

¹Sermon – Confirmation Sunday – 5.5.19
Lauren Baske Davis

Exodus 3:1-12

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' ⁴When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' ⁵Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' ⁶He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, ⁸and 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, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' ¹¹But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' ¹²He 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.'

Sermon - Turn Aside and Look

Amelia, Lydia, Liv, Madi, Owen, Clara, Maggie, Jacob, Isaac, Nathan, this is an exciting morning! We share in the joy that you have completed Confirmation class and have chosen to affirm the baptismal promises. This is something *you* have done today. We have not confirmed you, or blessed you because you've passed some sort of spiritual test or because you've completed a handful of requirements. No. *You* have confirmed *your* faith today. You have not agreed to a series of creeds or beliefs, but rather, confirmed that the love of God—which is present for all of us at birth—is still here, and that you seek to continue living out God's love. The great promise today is that God loves you and everyone here, and will forever be a part of your lives. Know that you have the support and encouragement of the community of faith around you, to continue on your journey, wherever it is that it takes you.

Before I get into the scripture for today, please know this. Pastor Abby and I have loved sharing in your learning with you. Together, we have looked closely at different images of God that were taped to the wall downstairs, and talked about how we relate or *did not* relate to them. We've discussed what the Bible is—how it's a diverse library of books—an arc of a story that spans people's experiences with the Divine, and how it takes place over thousands of years in different places among different peoples. We've discussed faith, what it is and how it relates to the shared journey we're on together. We've talked about baptism as a public recognition of something God has already done—loved you beyond measure and named you beloved. We talked about communion as a remembrance of Jesus, but also as a real enactment of a radically welcoming and equitable table. We've talked concretely about death and been curious together about the afterlife, remembering those who have gone before us. We've visited a synagogue, and spent an evening in conversation with a leader of the Carleton College Muslim Student Association to learn about Islam. And this is just the *beginning*. You see, confirmation is

not the end of your faith journey, it's the beginning. It's the jumping off point for you to affirm God's promises and continue seeking.

Now Moses' story, the one Garda just read, is a jumping off point too. It's a familiar story. As many of you—who personally brought this story to the congregation a couple of years ago via the middle school musical of 2017—are aware, Moses' call from God in the burning bush was really the beginning of the Exodus story. The story of Moses and the burning bush is a great story to talk about beginnings.

It starts out like this: "Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian." But do you remember where Moses has been up to this point? Moses was born into a world with an Egyptian Pharaoh so scared of the numerous Hebrew people in his kingdom, that he ruled that the youngest Hebrew children were to be drowned. But instead of putting him *in* the river, Moses' brave mother put him *on* the river, floating in a basket, and watched to ensure someone would save him. The person who did that was Pharaoh's daughter, who then raised Moses as her son. Moses' own biological mother, became his nurse in Pharaoh's home. He was an Israelite raised as an Egyptian in Pharaoh's court. That's the first part of his life.

Most of us forget that young Moses also had a criminal background: angered by seeing an Egyptian hitting an Israelite slave, he murdered the Egyptian, and then fled to the wilderness where he met some shepherdesses. Eventually he married one of them named Zipporah.

Then, Moses settled down for a while, and it's at this point, when Moses is in the *middle* of the wilderness, in the *middle* of his life, in *Midian*, which is just what it sounds like—the middle of somewhere.... Maybe some of you know what it's like to be in the middle. The middle of high school, the middle of the pack, the middle child. Middle aged, middle management.

And so, the scripture story opens, "Moses was keeping the flock of his father in law Jethro, the priest of Midian." He was keeping the flock. Not guiding, not tending, not commanding, not caring for. Keeping. Maintaining, as in doing just the thing that was required of him, nothing more. As another preacher has pointed out, Moses doesn't own the family business, he's working for his father-in-law. He's in the middle, doing the thing expected of him. Moses was keeping the flock.

But then in that same sentence, there's a shift in verb and location. Moses was keeping the flock; then he *led* his flock, *beyond* the *wilderness*. For reasons we can only imagine, Moses goes from keeping to leading. Whether he was trying to get better grazing or calmer water for the flock, or if he just got sick of being where he was, all of a sudden Moses led them. Beyond the wilderness.

But where is that, *beyond* the wilderness? Some translations say "to the farthest reaches," or "the west end," or even "the backside" of the wilderness, but it's meant to be the place that is beyond knowing. The wilderness—the pristine, beautiful place to be preserved, we might think, with our modern ears.

But in literature, the wilderness is the place that symbolizes ambiguity. Doubt. Chaos. The place in *The Scarlet Letter*, where Hester Prynne, sentenced to wear the letter A, for adulteress, is forced to live. The place through which Dorothy and her friends must travel to get to the Emerald City in "The Wizard of Oz," and yes, even the forbidden place that Harry Potter and his friends are occasionally compelled to go during their time at Hogwarts. The wilderness is where we are face to face with our fear and with mystery. It's the place where—if we can—we must address and let go of that which binds us.

But the wilderness is also the holy place, where Hagar names God after God sees and saves her and Ishmael from death; It is the place through which the freed Israelites will travel following their exodus from Egypt, it's the place John will baptize people, the place Jesus will go to allow something new be born in him after his baptism before he begins his ministry.

Wilderness is the place Moses goes *through* in our story, and after doing so, finds himself at the mount of God where there's a bush that's burning but not consumed. There, sure enough, is God's presence, waiting for Moses. God asks Moses to remove his shoes because he's on holy ground (which is by far my favorite detail in the story). And we know the rest. We know that God calls Moses to lead the Israelites out of oppression and slavery in Egypt.

The thing is, my friends, for as easy, as safe, as steady-feeling as Moses living in the *middle* of everything, *keeping* the flock, *maintaining* and doing what's expected can be, the smallest change—going from keeping, to leading—can make the biggest difference. Moses led, leaving what he knew, *pushing past where he'd been* in order to encounter the burning bush.... And as another has said, "for all we know, it had been burning there for years, waiting for Moses to come."

Amelia, Lydia, Liv, Madi, Owen, Clara, Maggie, Jacob, Isaac, Nathan, we want you to know that you have a place here, you belong here. But in these next several years, know that if wherever you are feels like the middle, feels like you're just rather ho-hum about keeping the flock, so to speak, remember all it takes is a change in verbage, and a change in action. Going from keeping the flock to leading it. That will be different for each of you. Remember that for Moses to encounter the burning bush, he had to *make a choice to lead*, but he also had to he had to be willing to take a different route. He had to slow down and really take a look. He had to give himself a chance to ask, "Why? Why is that bush burning but isn't consumed?" And "as soon as [Moses] did it, he was on holy ground."

So when it comes to your spiritual journey, be intentional. It's okay to maintain and keep that flock for a while, but don't do it forever. Lead. Push past the things you know. Crouch down, look up, get in close to check things out. Be willing to be diverted and take a detour. I promise it'll lead you to holy ground. And perhaps that's where God is waiting for you. Not just once in your life, but again and again. There's a good chance you'll be compelled to take off your shoes too. "Midian is not our home, maintenance is not our work. Our call is to find a path to the mountain of God over and over, so even in the middle, we are interrupted by a great sight in another setting. I think there is a burning bush that has your name on it. Turn aside and look," and remember God promises to be with you. May it be so.²

² I am indebted to Anna Carter Florence, whose sermon I still recall by memory on this text, when she preached and spoke at the Craft of Preaching Conference at Luther Seminary in 2017. Any quotes in this sermon are hers.