

“You Have to Be Kidding!”

New London UMC

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Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21 NRSV

Rev. Joyce Rich

There the angel of the LORD appeared to [Moses] in a flame of fire out of a bush; [Moses] looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.”

(Exodus 3:2-3 NRSV)

Was Moses a look-y loo who simply had to slow down and gawk at whatever this angelic fiery bush thing might be – or do you think his attention was drawn to it in more of a “see something, say something” kind of way? . . . What I’m always surprised by is that this sudden, unexpected burst of flames didn’t send the flock running off in all directions with Moses chasing after the animals to round them up. Or maybe the animals DID run but Moses was too bedazzled by the blazing fire that he didn’t notice what the flock was doing? But then the whole situation quickly moves from being about an unexpected sight, to being about an unexpected voice and the holy presence of God.

As Moses took off his sandals and hid his face – he must have wondered, “What next?” Because his relatively normal day of herding the flock had veered off into a theophany – a divine encounter with God. And whatever happened next would be up to God. So Moses was probably surprised that God wanted to talk to Moses (of all people!) about what was going on with the Israelites in Egypt – how God had seen their misery, heard their crying, and knew that they were suffering, so God was going to come down and deliver the Israelites from the Egyptians, to bring them up out of Egypt and to a good and broad land that is flowing with milk and honey. . . . And then quite suddenly God stopped talking about what God was going to do, and switched over to saying, “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” . . . Now the Bible records that what Moses said to God was, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” But I tend to think Moses might have said, “WHAT?! You have to be kidding! You expect ME to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the Israelites leave Egypt? He’s not going to listen to ME! He’ll arrest ME – maybe put ME to death for what I did before I left Egypt!”

While WE might think that Moses had a legitimate concern about fearing for his life if he returned to Egypt, and that it would be a dumb idea for him to go anywhere near Pharaoh, God didn’t see it that way. But God had an odd way of reassuring Moses that everything was going to be fine. God told Moses, “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.” The “sign” was going to be Moses worshiping God right back here on this mountain AFTER he’s brought the people out of Egypt. **AFTER.** Gee, thanks God! I suppose that’s kind of *eventually* reassuring – but it was not enough to get Moses moving toward Egypt.

Moses already knew that neither the Egyptians nor the Israelites fully trusted him. He was Israelite by birth – but was adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter and raised to adulthood as a privileged Egyptian. And when Moses killed an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating an Israelite – one of his own kinsmen, Moses tried to hide the murder – but word got out, and Moses had to flee from Egypt. Moses found his way to Midian – where people there thought he was an Egyptian – and Moses ended up marrying one of the seven daughters of the priest. All told, Moses’ life had been a pretty mixed bag of experiences and influences, so we might wonder if Moses understood himself to be more Israelite than Egyptian – or perhaps a mix of both. We could also ask what religious practices he followed. For example, did he always, or just recently, believe in the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? Or did he perhaps still carry some belief in the gods of Egypt? Objectively speaking, was Moses the BEST candidate that God could find to bring the Israelites out of Egypt? Clearly Moses didn’t think he was the person God should choose to do this. But God chose Moses.

Time and time again, throughout the Bible we read that God chose people who were not particularly well suited or prepared to handle the tasks God wanted them to do. Why, oh why, did God do this? Because the people that God chose knew they could not take credit for what was done, because they could not have done it on their own without God. And the other people who witnessed what happened also would have known that God had to have been involved for these things to have been accomplished. These things pointed people to see that when God is WITH God’s people, God determines what is possible.

In his letter to the believers in Rome, I believe Paul was reminding them of what can be possible with God. Because I don’t think the believers who were in Rome were fully prepared to live in this way of genuine love that was so countercultural to how the Roman Empire functioned. It must have been hard for them to value the power that genuine love has to counteract violence and bring about peace when they were being persecuted for their faith; or if they were being abused or taken advantage of as slaves or servants to demanding or cruel people; or if they happened to be more well-to-do people they may have found themselves blocked out from being able to make the necessary connections in the patronage system that controlled social status. It would have been hard for them to hold fast to what is good when other people chose to act badly toward them. But Paul still called them to let their love be genuine – to be without hypocrisy or vengeance, and not to lag in zeal. Do you think Paul expected them to be able to do that on their own? No! How could they? How could anyone? Even today it still seems impossible for anyone to live such a life of genuine love apart from God. We all need God to be with us. We all need God to help open up the range of possibility for us to replace cursing with caring, to end suffering through genuine loving, so that we may live well with one another and live peaceably with all. May God be with us now and always.

Amen.