

“Burning Questions”

Once again we make a huge leap between weeks in the Old Testament scripture. Last Sunday Moses was born and through the work of God and a devoted mother and sister he ends up being adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh instead of being drowned in the Nile. Now we hear that he is a shepherd who has encountered a burning bush. There was no fade to black with the words on the screen reading “Some years later.” That’s because that is not how the Bible tells stories like this. Rather the scholars who assembled the Revised Common Lectionary decided to skip over some parts of Moses’ story to get us here. The parts of the story that we missed might actually make what we heard today make more sense. After all, how did Moses go from being a resident in Pharaoh’s household to being a shepherd? That is a major life change.

To fill in the missing parts, Moses matures in the royal household. One day he witnesses an Egyptian “beating one of his kinsmen”. Moses strikes down the Egyptian and hides his body in the sand. He thinks no one saw him kill the Egyptian but the next day when he sees two Hebrews fighting he asks why. One of the Hebrews calls out Moses for having killed the Egyptian. Realizing that his secret is out and learning that Pharaoh wants him dead Moses hightails it out of town and out of the country. He goes to the land of Midian. A land across the Gulf of Aqaba from Egypt in the northwestern portion of Arabia. There he sits down by a well. What do we know about wells in the Bible? They are gathering places. Who are you likely to meet at a well? Men tend to gather at the gates of the city and women gather at wells. Remember a servant found a wife for Isaac at a well and Jesus met the Samaritan woman at a well.

Thus it is no surprise that Moses meets the daughters of Reuel the Priest of Midian at the well. He defends them from some violent shepherds and even waters their flock for them. The result of this is that Moses is welcomed into the family and then is given one of the daughters to be his wife. She is called Zipporah.

In the meantime, Pharaoh dies but the burden on the Hebrews grows even heavier. They cry out to God in their despair, and God remembers the promise made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is rather amusing that the only way the writer of Exodus has to explain why the Hebrews are in this predicament is because God forgot about the covenants. God went to so much trouble to make covenants with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob how could God forget? Regardless, God remembers and that brings us to today’s reading.

For Moses has become a shepherd for his father-in-law whose name is now Jethro.¹ He is bringing his sheep down Mt. Horeb God’s holy mountain. This is the same mountain where Moses will later receive the Ten Commandments from God. (As an aside, Mt. Horeb and Mt. Sinai seem to be different names for the same mountain.) In any case, as Moses walks the sheep down the mountain he notices a bush on fire that is not burning up. He steps aside to marvel at this surprising event. It is then that God calls his name from out of the bush and instructs him to take off his shoes because he is treading on holy ground.

What follows is a prototypical exchange between God and one that God is calling to be a prophet. God names a task that needs to be accomplished, in this case relieving the Hebrews from their slavery in Egypt and leading them to the land of

¹ The name difference is likely due to two different story traditions being combined, or that Reuel (meaning God pastures) was his name and Jethro (meaning excellency) was a title.

promise. God then designates the person to take on that task, in this case saying that Moses is the one to lead the people out of bondage. The designated person responds that he is not fit to take on the task, in this case because Moses says he is slow of speech. God overcomes the problem, in this case by designating Aaron, Moses' brother as the spokesperson.

Moses, having apparently given in to God's request, still has some questions about how to go about convincing the Hebrews to follow him. Moses finally pushes God to give him a name that he can give to the Hebrews. Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" At this point I can imagine God getting a little put out with Moses. After all, it is God who is asking Moses to do this thing. God has dealt with Moses' other objections (he has five in all), and now Moses wants to know God's name. God gives Moses a rather enigmatic name. God claims for a name "I AM WHO I AM." What's more God says "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" The name is so enigmatic we only know the four letters that make it up. In Hebrew they are יהוה transliterated as YHWH. Scholars refer to this name as the tetragrammaton meaning literally the four letter word. It became tradition in Judaism that this name is never to be vocalized. Whenever one sees these letters in scripture we are to substitute the word Adonai or in English LORD. Whenever you see LORD in small caps in the Bible the word behind it is YHWH, which is God's actual name.

This is a fascinating and at times amusing story. I wonder if you or I would have put so many objections to God the way Moses did. Yet when God calls on Moses to act God promises to give him all that he needs to accomplish the job he was given. But Moses had gotten comfortable being a shepherd and not having to see his kinsmen suffer under Pharaoh. Moses could shepherd sheep and he knew nothing about shepherding people. Nonetheless, God promised to be with him throughout the work of getting the Hebrews out of Egypt and back to the Land of Promise by way of the Holy mountain of Horeb.

Regardless of what God calls us to do whether the task is large, medium or small, God also promises to be with us in the doing of the work. Just as with Moses God will supply our needs. We may be afraid to ask God what God wants us to do with our lives,² because like Moses we are comfortable where we are. We may even be afraid to pray to God for fear that God will ask us to do something we don't want to do.

God's promise is through it all no matter what we are called to do God will be our shepherd and our guide. God will be at our side. For ultimately as it is written in the book of the prophet Micah, "what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." That is what God asks of each of us whether we are a great prophet or the regular person in the pews today. We must act justly in all things. We are to love mercy over everything else. We are always to walk humbly with, not behind or before, but with God. These are the secrets to a life well-lived and one that will lead us, and countless others, all the way home.

² Micah 6:8 author's translation