

Moses and the Name of God

Sometimes when people are trying to figure out God's will for their lives they'll say, I wish I'd get a burning bush.

But if Moses is any indication, even when God speaks very clearly from a burning bush, it's not that easy to just say yes.

It's worth a brief recap to get to where Moses is in this story. It all goes back to Joseph, a son of Jacob...you know, in the words of Tim Rice, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

Sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, Joseph ended up rising to a position of great responsibility and power in Egypt.

When a famine hit, Joseph's family traveled to Egypt because they'd heard there was food there. Joseph ended up saving his family and they stayed in Egypt. There, they did as God told them – they were fruitful and multiplied.

Moses was born about 400 years after Joseph. The Egyptian ruler at the time had grown suspicious and fearful of the vast numbers of Hebrews. He enslaved them and ultimately launched a cruel campaign to reduce their numbers.

Moses was a boy baby who should have been killed in the campaign. But you probably remember the story about the basket in the river and his rescue by Pharaoh's daughter. Moses grew up in Pharaoh's own palace.

As an adult, he likely didn't really fit in in either group. He had a pretty posh life growing up. That set him apart from the lives of his own people, living miserable lives under Egyptian oppression. But he wasn't completely an Egyptian either.

Fast forward to today's story. Moses is out in the Midianite pastures tending sheep. He sees this curious sight of a bush that seems to be on fire but doesn't burn up. He goes to investigate.

Out of that bush, God speaks. God lays out what God wants from Moses. But instead of jumping at the chance, Moses says, whoa...wait a minute. I've got concerns.

So let's look at this from Moses' viewpoint. The last time he'd had any interaction with his own people in Egypt, it ended disastrously. Seeing a Hebrew being beaten by an Egyptian, he beat the Egyptian to death.

Rather than gratitude, the Hebrews rejected Moses' attempts to intervene. Pharaoh wanted to kill Moses. Ostracized by his own people and under threat of death from the people he grew up with, Moses ran away.

Now God wants him to go back? To confront the Pharaoh who wants him dead and demand the release of a people who don't really like him? That would be a hard no for most of us.

So, did God anticipate Moses' initial response? We don't really know, but I suspect not. For God to know every action humans might take beforehand would make it a pretty inauthentic relationship. This exchange tells us differently, And it tells us some really important things about God.

First, it echoes what we've said before...God typically does not work alone. God chooses to work through people.

Second, God doesn't just impose divine will. This is an honest, gritty back and forth that lets Moses have his say. We know of course that ultimately God's will wins out, but God makes concessions to Moses.

Last week you heard the story of Jacob deceiving his father to obtain the blessing. Fleeing from an enraged Esau, Jacob landed in the home of his mother's relatives where he met and married his wives.

Ultimately, he heads back home, not sure what sort of welcome he will encounter. On the way, Jacob ends up in a wrestling match with God by the river Jabok.

In that literal wrestling match, Jacob was blessed by God and given a new name – Israel.

But God refused to give Jacob the divine name.

The wrestling match between God and Moses is a verbal one, but it's in the midst of the wrestling that God gives to him the divine name – I am. A name Jesus will later claim for himself.

It seems that not only is God OK with us wrestling with our call, it's in the midst of the wrestling that the blessing actually comes.

I preached on this passage two years ago. Here's a little part of what I said:

"I relate to these stories of wrestling with God. Over 20 years ago, God called me to leave medicine and become a pastor.

That alone was a huge wrestling match. It's also one that turned into a huge blessing for me.

But I still have questions. The church to which I was called – and I mean the capital C church - is beset with all sorts of problems.

I'm not one who likes to use the phrase the church is dying. But I do think there's something new struggling to be born, and for that to happen something will have to die.

My wrestling then becomes frustration that God is not clearer about what that is and what we're supposed to do."

Now, as I look back, I can see that some pretty cool blessings came out of that wrestling. Bethlehem went through a sort of visioning process and has found renewed energy in connecting with the community around them.

But I also believe it was out of that wrestling that this shared ministry was born...a ministry in which lay people take on bigger roles in our life of faith.

When all the members of a congregation take on a bigger role in the actual ministry of the church, whatever role that may be, it can be reenergizing. My hope is that as this ministry evolves, all four churches will be better equipped to be the church God calls us to be.

But it's not guaranteed. I think there is still wrestling to be done.

As I look at the church, ours and the church in general, I see the same divisions I see in the nation. I see people who struggle...who wrestle...to understand what the actual gospel is. I see very different versions of what following Jesus should look like.

We have all...no matter which side of any divide we're on...been tempted to make the other side the enemy. Today if God did speak from a burning bush I wonder if we'd all swear we heard completely different things.

But the whole story of Moses and the Exodus makes something very clear about what God wills. It can give us something to go with as we discern our own call.

First, God's will was for the people of Israel to be freed from slavery. God's will was for deliverance. Whatever has us bound up now, whether our own brokenness or the brokenness of the world, God's will is to set us free.

Second, God still desires to work through people...including us! We each have our own call in God's mission to free and bless the world. You yourselves do.

But most likely you won't get a burning bush. That call is best discerned in a community of faith committed to hearing God's word together and being willing to have conversations about it.

And third, we need to recognize what it is that threatens to block God's will. In this story, on the surface it's Pharaoh. But there's something deeper. Pharaoh will be replaced by later tyrants in scripture – the Babylonian king and the Roman Emperor.

The real enemy of God's will in this story is the fear that lies behind Pharaoh's actions. Pharaoh was afraid the Hebrews would become too great and conquer him.

Out of fear that he would lose power, he uses his power to enslave and brutalize them.

I think that fear...that suspicion of other people is the undercurrent of almost all human struggle. It leads us to make enemies of other people instead of seeing the enemy as the underlying temptation to be fearful instead of trusting God.

Ultimately, Moses does trust God. Moses and Aaron do go to Pharaoh. It takes 10 plagues, a hurried flight from Egypt, and the parting of the sea. But God does deliver the people.

We aren't Moses. But as Christians, we are people who are freed from our own bondage to all that threatens to enslave us.

On the cross, Christ, the great I AM, freed us from sin, fear, hate, violence. And now Christ calls us to be a force for freedom and life for the world.