

Hope in the Wilderness sermon series
Moses and the Burning Bush
August 23, 2020
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I took a short vacation last weekend to go hiking in the Asheville area. The last time I took vacation was the week of March 10 of this year, which is when the world decided to end. So, I was a little nervous to leave town again. Thankfully, I got to enjoy some time in the wilderness and everything was still standing when I returned.

The wilderness. In our overdeveloped and commercialized world, it's hard to find that kind of untamed space, where nature still rules and we humans are but a small part of a larger creation. The wilderness can be a place of sabbath, of rest, of recalibrating our souls.

But it can also be scary. In the wilderness, there are no road signs. No Starbucks. No technology to order and measure our lives. As humans, in the wilderness we are no longer at the top of the food chain, vulnerable to the wild things, the elements, nature's total disregard for our importance. In the wilderness, we are no longer in control.

This time in our world may feel like the wilderness for many of us. We are lonely, we are vulnerable, we are not longer in control. We are in our own kind of wilderness. This is nothing new if you read the Bible because you know there were plenty of people who spent time in the wilderness and came out stronger in faith and focus. For our fall sermon series, we're going to spend some time in the wilderness with these characters to learn from where they found their hope. I pray that helps us remain hopeful in our own wilderness today.

I don't know about you, but I like to have a routine. As much as I enjoyed summers when our girls were little, I welcomed the start of school to have a routine again. Get up, brush your teeth, let the dogs out, wake up the girls...wake them up again...threaten to ground them if they don't get up this instant, make breakfast, put together lunches, and ship them out the door. It was good to have a routine.

We see in our reading today that Moses had settled into a nice routine. This day he probably got up early, put on some coffee and fetched his copy of the Midian Daily Gazette. He got his kids up for school and threatened to make them walk if they missed their camel. Then he kissed his wife goodbye and headed out to the sheep for a day of tending the flock. Nothing new here, just another day. At breakfast time, Moses was responsible for keeping the sheep safe. By dinner, he'd be responsible for freeing a whole nation of people from slavery.

As routine as this may seem for Moses, he's living in his own kind of wilderness. You know the story. He was born a Hebrew child destined for execution by the Pharaoh, only to be sent down the river in a basket and rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, who raises Moses as her own. He grows up among Egyptian royalty but stays close to his Hebrew roots, going so far as to kill an Egyptian guard who was mistreating a Hebrew slave. Moses flees Egypt, settling in the wilderness of Midian, where he marries and takes a job as a shepherd.

On this workday like any other, on his umpteenth trip up Mt. Horeb, probably chasing a pesky runaway sheep, Moses catches a glimpse of a strange sight, goes to investigate, and has his life changed forever by God. It's interesting that God would

choose to come to Moses, because from all we know, Moses wasn't a particularly religious man at this point. In fact, there's no sign up to this point that Moses worships the God of Israel; after all, he grew up bowing to golden Egyptian idols.

Moses' lack of familiarity with God may explain some of Moses' reluctance to jump at this opportunity. A call from God isn't equal to winning the divine lottery, as Moses points out when he responds, "Who am I, that I should go to the Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Or, as it's translated in the Living Bible, "But I'm not the person for a job like that!" Moses is saying, "Me? God, you couldn't be suggesting that I go, could you? I mean, I'm a worker not a leader. I'm one of the behind-the-scenes people, not the frontline person. "

God's giving him the hard sell, but Moses isn't ready to give in that easy. "Well...well...What if they won't listen to me? What if I tell them I've come to save them and just glare and cross their arms and ask, 'Who sent you?' What do I tell them?" And God does something never done before: God offers up a name: "I AM who I AM. Say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you." Later, in the Gospel of John, when Jesus gives all his "I am" sayings – "I am the bread of life, I am the good shepherd, I am the way, the truth and the life" – he is drawing directly on this statement to show his divinity: "I am who I am."

For Moses and for us, that name means both comfort and mystery, a name spoken in the wilderness. It is comforting because it reminds us of the rock-solid stability of God. In a world where absolutely nothing is stable – jobs, governments, economies, our own bodies – God stays God. The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Moses is our God today, and we can put our trust in God just as much as those people did thousands of years ago. God is the great "I AM."

But there's mystery in that name as well. "I am who I am" – what does that mean, anyway? OK, you are who you are, but who ARE you, God? Have you ever asked that question? When we're faced with our own crossroads or tough decisions or crises of faith, what does that mean to us that God is the great "I AM"? Who ARE you, God? In the midst of our wilderness, we not only want to know where God is, we want to know who God is.

I believe we each have to answer that for ourselves, and here's why. Another translation of God's name to Moses is, "I will be who I will be." In other words, "I am God, and what that means for you will depend upon how you live your life." Who is God in our lives? For Moses, God may have been "I am with you." For others, God may be "I am present" or "I am forgiving" or "I am healing." Who is God for you? Only you can answer that. That's both the power and the mystery of God in our lives. "I am who I am."

So after a little more hemming and hawing, Moses finally agrees to God's plan, and the rest is not only history, but epic movie material. Moses' journey to Egypt is the most important event in the history of our faith, at least until that night in the manger with shepherds and the angels and that bright star.

But did you know it almost never happened? We almost never had any of this story. No Great Plagues, no Ten Commandments, no Charlton Heston in the cool beard. But one thing, one split-second action, made the difference in this story and in the whole history of God's relationship to his people. One teeny tiny little thing saved all those slaves, and ultimately saved us as well.

Moses is doing his job, living his life, tending his sheep, when he sees the Burning Bush. And the Bible says, “So Moses thought, ‘I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up.’” When the Lord saw that Moses had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush.

What did Moses do? He turned aside. That’s the thing. That’s what gets the whole ball rolling. Instead of keeping his head down, or just sticking to his routine, or being paralyzed by fear in the wilderness, he goes over and looks. And then God calls to him.

Moses could have said, “Wow, that bush is burning and it’s not being consumed! I should probably check that out! But, you know, I’ve got a job to do, and the wife is making meatloaf for dinner, and I’ve already taken a break from work this morning, and has anyone sanitized that bush? I should probably just ignore it.” It was certainly his choice. His attention was his to give or not to give. And by giving it, his life was forever changed and enriched by God.

Often times the circumstances of our life and the evil that operates in the world around us keeps us from focusing on God’s presence in our lives. God is right there, in the midst of the storm, in the center of the wilderness, but we are so distracted that we don’t even look. It’s so easy to get distracted, isn’t it? It’s so easy to miss the bush burning right in front of us because we are too consumed by fear.

As we make our way through the wilderness, we can take hope in the fact that God has not abandoned us. There are burning bushes all around us just waiting for us to notice. Maybe it’s a neighbor who’s lonely and needs a porch visit. Maybe it’s a child on Zoom who needs to hear their name and know they still matter. Maybe it’s someone in your own house who simply needs to know it’s OK to be afraid of the wilderness, but the wilderness doesn’t last forever. Moses was called to save a whole nation; you may be called to save one person. In God’s eyes, there’s no difference.

You woke up today, maybe had some coffee, maybe read the paper. When you woke up, maybe you were responsible for doing your job or providing for your family or taking care of your children or just making it through the day with your sanity and your hope intact. Sometimes that’s all we can do. But there’s a call out there. Maybe you haven’t heard it yet. Maybe you’ve already heard it, but don’t know how to respond. What would happen if you turned aside and said to God, “Here I am,” if you invited the Great I AM to show you how to be someone’s hope in the wilderness? If you turn aside today to see God in your life, who will you be when you wake up tomorrow?