

“I Will Do It . . . But You Go”

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Ex. 3:1-12, Ps. 103:1-13, Rom. 8:18-15, Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43

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Moses was doing an ordinary thing, living an ordinary life, herding ordinary sheep. And then there exploded in the midst of his life the extraordinary, the miraculous. It moved in against him, addressed him, summoned him, and his life was changed irreversibly. The Bible does not quite know how to talk about that intervention (as we do not know how to speak about it), because the experience falls outside our usual way of talking. So the Bible speaks about a “bush burning,” and an odd voice.

The real issue for Moses, however, is not the bush. What happened is that God came to confront Moses, and to give him a large purpose for his life that refused everything conventional. The reason we hold on to this old story and continue to ponder it is that we are people who either have had this extraordinary reversal of our life by God, so that nothing is ever the same again, or we wait for and yearn for such a moment that will break our life open. We hold this story because we know there is more to our life than the ordinariness of life without the holiness of God.

I

The first thing that happens in this moment of extraordinary miracle is that God speaks. God announces for God’s own self a very specific identity. This is no generic God. It is rather the specific God of the book of Genesis:

I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham,
the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob (v. 6).

And the statement might have added, “I am the God of Sarah, the God of Rebekah, the God of Rachel.” I am the God of the old ancestral stories, the one who came upon hopeless old people and gave the children and new life, the one who came among wandering sojourners and promised them land, the one who came where life was all closed down, and promised them a future they could not imagine or invent for themselves.

The first part of this story of Moses and the bush is a life-changing assertion: there are promises from God writ large in the faith of the church and the life of the world. This story (and we) believe that God has indeed made promises and God will keep promises that run beyond all our controlled definitions of reality.

The alternative to promise is despair, which is what you get without the intrusion of this God. There are two kinds of people who despair. There are those who have nothing and who conclude they will never get anything. There are those, by contrast, who have everything, and who want to keep it just the way it is. Both those who have nothing and those who have everything find promises impossible. Nonetheless, God’s promises are rude and relentless. These promises do not honor our despair, or our complacency. We are the people who believe that God’s future will cause a newness in the world, in which our old tired patterns of displacement and fear and hate cannot persist. In this “bush-narrative,” God has come to enlist people into these promises for the future of Israel, and the future of the world.

II

But second, God speaks to Moses not only about the old promises and future expectations. God comes to speak also about God's immediate intention for the present tense:

I have seen the misery of my people. . . I have
heard their cry on account of their taskmasters.
I know their sufferings, and I have come down to
deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians, and
to bring them to a good land . . . I have seen how
the Egyptians oppress them (vv. 7-9).

The God of the Bible takes notice of social suffering, in which some are oppressed and others are oppressors, in which some are exploited and others are comfortable because of the exploitation. God notices and God cares, and God acts decisively, because God will not put up with these kinds of dysfunctional social arrangements.

There is presently a great quarrel in the U.S. church about the nature of biblical faith and the God of the Bible. Is this faith only about matters religious and pious and private . . . or is it also about the great public questions of justice and equity in relation to economic and political reality? The argument is made differently here and there in the Bible. In this text, in any case, the one that comes today in the lectionary, we are at the core claim of biblical faith. The God of the Bible is profoundly and perennially preoccupied with the kind of human suffering that comes when one brother or sister is able to establish economic and political leverage over another brother or sister. Because God is who God is, there must be liberation and transformation, and the reestablishment of equity, a community in which all attend to all.

In the epistle lesson of Romans 8, Paul, good Jew that he is, knows about God's resolve for liberation. In an astonishing way, Paul extends that resolve for liberation so that it concerns not just slaves and peasants and nomads, but the whole of creation. Imagine the whole of creation destined for an Exodus liberation!

The creation waits with eager longing for the
revealing of the children of God . . . and the
creation itself will be set free from its
bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of
the glory of the children of God (Romans 8:19-21).

What a mouth full . . . that Paul wrote long before our environment concerns. As Israel is enslaved to Pharaoh, so the creation is enslaved to fear and anger and alienation, cursed under the distortion of the human community. And so creation cannot be fully liberated until true "children of God" appear, who can care for the earth differently. So says Paul, God wills the liberation of the world, in order that the creation can be its fruitful, productive, harmonious true self.

Notice that in these two speeches on *the promises of Genesis* (v. 6) and on the *resolve of liberation* (vv. 7-9), Moses is inducted by God into some of the largest and most definitional themes of biblical faith. We Christians are people who attest to the promises of God, believing that the promises of God are at work in the world, unsettling every *status quo*, and making the world new. We Christians are people who celebrate God's resolve for liberation, in society and in creation, knowing that God

wants us all to be liberated selves in a liberated creation. We affirm that the large forces of God's promise and God's resolve are at work, even though the world does not notice, and even though we ourselves do not always resonate with that work.

III

After the promises to Moses and the announcement of liberation to Moses, however, something very strange happens in the text of Exodus 3. In vv. 7-9, God has uttered a lot of first person pronouns in which God takes initiative for what must come next: "*I have seen, I know, I have come down to deliver, I have seen the oppression.*" God is deeply, directly, and personally involved in this crisis in Egypt and intends to do something about it. Upon hearing this speech of God, Moses must have thought, "This is indeed some impressive God—God is going to do all this, even though I do not know how it will all happen."

And then in v. 11, there is an odd, surprising turn in the rhetoric. The same God who has been uttering all these "I" statements now says to Moses:

So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my
people Israel out of Egypt (v. 11).

"I will, I will, I will . . . so come, *you* go." What a turn around. The trick is that all of these glorious things God has resolved to do are now abruptly assigned to Moses as human work. It is moreover, dangerous human work. You be the liberator! You go to Pharaoh! You go to the big house and confront the entrenched, oppressive powers. You care enough to make the case for this bonded people. What had been "I, I, I" now is suddenly "You, you, you."

What happens in one quick rhetorical flourish is that *God's wondrous resolves* are transposed into *dangerous human work*. That is how it is lots of times in the Bible. God does God's work, to be sure; but the story of the Bible is the story of enlisting and recruiting human agents to do the things that God has promised. As you know, the book of Exodus is the tale of Moses' courageous life lived in defiance of Pharaoh for the sake of God's liberating resolve. Indeed, the resolve of God would not amount to much without the risky courage of Moses.

Now I assume you are like Moses and like me . . . ordinary life, ordinary work, ordinary sheep to tend. Nonetheless, it does happen that the power of God explodes in our midst, and we get pushed out beyond our conventional horizon. It is of course possible to go on, as though God's intrusion has not happened. Most of us, moreover, are timid and not inclined to crawl out very far on a limb. But it does happen, here and there, to people like us. And where it happens, the story of the church moves to its next scene, for the story of this people is the story of folk who have agreed to do the work which is God's own work of promise and liberation.

I imagine, moreover, that the reason we need to think about this story of the bush and its unsettling invitation is that we are in a society in deep crisis. It is clear that most of our old patterns of life together are not working. I suggest that this is indeed a time when the church may gather its faith together in order to think and pray and act differently. We are the people who believe that God's old promises for well-being and justice still persist in the world. We are the people who believe that God's resolve for liberation in the world and of the world is a resolve of urgency that still pertains to the abused. And we are the ones who know that the promissory, liberating work of God devolves upon folk who do God's work in the world.

So Moses had his ordinariness broken. He had to rethink about the faith of his people. Moses discovered that his life was saturated with the reality of God. And some God this is! The Psalm for the day speaks of the God of the bush in this lyrical way:

... who forgives all our iniquity,
... who heals all your diseases,
... who redeems your life from the pit,
... who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
... who satisfies you with good as long as you live,
 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's,
... who works vindication and justice for all
 who are oppressed. (Psalm 103:3-6).

And Moses wondered . . . what could be different about the purpose of my life because of the reality of this God?