

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, September 10, 2023
10am

Text: Exodus 3:1-15

Theme: Anything but Ordinary: Moses & the Burning Bush (Ordinary)

[prayer]

It has been a while since I shared a poem in worship. So here is a poem I came across this week by Danusha Laméris, titled “Small Kindnesses.”¹

*I've been thinking about the way, when you walk
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs
to let you by. Or how strangers still say “bless you”
when someone sneezes, a leftover
from the Bubonic plague. “Don't die,” we are saying.
And sometimes, when you spill lemons
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you
pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,
and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.
We have so little of each other, now. So far
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
fleeting temples we make together when we say, “Here,
have my seat,” “Go ahead—you first,” “I like your hat.”*

I am struck by Danusha's insight when she says, “We have so little of each other, now.” Perhaps the reason our society, including our churches, are growing more and more polarized is because we have so little of each other. By which, I mean, we are lacking the meaningful interactions that connect us to our humanity, the

¹ <https://www.danushalameris.com/poems>

ordinary things that remind us we are not alone, that we belong to each other. God loves to use the ordinary things of life to show us what is holy.

Danusha’s poem captures that beautifully, as does our Scripture lesson. Today we conclude our summer worship series, *Anything but Ordinary*. Early in the series, someone remarked to me, “I love these ancient stories because they are about ordinary people.” And you are so right! Abraham and his descendants were ordinary, messy people, living ordinary, messy lives with ordinary, messy problems we can all relate to. But their lives were also anything *but* ordinary because of the extraordinary ways God chose to work in and through them to keep God’s covenant promise.

In our Scripture lesson, God extends a calling to Moses. God chooses an ordinary bush to make His presence known. This theophany – this appearance of the divine – happens in what the King James Version calls the “backside of the desert,” the barren Sinai waste (v. 1). This is a place where a withered bush would hardly catch your eye; it’s just part of the landscape. Perhaps that is why God chooses to set one on fire. This ordinary bush becomes a fleeting temple, a brief dwelling for the holy. It’s like God was just waiting for Moses to turn aside from what he was doing and look at that bush.

And what if he hadn’t? How different this story would have turned out! So often we miss the extraordinary things of God amid the ordinary. In *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor remembers a time she was taking out the garbage and she passed this shabby spot in the yard miraculously lit by the sun. She writes, “It was like a door to another world. I had to go through it. I knew that if I did, then I would become golden too. But first I had to ditch the [trash] bag.” In the time it took Barbara to put out the trash, the magical light shifted and that spot in her yard was shabby once more. “The garden was no longer on fire. . . . While I made [my task] my first priority, the fire moved on in search of someone who would stop what she was doing, take off her shoes, and say, ‘Here am I.’”²

Moses does not recognize he is on holy ground because Moses does not know this God who speaks to him from the flames. Truthfully, the Israelites do not really know Him, either. In Egypt they did not enjoy the same intimacy with God as their

² Story found here: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/lectionary/september-3-22a-exodus-3-1-15>

ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Indeed, the memory of the LORD and His covenant promise had grown dim during their long years of enslavement.

But while Israel may have forgotten God, God never forgot Israel. All those many years, God was watching. God tells Moses, “I have seen...I have heard...I have known my people’s pain” (v. 7). And then he commands Moses to get going. “I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt” (v. 10).

When I was in college, I attended a conference for young adults contemplating a calling to professional ministry. The story of Moses and the burning bush is the archetypal call story in the Bible, and the conference capitalized on it all weekend. So, I was convinced that a calling by God had to *feel* supernatural. I spent the weekend praying for a burning bush moment, an unequivocal “I am sending you” command from God.

I left that conference disappointed. God’s presence in my life has never felt like a burning bush. I know people who have felt that holy fire shut up in their bones (Jer 20:9), people who have experienced profound appearances of the divine in their lives. But if you, like me, have never experienced the presence of God in that way, that does not make your faith less real. My experience of God’s guiding presence usually feels like what Eugene Peterson called “a long obedience in the same direction.” I experience God’s presence by obediently putting one foot in front of the other, feeling my way through the darkness, trusting that God has called me and will be faithful to lead.

We must remember that the content of the call is always more important than the method. And the call is ultimately never about us; it is always about God.

This is why when Moses protests “Who am I?” God does absolutely nothing to address Moses’ sense of inadequacy. And Moses had plenty of reason to feel inadequate. When we left our story last week, Pharaoh’s daughter had raised Moses up as an Egyptian. But Moses always knew he came from the enslaved Hebrews. One day he saw an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew slave, and in a moment of righteous rage, he killed the man. Branded a murderer, Moses was forced to flee Egypt. The Midianites found him wandering in the desert and adopted him into their tribe. Now he spends his days doing ordinary things:

Tending sheep, loving his family, putting his past behind him. He does not consider himself worthy or even remotely equipped for the task that God has handed him.

But God still chooses to use an ordinary bush to call an ordinary man. The only thing extraordinary about the bush or the man is the presence and power of God dwelling in them both. God turns Moses' stuttering question on its head. "Who am I?" is answered with God's statement of self-identity: "I AM Who I AM" (v. 14). It doesn't matter who Moses is; it only matters who God is.

And who is God? God is "The LORD, the God of your ancestors, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God'...This is my name forever; this is how all generations will remember me" (v. 15). We know God through the stories of the people God has called – ordinary people whose lives were made anything but ordinary by the power and presence of God working through them.

You may hear the story of Moses' calling and think, just like I did, *if that is what calling looks like, then I'm not called*. But this is a lie. Every one of us is called by God. How God chooses to call us and what God calls us to do will differ. But every one of us is called. Because a calling is simply this: God choosing to work God's will through us in the world. And if we have been incorporated into the body of Christ through water and the Spirit, then we are called. We are called to transform the world by making disciples of Jesus. Every single one of us.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote, "He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. His purpose was to equip God's people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ until we all reach the unity of faith and knowledge of God's Son" (Eph 4:11-13). Paul's list is not exhaustive, so if you do not see yourself as an apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, or teacher, you are not off the hook! You are still called to go and make disciples.

Where we get stuck is when our pride and ambition, or our own sense of inadequacy, tell us that only great deeds count for the kingdom of God. But we won't always be sent to face down the Pharaohs of this world. More often we are called and sent to do the work of discipleship through the small and ordinary kindnesses that Danusha described in her poem. For is this not discipleship: To share God's love and compassion everywhere we go, to abide in the Way of Jesus in everything that we say and do? I believe that kindness and compassion are the

most radical things we can give another person. They are a ministry of co-suffering that says, “I see your pain. You are not alone.” Just like God saw the pain of the Israelites. He sent them Moses to remind them they were not alone. And after Jesus commissioned his followers with the work of making disciples, he left them with a similar promise of divine presence: “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matt 28:20 KJV).

God fulfilled His covenant promise to our ancestors through the ordinary people he called: Abraham and Sarah; Hagar and Ishmael; Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob and Esau; Rachel and Leah; Joseph and his brothers; Moses and all the people who were part of the Exodus story. And today God continues his covenant promise through those of us who have been called in Jesus Christ. We work out this promise through our ordinary, faithful actions as disciples. Every one of these actions is a witness to the presence and power of our God. Every one of these actions is a little theophany, a “true dwelling for the holy” where our neighbors can encounter a glimpse of Jesus. Ordinary ground can become holy ground anytime and anywhere when we allow God to work in and through us.

Next week we will kick off a year of hope, faith, and gratitude as we reflect on God’s faithfulness to us over 140 years of ministry here in Coeur d’Alene. The faithful, ordinary actions of the saints who have gone before us have brought us to this point. In the rearview mirror of 140 years, we see how God has used their ordinary faithfulness to do extraordinary things. As we look with hope to the future, may we also open ourselves to the ways God will continue to use what is ordinary for radical transformation and love.

Amen.