

September 3, 2023

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Reverend Joseph Kimmel
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Exodus 3:1-15



“But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ He said, ‘I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.’”

I want to open my sermon this morning with three brief vignettes: #1: He dropped out of school in the seventh grade and for most of his life worked at various odd jobs, including running a small gas station when he was in his 40s. Later he opened a tiny restaurant in the apartment adjoining the gas station, and in his 50s and into his 60s began finally to discover his life’s purpose and passion: he really enjoyed cooking in the gas station restaurant, particularly fried chicken. And his chicken was so tasty that in 1952, when this man was 62 years old, Colonel Harland Sanders opened his very first Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Example #2: She couldn’t cook at all when she graduated from Smith College. She took jobs in advertising and later in government intelligence. It wasn’t until the middle of her life that she began dabbling in French cuisine, and then quickly found a heartfelt passion for cooking. She wrote her first cookbook at the age of 50, eventually gaining a reputation as one of the top chefs in the world, and later became the first woman inducted into the Culinary Institute Hall of Fame. Who am I describing? (Julia Child)

Example #3: She quit school at age sixteen to work for a local dressmaker. It wasn’t until her 40s that she first started to write, and another 20 years after that that she really began to find her voice and to compose the story she was born to tell. With her publication—at age 65—of *Little House in the Big Woods*, Laura Ingalls Wilder finally rose to national prominence and inaugurated her extremely popular Little House on the Prairie series.

What do these three people all have in common? They all discovered a sense of purpose and mission only in the second half of their lives, and not until the last third of life for Wilder and Colonel Sanders.

Like these three individuals, the main character of our reading this morning from Exodus offers us a fascinating case study in

how a sense of calling can spark and grow, even quite late in life. By the time that Moses meets God through the burning bush, he is very far “over the hill.” After his res-cue from the Nile River as a little boy, he enjoyed quite a glamorous up-bringing in the palace of Pharaoh. But earlier in Exodus, we read that when he was a middle-aged man, probably in his 30s or 40s, he impulsively murdered an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. Fearing for his life, Moses then fled into the wilderness, eventually making his way to the bar-ren desert region of Midian, a desolate area east of Egypt and southwest of Israel. There he settled down, married, and became a shepherd, and by all accounts, Moses was really content to live out the rest of his days in the safety of his self-imposed exile. Surely his very last desire was to return to Egypt, the scene of his earlier crime.

But suddenly one day, when Moses was probably somewhere in his late 70s or even early 80s, God shows up, and God stuns Moses by telling Moses that he’s not going to just follow his play-it-safe retirement plan, piddling away his final years with a bunch of sheep in the desert. No, God has a plan, a calling, a mission for the elderly Moses—something so far greater than anything Moses has ever done before, something so far greater than Moses can even imagine.

And how does Moses respond? Like many of us, he’s not really interested in having God upset his carefully laid plans. Moses knows how, when, where, and with whom he wants to retire, and these plans clearly do not include returning to Egypt to lead a slave rebellion. So Moses objects, saying “Oh God, who am I? I’m really not qualified for this mission.”

And then importantly, God does not respond to Moses’ objection directly but goes to the deeper issue: “I will be with you,” God says. Moses’ lack of qualifications (and personal plans) are totally beside the point. When God is the author of the mission, often it’s the least qualified people that get drafted, precisely so that God’s power can more easily flow through them.

If you confidently assume you’re qualified, that you are clearly the right person for the job, then you’re more likely to rely on your own abilities than to turn in desperate surrender to God. But if you know that you’re completely incapable in your

own power for the enormous task before you, then you're much more likely to call upon God, much more likely to turn to God and to allow God to work through you on God's own terms. God re-minds Moses of this fact by not responding directly to Moses' question, "Who am I that I should be the one to go to Pharaoh?," but instead empha-sizes to Moses, "I will be with you": in other words, "Moses, your qualifications (or lack thereof) are not the point. The point is that I, God, am calling you, and I will be with you, and that is all you need."

God then promises Moses a reassuring sign (that he will worship God on this very mountain after leading the Israelites out of Egypt), but this sign really fits the illogical logic of God—the absolute genius that doesn't seem to make any sense—because it's the kind of sign that Moses will only be able to see after he has obeyed. "Give me a sign, O God," we might often—like Moses—want to pray, as we desire a clear indication of God's support be-fore we obey God's calling. But God's signs often work the other way around: as God tells Moses, first you are to obey me, and only later will you receive proof that I've been with you all the way.

Now this can all feel rather abstract talking about some guy out in the desert thousands of years ago. So what about us here today? What is your life's purpose? Why has God put you here on Earth? To ask the question in an-other way, what kinds of mission, what causes, really ignite your passion? There's no shortage of possibilities and they certainly do not need to be as lofty as freeing slaves: perhaps it's caring for children, supporting organic farmers, opposing racial injustice, providing medical care for sick patients, helping people make sense of their finances, fixing people's toilets when the plumbing goes awry, writing beautiful poetry, and so on and so forth.

And different stages of life bring different mission possibilities. When you're 7, maybe that sense of mission means being kind to your siblings, or helping your elderly neighbor pull some weeds. When you're 30 or 70, you don't stop being kind to your siblings, but your sense of purpose and calling changes, hopefully expanding to a bigger, broader mission. For those nearing or in retirement, like Moses, a very important task, a very important

calling, even, is to discover what a godly mission as a retired person looks like for you specifically.

Now, when discerning your mission, at whatever age you happen to be, there is usually no “one right answer.” But there are a lot of bad answers. One bad answer would be: “God, I see this need in my community and I feel excited by the thought of helping out, but you know, God, I’m retired now, so it’s ‘me time.’” Regardless of what your age is, whether you are 8 or 80, an excessive prioritization of “me time” is guaranteed to provide a shal-low, unsatisfying, and basically meaningless life. That’s not to say that we should be working ourselves to the bone for God, but generally speaking, our culture way over-emphasizes taking care of “me” first, second, and third, and then only giving our leftovers, our scraps (of time, or money, or energy) to others and to God.

Another bad answer would be Moses’ response: “God, I sense you placing this calling, this mission, on my heart, but no, I’m gonna pass, this is too disruptive to my personal plans, and I don’t think I’m qualified enough.” Moses’ problem—which often trips us up too—is not so much that he/we sell ourselves short but that Moses/we sell God short. God’s mission often has very little to do with our personal qualifications, and everything to do with God’s power and wisdom for which the only appropriate response is to trust and obey—and then buckle up and enjoy the journey, because as Moses quickly found out, God takes the obedient soul on quite an exhilarating ride, doing wonders far, far beyond what we can ask or even imagine.

You don’t need to lead the slaves out of Egypt, but finding soul-satisfying meaning at any stage of life does require quieting down, taking stock of your passions, what ignites your heart, and doing some prayerful dreaming about how/where those passions can be applied, acted on, in your particular context and community.

Let me close by asking us all to consider, “how big is the God you worship?” How grand and bold and exciting and creative is that God? Is your God the small g “god” who’s content to just let Moses fiddle away his sunset years with some sheep in the desert? Or do you know the much bigger God—God with a capital

G—the God who bursts our self-imposed limitations by meeting us in miraculous ways (“burning bushes”), who challenges our meager notions of what we can do and be, and who calls us to lives of thrilling mission beyond our wildest dreams?

May we prayerfully consider where our God is too small, where we might let go of the limits we place on God, and where the real God, the big God, the God of the burning bush and the exodus from Egypt, might be calling us, like Moses, into lives of meaning, and purpose, and calling, and wonder far beyond the bounds of our imagination. Amen.

