

# North Kildonan United Church

30<sup>th</sup> August 2020 – Rev. Don Johnson

*Exodus 3: 1-15*

**“The Call of Moses”**

*Matthew 16: 21-28*

*Eternal God,*

*in the reading of the Scripture, may your Word be heard;*

*in the meditations of our hearts, may your Word be known;*

*and in the faithfulness of our lives, may your Word be shown. Amen.*

In the summer of 1981 I worked in the United Church archives at the University of Winnipeg. The archives had received government funding in order to hire a couple of students to help organize and arrange the various documents and artifacts that had accumulated over the years. We weren't hired to do church work as such, though the history of the university and the United Church is so intertwined that it was inevitable that we would have some contact with church items. Actually, if memory serves me correctly, we were hired on a joint project between the church archives and the university library.

It was interesting work. One of the jobs was cleaning old books. But these weren't just any old books. Back in the late 1800s, the Presbyterians running Manitoba College appealed to the Church of Scotland for financial help. In response, the Scottish church sent several large volumes of works by the early church fathers. These were substantial, shall we say hefty books, covered in animal hide and printed in the 1700s. Our job was to carefully erase (with an eraser) then vacuum away the centuries of accumulated dirt and grime from these quite precious books.

We also spent a fair amount of time organizing the papers of Dr. Baird, a long time staff member of United Colleges back in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dr. Baird kept carbon copies of most everything, including the bill which detailed the cost of repairing the college washroom after a fight broke out in there. That was at some point during the First World War and I'm not sure if soldiers were being billeted in the residence there, but these soldiers were certainly responsible for the damage done.

In the years leading up to Church Union in 1925, Dr. Baird kept a file of the various pamphlets issued by Presbyterians and others regarding the proposed Church Union. The Presbyterian Church in Canada was in favour of union but not all its members held the same opinion. Most of these documents were opposed to Church Union, usually on the grounds that joining up with the Methodists would lead to a loss of the high academic standards of the Presbyterian clergy, that the dignity of kirk worship would be lost and that too much modern thought would misdirect the church. Some of the arguments presented were little more than a thinly veiled bias against Methodist practices.

However, one pamphlet stands out in my memory. It was opposed to union with the Methodists because the author had read somewhere in a Methodist publication that the burning bush described in our reading from Exodus was merely an optical illusion, based on the angle of the sun which gave the appearance of flames. Nothing supernatural, nothing extraordinary, nothing alight, just a trick of shadow and sunshine. Perhaps Moses just imagined that God spoke to him.

Considering the emblem of the Presbyterian Church is the burning bush, with the text in Latin translated as "*Yet it was not consumed*", this Methodist demythologizing was not appreciated. "*If this is what Methodists are like, I'm not joining them,*" the author may as well have said.

When Dr. Mooney designed the United Church crest, which was approved for use by the 11<sup>th</sup> General Council in 1944, the symbol of the Presbyterian component of our denomination was, and still is, the burning bush. The description of the crest on the United Church website offers this insight. *The burning bush is the symbol of Presbyterianism. It refers to the bush that burned and was not consumed (Exodus 3:2), and symbolizes the indestructibility of the church. From Presbyterianism we have received a heritage of high regard for the dignity in worship, the education of all people, the authority of scripture, and the church as the Body of Christ.*

Let's then look at our Exodus text from a Presbyterian perspective. Much has happened to Moses since last week's lesson. As an adult, Moses saw a Hebrew being beaten by an Egyptian. Moses kills the Egyptian and hides the body. Word gets out and Moses flees for his life to Midian.

While in Midian, he comes to the defence of women who are trying to water their flock while being harassed by shepherds. Moses not only gets rid of the shepherds but also helps the women with their task. Their father is so impressed that he invites Moses to dinner. Moses has found a new home and he marries Zipporah. They have a son and one can imagine Moses happily settling into a good home life.

Then the angel of the Lord appears to him in the burning bush, and nothing is ever the same again for Moses.

God calls to Moses from the burning bush, calls him to be God's agent in rescuing God's people from Egyptian slavery. Moses feels woefully inadequate for such a task: "*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*"

But Moses is exactly the one to lead his people to freedom. And God assures Moses that the Holy One will be with him all the way on the journey.

Not that Moses is a particularly skilled public speaker, or a great military leader, or an experienced politician. Moses was an adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, a fugitive from Pharaoh's justice, and currently a shepherd. But there is more to Moses than those facts.

As we find throughout the Bible, in both Old and New Testaments, God chooses the least likely to achieve God's purposes. God sees the heart of the chosen, sees the love and kindness and hidden wisdom within, sees the passion for justice and compassion, sees the love for God and for the neighbour. And though mistakes will be made, misunderstandings will happen and at times it may seem like all is lost, God's chosen leaders, when they listen to and trust in God, are able to be God's agents in the world.

Think for a moment about Peter, that most unlikely of saints. An overview of the life of St Peter shows us a man who didn't understand Jesus on many if not most occasions, who sometimes opposed Jesus, who denied Jesus three times, but who, at the last, became an essential church leader and the rock upon which the church took shape. Yet Peter, by our standards, would seem to be almost unemployable for God's work. Somewhat the same might be said for Moses. And how often might we feel the same.

How many of us have said *"I can't do that?" "I can't serve on a church committee or teach Sunday School or read the lessons in church"* or what other opportunities arise. But when we decide to test out that invitation to serve, we may be surprised that we can do the task and that we are not alone in that task. We don't know until we try, until we face our reservations and our fears, until we trust that we are all in this work together. And we are not convinced about our ability until we discover the joy that comes with service, the joy of working with others to achieve certain goals, the joy of knowing that your contributions of time and talent are strengthening and blessing the congregation and the church you love.

So we have Moses, a Hebrew raised as an Egyptian, a fugitive in a foreign land, the man chosen to lead his people to freedom and new life, a man totally unconvinced that he is the one to do this great work.

But God knows best. *"Moses, Moses"* God calls out from the burning bush. *"Know that you are on holy ground, that you are in the presence of the Almighty, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob"*. The God who has seen and been moved by the desperate plight of his people, who has witnessed their sufferings at the hands of the Egyptians, who has decided to lead his people from slavery to a land of milk and honey, this God calls Moses to bring his people to freedom.

Why Moses we may ask. The answer is found in his life story. Moses was a man of justice. He sees an Egyptian beat a Hebrew slave. In his anger at such a deed Moses kills the Egyptian, possibly saving the Hebrew's life. The next day Moses encounters two Hebrews fighting and he tries to break up the fight. In the words that follow, Moses is accused of the Egyptian's murder and he realizes that Egypt is no longer safe for him.

Settling into the safety of the land of Midian, his innate desire for justice and fair treatment is triggered once again. He is sitting by a well where the local people come for water for themselves and their animals. Seven sisters are watering their flock when shepherds interfere with their work and drive the women away. Moses deals with this situation, deals with the troublesome shepherds and kindly waters the sheep. A man of justice who could have just as easily said it was none of his business and walked away from each situation. But that was not Moses, a man who burned with a sense of justice.

God could see the passion for justice in Moses's heart and knew this was the man for the job. In time God would also discover that Moses was not above challenging even God, but that is later in the story.

Justice is central to Judaism and through Judaism central to Christianity as well. Rabbi Sacks says: *"Jews, however deeply they believed in God and divine providence, never made their peace with what seemed to them to be injustice. Albert Einstein spoke of the 'almost fanatical love of justice' that made him 'thank his stars' that he belonged to the Jewish tradition."*

We are told that Moses asked for the name of God if Moses was going to achieve anything in God's name. *"The Israelites will ask what your name is,"* Moses says.

God answers, *"I am who I am"*. The Holy One will not be constrained by human understandings or human imaginings. In Hebrew thought, to say the name was to conjure up the image of the one named. We do something like that to this day. If I say or think the name of someone, often the image of that person comes to mind. But God is beyond our imagining, beyond our conjuring, beyond our limitations. God refuses to be domesticated, to be put in a box of our designing. God tells Moses: *"Just say I am has sent me to you. That is enough."*

There are two primary names of God in the Bible: Elokim and Hashem. Elokim refers to God's attribute of justice. Hashem refers to God's compassion, mercy and kindness. These names are used in place of The Name, the four letter Tetragrammaton, YHVH, sometimes pronounced Yahweh, which devout Jews will not pronounce. In fact, some Jewish writers to this day will spell God as G dash d, because the name GOD is too sacred to be spoken or written.

Justice and mercy, justice and compassion, justice and kindness, the way of God, the way God would have us embrace and strive towards. The Biblical story tells us that God wants us to work and struggle for justice, to fight against slavery, tyranny, poverty and disease, to become partners with God in redeeming the world.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we too are called to embrace the way of justice and mercy, striving to share God's love and grace in a hurting world.

Amen.