to *get off the path* to get a closer look at what *God's* up to. We need to be curious about the world 'out there'. Look more closely. Listen more intently. Search out the nooks and crannies of the world around us, and hear the cry of people we might *not* normally hear. To know *God*, you have to go *with* God, wherever that might take you - even if it's not the path you're used to following or that you were *planning* on taking.

Not that Moses is exactly thrilled when he does get to the bush and discovers that it's *not* just an interesting diversion but God Almighty come calling. I picture Moses in front of the bush, listening to this mighty announcement of God about oppression and God's decision to act against it on behalf of Israel. It sounds **good**, doesn't it? Especially after noting an important fact: every pronoun God has used has been a *first person* one. It's obviously **GOD** who's made the decision to intervene in the world for Israel, and Moses is surely thinking, "You go God!" But unfortunately for

Moses, the pronouns take an abrupt turn in verse 10. "So, come, I will send **you** to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt."

Wait, whaa...?! Well, that's a camel of a different color! And this pronouncement sends Moses off into a series of questions that have one purpose - namely, to get Moses off the hook of this preposterous command. It takes him only the blink of an eye before he starts his objections, "Who am **I** that I should go to pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? After all, God, I'm a **fugitive** from Egyptian justice, and besides I have a wife and child and a steady job". God's call to service is regularly met with reluctance, resistance and a lack of enthusiasm but Moses tops the list of Biblical prophets in *resisting* God's call. In quick succession, he lodges **five** objections to the idea (most of which aren't included in the section we heard today). And to be fair to him, Moses **isn't** just being *humble* when he says that he isn't good at public speaking, theology, politics. He's right – he isn't. But God answers all Moses' objections by promising to give him what he needs. God intends to save the people whether they deserve it or not. Whether *Moses* is up to the task of leading them out of slavery or not. Because God has promised to look after them. And, I have to say God is actually pretty patient with Moses and his foot dragging. Although God's patience **does** have limits and *eventually* he says, 'just **do it**'!

Moses even tries to stick-handle God in his effort to wriggle out of this assignment. "Suppose", he says, "I go to the Israelites and tell them all this great news, and you know, they're a tad sceptical and ask just who **is** this God who sent me. What's his *name*? What should I tell them?" Such an innocent, understandable, even reasonable question... Except that it's *not*. It's a total *power play*. In ancient culture, it was believed names had *power*. Moses isn't asking for a calling card, he's trying to get a name out of this divine being because to know someone's **name** is to have power

and control over them. And in reply God gives that great ambiguous answer "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh": "I am who I am!" Or, "I will be who I will be." In other words, "Don't try to box me in, Moses!" And the truth is you can't really know who God *is* unless you're willing to sign on for God's mission in the world. Which is what Moses ultimately **does** - once he runs out of objections— going back to Egypt, confronting Pharaoh, leading his people out of Egypt, taking them through the parted waters and into the wilderness. And there, on the other side of things, Moses doesn't *need* to ask who God *is* anymore— he's learned it first hand, through his own experience.

So, Moses is not Charlton Heston. He is, in fact, you and me—less than eager to speak truth to power, *more* than eager to leave the hard work to someone else. But sometimes, the task is **ours**, and **we** must be the agents of God. So, the important question is - what is God calling **us** to? What is God calling **St. Anne's** to? We too often allow our 'consumer culture' let us think of church as yet another *choice* we make that is supposed to make us *personally* happy and fulfilled. But in fact, church is **not at all** about **you**, and what **you** want. It's about **God**. And what **God** wants. So ,the real question is *never* 'what do **I** want to do?' or 'How do I get *my* needs and desires met?' The real question is *always*, 'What path is God calling *us* to follow?' And then, just as importantly, and the part that we too often ignore... 'what is God calling **me**, personally, to **do** as **part** of that?' Moses was happy with the **idea** of the Children of Israel being freed from slavery in Egypt. He just wanted to wriggle out of having to take a role in making it happen. And **that's** something we can all fall prey to.

What we're called to do *doesn't* have to be spectacular. But the sad truth is most of us don't allow ourselves to believe that God might actually *expect us* to do

something important. But that's probably because we haven't been reading our Bibles very carefully. After all, almost none of the people God calls into ministry in the bible - including Moses and Peter and all those others we venerate - are the stuff of *heroes*. And yet, over and over again God uses these frail, fallible, and oh-so-ordinary people to do *extraordinary* things. God continues to beckon us forward into a future that we can't yet see but which God is fashioning both *for* us and *through* us and *our* ministry.

So, as you tend **your** metaphorical sheep this week be on the lookout for interesting bushes by the wayside. Because you just never know when, where, or how God might just turn up...