

## **Life-Changing Moments**

**Sermon by Fred Joblin, August 31, 2008  
St. Paul's United Church, Orillia**

Exodus 3:1-15

I received a joke on e-mail recently—some of you may have seen it—about a person who decided to do some research on different churches. He started in the southern United States and went into a church where he saw a large golden telephone on the wall. Beside it was a sign: “\$10 000 per call.” He asked a nearby person what this meant, and he was told it was a direct line to heaven, and for \$10 000, he could talk to God.

He was curious and very tempted, but he didn't have that kind of money, so he made his way north to the next large city, and to another church. To his amazement, he saw the same thing: a golden telephone with a sign beside it: “\$10 000 per call.” And he was told the same thing, that for \$10 000, he could talk to God. As he made his way further north, to Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Boston and New York, he found the same thing in each church he entered, even the small country churches. For \$10 000, he could talk to God on a golden telephone.

Finally, he decided to go to Canada, to see if Canadians had the same thing. At the first church he entered, he saw the same golden telephone, but beside it was a sign that said, “25 cents per call.” Surprised, he asked someone why the call was so cheap up here in Canada, when everywhere he'd been in the States, it was \$10 000. The person answered, “You're in Canada now. It's a local call.”

Of course, every call to God, and from God, is a local call, since God is in everything, as close to us as each breath we take, as each person's eyes we look into, and as the very ground we walk on each day. We'd do well to consider every footstep we make as being on holy ground.

What's initially interesting about today's Bible story is that Moses doesn't realize he's standing on holy ground, and it takes a burning bush and God's voice calling to him before he realizes it. As a shepherd tending the sheep of his father-in-law, I imagine the days went by pretty much the same, so a holy ground, life-changing experience with God would likely be the last thing on his mind.

But that's how it often works. We meet God in the strangest and most unexpected places, often in the midst of ordinary living. We may not come across an unconsumed burning bush, but God speaks to each one of us; we only have to be open to it, or be able to recognize it when it happens. And when it does, our lives are changed in that moment forever, as happens with Moses.

Let's go back a bit, and review the background to today's story. Our summer lectionary passages have told the story of the trickster Jacob receiving God's blessing and promise to be with him as he is to become the father of a great nation, Israel, which becomes his new name. Jealous brothers sell his son Joseph into slavery, and Joseph ends up in Egypt where he rises to be

Pharaoh's second-in-command in charge of the food planning during seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. He is reunited with his family, which joins him in Egypt, and so begins a time of blessing for the Israelites until, after many generations, they grow in numbers and a new Pharaoh feels threatened enough to oppress them with forced labour.

Moses appears in the story as a baby, riding down the Nile river in a basket, being rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, and growing up in luxury. This easy life ends when in anger, he kills a man and he has to flee. Now he's living far away, safely settled down with a wife and baby. Going back to Egypt would not be an option, for he'd likely be arrested and put to death. It's too bad about his compatriots down in Egypt, but hey, what can one person do in the face of such tyranny and hopelessness? After his life adventures so far, he's probably feeling quite content with his life, working as a shepherd for his father-in-law.

I'm sure we can all appreciate this desire to live a peaceful, contented life, with all the struggles and worries of our past over with. Advertisements of the "good life," for example, show happy people with secure finances, nice homes, and frequent travelling. There's nothing wrong with this picture, but God often has other things in mind for us...

In today's story, then, Moses is minding his own business—minding the flocks—totally unprepared for the life-changing moment that is about to occur. You might think back to moments in your life when you were in this position, totally unaware that your life direction was about to change dramatically. I'll share an example from my life later on.

When Moses sees the burning bush, he looks at it with curiosity, but then he hears his name being called: "Moses! Moses!"

He responds, "Here I am," but I doubt he's saying it with the same conviction that our Offertory hymn, "Here I Am, Lord," conveys. I imagine he's saying it with just a little trembling and quite a bit of uncertainty, like a child being called by a parent to do chores, or to be scolded.

"No closer!" the voice says. "Take off your sandals. You're standing on holy ground."

I imagine those sandals came off pretty quickly! The voice identifies itself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—Moses' revered ancestors, with whom God had promised always to be.

Our modern minds might be having trouble with a burning bush that is not being consumed, and with God's voice coming from it. But we don't need to get hung up on the science of this; the Bible is not a science book. It's the metaphor—the meaning—that matters. The point is that God speaks to us in unpredictable ways at unpredictable times, letting us know where it is God wants us to go, what it is God wants us to do. The question is whether or not we are listening for that voice inside our hearts, or in the words someone speaks to us, or in the words of a book we read, or in a time of meditation, or in an experience we have—a voice that sends an unmistakable message of new life direction.

For Moses, the welcome news follows, that God has seen the sufferings of the people and will deliver them out of slavery to a land flowing with milk and honey. “Hooray!” I can hear Moses thinking.

Then comes the not-so-welcome news: it will be Moses’ job to go to Pharaoh and bring the people out of Egypt. “Hold it!” Moses interrupts. “Who am I to do that?”

“It’s okay,” God reassures him. “Not to worry. I’ll be with you the whole way.”

“Hold it!” Moses says. “If I tell the people you, the God of our ancestors, have sent me to them, what shall I say if they ask your name?”

Then God gives a profoundly mysterious answer: “I AM WHO I AM. Just tell them ‘I AM’ sent you, the God of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

“I AM WHO I AM.” The Hebrew words can also be translated, “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE.” What’s so astounding about this name for God is that it is a verb, not a noun, indicating not only mystery, but also that God is an active God, working in creation and the lives of human beings, to bring about freedom and new life. But God isn’t going to bring these things about while we sit back and watch. It’s our calling to also feel compassion for the suffering of people, and to be active in bringing about freedom and new life.

One part of the story that I love is how Moses argues with God in a conversation that goes on after today’s reading. This makes Moses very human and much easier to relate to. I also like how God enters into the argument, negotiating what the deal will be. For example, Moses wants God to give the people a sign if they don’t believe him. God agrees. Moses reminds God that he has a speech impediment and that God should send someone else. God compromises and agrees to let his smooth-talking brother Aaron speak on Moses’ behalf, but it’s still Moses whom God has chosen to lead the people to freedom.

I hear in this that there is flexibility in how we go about following the call to new life, to working out the specifics of a certain task or goal. But we are not to pass off responsibility, and we are not to forget that we can trust God to be with us through thick and thin.

Why God would choose Moses is a mystery; it seems every time a leader is needed, it’s the most unlikely and even the most under-qualified one you could imagine. For example, if Moses had a resume, it might say:

**Work history:** shepherd.

**Experience:** murdered a man; ran away from authorities.

**Personal qualities:** Low self-confidence. Argumentative. Has anger problems. Tendency to run from responsibility. Needs a lot of reassurance.

**Communication skills:** very poor; speaks with a stammer.

**Leadership experience:** none.

Obviously, he wouldn't even get an interview if he applied for a leadership position somewhere today, but God is not apparently interested in what's on a resume. God obviously sees beyond his, and our, apparent lack of skills and personal qualities. There is work to do! Moses is "hired" on the spot to go to Pharaoh, demand the people be set free, and lead the people to freedom.

The good news was that Moses had the capabilities and strength to fulfill his mission—he just didn't realize this or trust this, even when assurance is given. However, when he does get it, he is able to rise above his fears, his lack of skills, and his lack of confidence to speak boldly to Pharaoh and ultimately lead the people to freedom, with his brother Aaron and sister Miriam at his side.

It's the same for us. God's voice may be saying to us that we are capable of great things if we would just let go of any sense of inadequacy and fear. Are we willing to risk this for the sake of what God, through Jesus, calls us to do? To love one another as God loves us? To love our neighbours—which means everyone on the planet—as we love ourselves? To forgive 70 times 7? To do good to those who hurt us? To feed the hungry, to give water to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, and to visit those in prison?

Whatever we are doing in life, our goals have to be more than taking care of ourselves, trying to play it safe, or doing less than we know is possible. Our life purpose needs to be about something larger than ourselves, something that makes a difference in the lives of others, something that forwards the realm of God's peace on earth.

This week I re-read the life story of Mahatma Gandhi. I was curious to discover what was his life-changing moment. It happened after he got his law degree in England and was working in South Africa as a lawyer. Indians there had no political rights, and one day he was forced to leave a first-class railway car, even though he held a first-class ticket. This awakening to the realities of racism led him to becoming a leader of the Indian community and to his developing his belief in and practice of non-violent resistance. His focus became making both the oppressor and the oppressed recognize their common bond of humanity.

A life-changing moment doesn't have to be as dramatic or newsworthy to be significant. I think to a life-changing moment of my own when I was teaching grade 6 in a private school in Los Angeles. Many students struggled with their learning, especially in math and grammar, so I began to help—a student here and a student there—by giving private tutoring lessons. I found this enormously rewarding, as students could learn at their own pace, with their specific learning needs addressed, and I could experience with them the satisfaction of coming to understand something and doing better in their work. I also developed stronger bonds with those students, and I found joy in being able to help them with self-confidence and personal growth. Finally, it hit me—my life-changing moment: I could do this for a living and experience this feeling all the time!

But I had zero business experience. It would mean quitting a steady job and entering the uncertain world of the entrepreneur. It would mean leaving a comfortable living place on the campus of the school and having to find a new place to live that we could afford. At the time, I

didn't conceptualize what was happening as God thundering in my ear to go ahead with this plan, but in retrospect, I do.

And so I quit classroom teaching, spent a year with another teacher tutoring in a little office space together, and then went my own way, opening up *The Center for Learning Unlimited*. For the next six years, until our move back to Canada, the centre grew and succeeded, and I did have the joy of working with students at all levels to not only help them learn but also to help them grow into the freedom of being more competent and happier learners. I felt my own sense of freedom in teaching the way I felt called to teach, and indeed, I had no idea when starting out, that it would lead me to where it did, having 15 part-time staff, becoming my own private school to support home schooling families, appearing on radio several times and on TV to discuss learning and teaching, becoming part of a business support network, and even co-writing a little book on vocabulary enrichment. I'm happy to say that *The Center for Learning Unlimited* is still thriving with those who took it over when I left.

We can all examine our lives to see where God is encouraging us to move into more challenging positions of leadership. It might be on a church committee, or with the Sunday School, or with our Social Services team, or with a community organization, or with a more global concern.

As soon as we have doubts about our ability, or hesitation around the time commitment, or thoughts of others doing it instead, let's remember Moses and God's calling him to higher things. It may also help to think back to times when this has happened to us before, when we listened to the call and followed it despite hesitations at the time, and when we came to discover blessings and personal growth and the joy of making a difference—things we couldn't have imagined happening before we started. Moses certainly had no idea, but God was with him and gave him the strength to stand up and speak and lead his people to freedom. In our day, and in our way, we can do the same.

At each moment, we are standing on holy ground and in God's holy presence. We don't need a burning bush or a voice coming from one to know this. We only need to know that God is with us always, speaking to us in every place, in every moment, in every situation, in every person. If we would just listen.

We can count on God's presence, God's desire for all people to be free and loved, and God's guidance as we embrace the call to be God's instruments of love and compassion.

It doesn't mean life will be easy. Quite the contrary! Remember that Moses' challenges were now just beginning: confronting Pharaoh again and again, nearly being killed by the Egyptian army, and having to listen to the complaints of the people for 40 years. The joys he received, and the blessings he brought, however, were beyond imagination.

So let's take heart from the story of Moses. Rather than spend our lives in fear, being less than God knows we can be, let's welcome God's voice speaking to us—whispering at times, thundering at times, maybe even speaking on a 25 cent phone call at times—to live lives that matter, to live in the awareness of God's guiding presence with us, to be open to life-changing moments that lead to new awareness, new insights, new hope, and new life.

I will close with excerpts of a reading by Oriah Mountain Dreamer, which I found in the worship resource materials of *Season of the Spirit*. It's called *The Invitation*, and we can imagine that this kind of invitation not only went out to people like Moses and Jesus and Gandhi, but also goes out to us:

*It doesn't interest me what you do for a living. I want to know what you ache for, and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.*

*It doesn't interest me how old you are. I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dream, for the adventure of being alive...*

*...I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own, without moving to hide it or fade it, or fix it. I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own, if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful, to be realistic, to remember the limitations of being human...*

*... It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have. I want to know if you can get up, after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done to feed the children.*

*It doesn't interest me who you know or how you came to be here. I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me and not shrink back...*

*...It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied. I want to know what sustains you, from the inside, when all else falls away.\**

By the power of the Spirit that leads us to freedom and beyond, may we embrace the invitation to stand on holy ground and live out our highest calling. Amen.

\*"The Invitation" from THE INVITATION by ORIAH. Copyright © 1999 by Oriah Mountain Dreamer. HarperCollins Publishers.