

“You talking to Me?”
Exodus 3:1-15
Sunday, August 30, 2020
A sermon by The Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating
Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church
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God’s call to Moses, as Dennis Olson observes, is “awesome and fearful, frightening and comforting, untamed but reassuring.”

We all long for the time when we can gather again in worship – longing for the familiar sights and sounds of Sunday morning that mean so much: the narthex bustling with activity, sign up sheets and calls for volunteers, the smell of freshly printed bulletins and still brewing coffee, even the congregation’s collective sigh as the acolyte ignites the candles and not the communion table.

We miss that sense of holy anticipation of waiting for worship to begin.

On the other hand, most of you will be able to follow Moses lead this morning by worshipping with your shoes off without any fear of someone saying something to you!

In this time of our pandemic exile from worship, something remarkable has happened. Not only have we all scrambled to make use of new ways to remain connected, several surveys indicate that for most of us, our faith has deepened in this time.¹

It is not unusual to hear people say they have spent their entire Sunday afternoons worship surfing on Facebook, sampling from the smorgasbord of offerings available. How this practice may continue when the pandemic eases is unclear, though I’m sure more than a few folks have enjoyed worshipping in bathrobes and pjs!

Our homes have become our sanctuaries. Our backyard decks are the places where we gaze upon the vistas of a virtual Mt. Horeb. God speaks to us in these places, much the way God speaks to Moses. And while we may not be gazing at burning bushes, or even blinking neon signs, God is here today. We are indeed gathered on holy ground, and there are angels all around, inviting us to turn and look at this great sight.

¹ See: https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/03/30/most-americans-say-coronavirus-outbreak-has-impacted-their-lives/?utm_source=link_news9&utm_campaign=item_307619&utm_medium=copy

So take off your shoes. Take off your shoes and realize that the ground beneath you is holy ground, and there are indeed angels all around. Take off your shoes, and listen for the voice of God speaking through the burning bushes of every day life.

In her book “The Cloister Walk” Presbyterian author and poet Kathleen Norris shares her experience of spending several months living and praying with a community of Benedictine monks. Norris describes her extended stays in the community as transforming and filled with grace, a sacred place of encountering God.

She describes one particularly memorable Sunday.

One Sunday, Norris was invited to assist the monks with Sunday morning worship. Having been invited to carry in the scriptures during the beginning processional, Norris finds herself leading more than 200 monks into mass. She quips that even Mae West had never been followed by so many men. In that moment of gathering, Norris says that she “found i “I found I was walking a path with a downward tilt much more steep than I had realized...this church was a place I thought I knew, a big space I’d tamed by my daily presence...now I was discovering that it was wild after all, and could roar like the sea. Walking on the terrazzo floor, she says she was “reminded of a recurring dream, which I move through the galaxy stepping delicately (and sometimes leaping) from star to star.”²

“Good ceremony,” she writes “makes room for all the dimensions of human experience in the hope that, together, we will discover something that transforms us.”³ Make no mistake: the bush was burning brightly before her, yet it was not consumed. The ground upon which she stood was holy ground.

It had such an impact on her that Norris began to wonder how she might experience that sort of deep connection to God once she returned to her everyday life in a small farming community. How would worship in her small Presbyterian church compare to the grandeur of the songs and prayers of the Benedictine monastery?

What she learned is that the mystery of God’s presence is experienced in communities where lives are shared, and prayers are offered. It happens as we do what Moses did: show up, pay attention, and listen.

For better or worse, most of our impressions of Moses were formed by the 1956 classic movie “The Ten Commandments.” Those of us born after that movie remember watching it on television every Easter Sunday. A youthful and well-chiseled Charlton Heston is led up the mountains to see a burning tree. In the mountains, he sees the best special effects Cecil B. DeMille could turn out, a tree on fire, but not consumed. And then, a big, booming baritone voice cries out, “Moooses! Moooses!”

² Norris, “The Cloister Walk,” p. 265.

³ Ibid., p. 266.

Let's cast aside those images for a moment. With all due respect to Charlton Heston, I believe there is a different image we need to discover. Lately I've begun imagining Moses less like Charlton Heston and more like...Robert DeNiro. Imagine Moses as one of DeNiro's street-hardened, bittersweet characters who are deeply flawed on one hand but also heroic. Imagine Moses as played by DeNiro, imagine him confronted by the burning bush, hearing the voice calling to him. In utter surprise Moses turns and says, "You talking to me? You talking to ME?"

I believe this is the image of Moses we need to discover.

This Moses isn't certain; his faith may even be in question. This Moses is an outlaw, someone who has struggled. He's a bit of a renegade. This Moses is the one who has led his father-in-law's sheep into the far part of the desert. This Moses is homeless: as an infant he was plucked out of the Nile and raised in Pharaoh's household, and even among his own people he never had a real home.

But here on the mountain of God, Moses is invited home. The narrator does not explain why he has wandered this far, but a good guess might be that having fled Egypt, Moses was trying to understand his purpose and place in his life. We are familiar with those moments of questioning and wondering—those times when in the words of the poet William Stafford we say, "Ask me whether what I have done is my life?"⁴

Having spent his entire life trying to figure out what is his life, Moses stares at the burning bush that has suddenly caught his attention. And in that moment, he hears his name spoken.

God's intrusion into his life catches him off guard. You talking to me? Yes, Moses, there is no one else around. "You talking to me? You want me to go and stand up to Pharaoh? Yes, Moses, go down. Go down and tell Pharaoh, "let my people go."

God has heard, God has seen, and God knows. God has seen the misery of those caught in the death grip of evil. God has heard them crying, "Lord, save us," "I can't breathe," "They are killing us."

God *hears*, *sees*, and *knows*. God responds because the way of God is always the way of liberation and freedom. This is the mystery which Moses discovers: that all of the pain and struggle he has endured is lifted from his shoulders the moment God speaks his name. There, surprised by a burning bush, Moses encounters God. God's anger erupts into flames. Moses feels the heat on the soles of his feet and in the soul of his spirit.

He feels the invitation of God to make things different.

It is a difficult place to stand; but in that moment, Moses knows the liberating power of God. It is a hard place to stand, no matter the burden you bear. But Jesus lifts it from our shoulders and calls us to do the same for those near us.

⁴ William Stafford, "Ask Me" <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/ask-me/>

If we take time to notice, there are burning bushes all around us: there are those crying in loneliness, and those crying out in grief. There are Black and brown persons crying for justice. There are families yearning for a better chance. There are those desperate to find healing, and those for whom the burden of the pandemic has increased their load of anxiety and depression.

God hears. God sees. God knows.

This is the mystery of our calling as a church. All around us the burning of the world summons our attention. And I wonder, “Do we hear our name being called?”

Some thirty years ago, dedicated volunteers from our Presbytery participated in a program called “The Phone’s for You.” Simply put, they gathered in an office and made phone calls inviting people who answered to consider attending a new church that was being built at the corner of Clayton and Strecker in Wildwood. It was a wild idea, far from the way Presbyterians normally do business.

But it worked, and combined with many other efforts, helped give birth to Woodlawn Chapel. Times change and methods change, but I wonder if the pandemic might be our call to consider once more what it means to be called.

In the movie “Harriet,” singer and actress Cynthia Erivo plays Harriet Tubman, the daring ex-slave who guided slaves to freedom along the hidden routes of the Underground Railroad. At one point, Harriet and another slave are preparing to start running. Looking at the slave quarters, she tells her companion to wait. It is as if she has seen a burning bush in the middle of the night. Her deep alto voice booms, “Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land.” Suddenly doors begin to open, and others appear. She keeps singing, “Go down, Moses, tell old Pharaoh, let my people go!”

Let the heat of this moment warm the soles of your feet, but also the soul of your Spirit. Listen for the voice of God leading you today, even as you ask, “Is what I am doing my life?” AMEN.