

“You Might Get Burned”

Exodus 3:1-15

3Moses 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.

⁷Then 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.”¹³But 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?”¹⁴God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”¹⁵God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

Every Search Committee looking for a new pastor checks off the choice, “is an effective leader” on their search profile. Maybe it is just found in the United Church of Christ, but I find the use of the word “effective” to be most interesting. Why not “excellent” or “charismatic” or “creative” choices for a leader? No – we look for an effective leader. What, exactly, does that mean?

I imagine that most Search Committees have in their mind that “effective” does include all of those descriptives. “Effective” also means someone who gets things done; someone who relates to those around them; someone the people can relate to. What “effective” doesn’t mean is “perfect.”

Moses certainly wasn't perfect. He falls short in the public speaking arena - some believe he had a terrible stutter. His theology isn't well-developed and he isn't very savvy politically. He wasn't overly creative and he was a murderer to boot.

It took a burning bush and the voice of God calling "Moses! Moses!" to get this incurious Hebrew's attention. Even then, he had to talk himself into investigating the strange sight of a blaze that didn't even touch the bush it surrounded. No, Moses didn't have any overt leadership skills, unless you count herding sheep (and I'm sure he had help from the dogs on that one).

But God called Moses anyway. That is true of most leaders - good leaders, anyway. Good leaders learn and develop on their way to becoming good leaders. Bad leaders are concerned with gaining power. Good leaders have a healthy respect for perceived power - they don't flaunt it. They learn from their mistakes. Most importantly, especially in the religious setting, good leaders don't see themselves as having power. They rely on the power of God instead.

'Harold Quinley's 1970's study of activist pastors set out to discover what made pastors strong, courageous and bold in leading congregations to confront the social evils of the day. Quinley concluded that a strong sense of external authorization, a sense that "I am here because I have been authorized and sent here by God and the church," was the main source of pastoral courage.' (Willimon)

Have you had a "burning bush" moment? Have you found yourself on "holy ground" where you just couldn't keep it to yourself? God speaks to all of us, just in different ways. Maybe God wakes you up at night - I know that happens to me. Maybe God places people in your life that you can help. Or maybe those people bring the presence of God into your life.

I know God speaks through others. Just recently at Silver Lake Conference Center, the Rev. Day McAlister (our minister for youth and young adults) asked a group: "Have you ever thought about working for God?" One young man, that I know of, raised his hand. I know this because Day wrote about it in a letter to me. Mason Rockwell is that young man. I know he was able to raise his hand because of the nurture and experience he has had right here in this place, with this church.

How many more of us can raise our hands to answer the question "Have you ever thought about working for God?" Or maybe I should ask how many have said an outright "No!" for all the reasons Moses gave, and more. Our answer may have sounded like: "I've got other plans;" which is what I told God when I heard the call when I was Mason's age. Or maybe "I've got responsibilities that I just cannot turn away from." Imagine all the other answers, or excuses, we all have for saying "no."

It may be helpful to consider this, though. "God's choice [of who is called] tells us more about the quality of God than the positive qualities of the people who are called by God." The people God calls to lead are "almost always the wrong people." (Willimon) Just think of them: Jacob, Sarah, Mary, Peter, and Paul...and many more. But what was it that God said after Moses' litany of excuses? "I will be with you..."

God calls each of us to lead in our own ways. To “work for God” may not mean going to seminary or becoming a missionary or a street preacher somewhere. To “work for God” does mean knowing God will be with us, in all that we do. Mowing the lawn, shopping for groceries, helping at a church supper, baking pies, or simply talking with a neighbor – in all we do we are called by God to simply recall God’s presence with us. In so doing, we bring the Spirit to life for others.

We are all hesitant to say “yes” to God. A part of that is the unknown – what will happen in our lives if we do say yes? It is risky when we take that step of faith. We might be called out of our comfort zones, get burned. But more often than not, working for God means doing what we are individually good at. Remember that Jesus said, “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...” John 15:16a

A wise professor once told me that each of us have the tools we need to “work for God” or to be effective leaders. Our identity, our life experience, and faith. When it comes right down to it, all we really need is to believe God’s promise, “I will be with you...”

Amen.

Will Willimon, “Back to the Burning Bush” in *Christian Century* April 24-May 1, 2002; pp 7-8