

You Want Me to Do What?

World Communion Sunday – October 1, 2017

Exodus 2; 23-25; 3:1-15

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Last week, our second grader, Nathan, had a homework assignment that involved asking Ryan and me questions. His class was learning about their names, and the assignment was to answer four questions: What is their special name, what does it mean, who chose it and why. Answering these questions reminded me of the many conversations Ryan and I had years ago about names as we discerned what we wanted Nathan's special name to be. Names are so special. Naming is a part of every culture and, at its most basic level, indicates the newborn's existence and the communities' responsibility to it. A name differentiates a person and is a way that we associate our identities each and every day.

When an infant is baptized, the pastor asks the parents for the child's name, so that the baptism proclamation becomes personalized to that child, celebrating that we are each irreplaceable, beloved creatures of God.

Our names are used to single us out and to get our attention, especially in a time or place when we least expect to hear someone—like in a deserted place by a mountain where you are alone with a bunch of sheep. This is where we find Moses in our passage for this morning. Living in Midian with his father in law Jethro, Moses is shepherding the flock of sheep, as he does every day.

But on this day, in this new place beyond the wilderness, where Moses usually goes, Moses has a most unexpected experience. All of the sudden, out of nowhere, a bush spontaneously bursts into flames, but very oddly does not burn up. Moses is amazed and curious and turns to look at it more curiously, as he can scarcely believe his eyes. Then he hears his name called, not once but twice: Moses, MOSES! Whoever is calling out knows his name, knows that it is he, a young Israelite shepherd leading his flock. And so, with courage, Moses responds to the unknown voice: "Here I am."

Here I am.

Three little words that confirm to the voice that Moses is there, ready to listen; three little words that open Moses up to a relationship that will change his life and the lives of his people forever; three little words that lead Moses into an unbelievably difficult task.

But before giving the task, God prepares Moses to receive it and tells him to whom he is speaking:

Then God say: "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground....I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

Moses had heard of this God. Despite being raised with the Egyptians, he remained in contact, at some level, with his Israelite mother and sister, Miriam. He had learned of God's faithfulness to Abraham in giving him Isaac, and he knew of Jacob's sneaky ways and wrestling match with God. Moses knew of Jacob's son Joseph, who became a leader in Egypt. And, Moses knew this God to be one of mercy, of grace, and of deep faithfulness.

God's faithfulness is at the core of this morning's narrative: "I have observed (more accurately translated, "I have certainly seen") the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters...I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land....The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them." (3:7-8a)

The God of Faithfulness *knows* the Israelites' pain. God has not only heard the cries but *knows* their sufferings. Such language reflects a deep relationship with them, a relationship with commitment for the Israelites' welfare, a commitment that Israel's history demonstrates is kept. Moses has every reason to think that the God of faithfulness, grace and mercy will prevail again. But this time, God will prevail through a human's leadership. God will prevail through a flawed young man who has no interest in being this leader. God will prevail through Moses.

Imagine Moses' angst when God says, "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

Excuse me, did you say me? You are going to send me to the Pharaoh?

You want me to do WHAT? I imagine Moses wanted to scream to God.

Recognizing and respecting to whom Moses is speaking, instead of yelling his rejection of this suggestion he asks a question: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" For more than one reason, it seems that Moses is not the right person for this task. We recall that Moses is not in Midian by choice but because he had to flee Egypt after killing an Egyptian. He had to, because after hearing of the murder, the Pharaoh told his leaders to kill Moses.

Scripture tells us that king is now dead, but that does not mean that all the Egyptian leaders have forgotten him. To return to Egypt would be a particularly dangerous journey for Moses. It also seems an odd choice for a murderer to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, doesn't it? And then there were the personal shortcomings that made Moses ineffective as a leader, namely that he was not a good public speaker. Why would anyone, let alone the Egyptian king, listen to him?

These concerns, plus being afraid, brings Moses to beg, "O Lord, please send someone else" (Exodus 4:13). We know that God does not let Moses off the hook but continues to push him to leadership, offering his brother Aaron to be a co-leader. A reluctant leader, Moses was only one of many found in the Bible, and in human history.

A reluctant leader. This is what Charles Thomson found when he arrived at Mount Vernon on April 14, 1789. The secretary of Congress traveled from New York to confirm

for George Washington the good news: he would be America's first President! Congress had ratified the earlier Electoral College vote, which had been unanimous for Washington. But this was not welcome news for the General. To his friend, Edward Rutledge, Washington wrote about the presidency as though it was practically a death sentence. By saying yes to his country, Washington wrote that he had given up on "all personal happiness in this world." (2011 Chernow).

Perhaps, like Moses, he too asked God, "You want me to do What?" Having fought across the country during the Revolutionary War, Washington knew all too well the disrepair the United States was in afterward. His task, as its first President, would be awesome. And, also like Moses, he felt most unfit for the leadership position, which was very different from his role as commander-in-chief. At his inauguration, Washington lacked all confidence and poise that came naturally to him in battle. Senator William Maclay recounted Washington's shaky inauguration speech delivery: "This great man was agitated and embarrassed more than he ever was by the leveled cannon or pointed musket...He trembled and several times could scarce make out to read, though it must be supposed he had often read it before. (2011 Chernow)

How much easier it would have been for Washington if he had refused the nomination; how much easier for Moses if he had not said, "Here I am." But they didn't; they couldn't. Because they weren't just asked by God, they were called. They were called to lead a people—not alone, but with God: "I will be with you..." God told Moses. Washington no doubt knew this story and took the same words to heart as he offered all that he was, inadequate as he felt he was, to his country and to God.

As we journey through the Bible, many of God's myriad ways of working in the world are revealed. With Moses, God tries a new thing, giving human beings central importance in God's story. Throughout the Old Testament, God calls prophets to serve as holy messengers.

In the New Testament, God does a new thing again, coming down to us, not as a voice in a bush, but as a human. Jesus... God with us... God experiencing human life first hand, was born. Jesus showed and taught us how to live lives that create heaven on earth. Jesus prayed with us and Jesus died because of us. Jesus must have thought, as he headed to Jerusalem, really? I am going to do THIS? Is crucifixion really the best way? The only way? And still, Jesus said, "Here I am." Most obviously in Jesus' dying and resurrection, God asserts that the present situation does not define what is possible.

Moses, Washington and Jesus. Three leaders who said, "Here I am." That willingness to respond, that courage, that faith, made impossibilities become realities. With courage and willingness, small and large realities can be realized.

Friends, all of us *can* say "Here I am" to God...but *will* we? We must have courage. Forget the long lists of inadequacies, excuses and reservations, and respond to God, remembering that God chose you. Amazing things will happen. The cranes hanging above us are a beautiful example of what can be done when we say those three little words. Take a moment to gaze (again) at the rainbow of colorful cranes suspended above us. Take note of their great number and their striking similarities to one another and also their unique elements. Over 1300 cranes folded and strung and hung by us. By the few of you who are expert origami artists and by the many of us who are not.

I heard several of you say, when you saw the almost transparent thin thread first used for stringing, “You want me to do what?” After trying myself, I said that too. It seemed like an impossible task. But, we were willing to try a new thing, to offer ourselves and our creativity to find ways to get these cranes strung—using glue, fishing line and upholstery needles! Last Sunday we had five strands of cranes. Today we have 79! In small ways and large, the present situation does not define what is possible with God leading us. The present situation does not define what is possible with God.

And so, with courage and open hearts, we can come to this table as ourselves, complete with faults, frailties and fears. We come as named, claimed, beloved children of God, and we come as a community of believers. We come to be Jesus’ guests at the table, to be fed by him and, through the Holy Spirit, to be bonded in unity with one another and with Christians all over the world. We celebrate this miraculous connection made possible through the Spirit particularly on this World Communion Sunday—this Sunday on which we celebrate and support the peace makers of the world. Inspired by the cranes above, we celebrate and believe that our present situation of violence, distrust and tensions do not define the future of peace possible with God. And as we eat the food of life, we celebrate and remember the one who gives us the peace that passes all understanding. Through this holy meal, we are given the spiritual nourishment necessary for us to grow in our faith and we are renewed to return to our worlds to bring peace, love and mercy.

We may be reluctant to do what it is God is calling us to do but, at this table and elsewhere, we listen and respond to God. Although we may be reluctant disciples, God’s story affirms that greatness is possible, even if improbable.

We did not choose God, God has chosen us—each and every one of us. Just like Nathan, each of us has a special name and a special place in this world. Let us then move forward with courage, knowing that ours is a God that knows us, loves us and is deeply faithful to us. May we respond to God—even if it is with the question, “You want me to do what?” And remember, that with God, impossibilities can become realities. Thanks be to God, Amen.

Work Cited

Chernow, Ron. 2011. “George Washington: A Reluctant Leader.” In *The Smithsonian Magazine*, February. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/george-washington-the-reluctant-president-49492/>