

**Ex. 3:1** Moses 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. **2** There 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. **3** Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." **4** When 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." **5** Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." **6** He 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.

**Ex. 3:7** Then 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, and 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. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" **12** He 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."

November 6, 2015

## A Burning Bush in Minneapolis

Exodus 3:1-12

Question: *why* does Moses decide one day to lead his father-in-law's flock beyond the wilderness to Horeb, the mountain of God? Going beyond the wilderness means going beyond where he normally brings the flocks to graze. Something makes him go beyond the same old familiar boundaries, the same old comfort zone, into burning bush territory. Why does he do that?

Maybe there's a hint of an answer in that first picture: Moses is *keeping his father-in-law's flocks*. There was a day when life was a lot more interesting. Rescued as a baby by Pharaoh's daughter, raised in the household of the most powerful man in the world, with wealth, fame, and an easy lifestyle. Then he stops an Egyptian soldier from beating up an enslaved Israelite and ends up running for his life to Midian. Midian is a hundred miles east of nowhere...across the Sinai Peninsula and into Saudi Arabia. There he meets the priest of Midian, Jethro, marries Jethro's daughter, Zipporah, and starts keeping his father-in-law's flocks.

This is not easy work, nor is it fun. Sheep are not bright and they smell bad. Midian isn't Egypt and keeping his father-in-law's flocks isn't living in Pharaoh's palace. He's been here awhile and by now there's a lot of maintaining, stagnating going on. He's *keeping* these sheep and they aren't even his sheep. He's in Midian, which may be Hebrew for middle of nowhere. He's in the middle of nowhere, going nowhere. Every day, the same old wilderness.

So, one day Moses leads those smelly sheep that aren't even his out into the familiar grazing fields, and then, he just...keeps going. He just...keeps...walking, with some very confused sheep following behind. Before he realizes it, he's climbing a mountain and there's a burning bush, and a voice that knows his name telling him to leave Midian, go back to Egypt and set his people free.

Let me pause the story to tell you why I'm sharing it with you. Back in June I got an email about a preaching conference in October in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Nothing unusual about that. For preachers emails about preaching seminars are as common as getting phone calls at suppertime. But, something caught my attention. I read the email again, then clicked the link and read the online brochure. And I kept walking, beyond the familiar curiosity to the registration site, and the flight tickets, and before I knew it, I was in Minneapolis looking at a burning bush. The voice of God sounded a lot like the voice of one of the keynote preachers named Anna Carter Florence.

She's talking about Moses keeping, maintaining Jethro's sheep in Midian, and she asks the question, "When was the last time you left Midian?"

I felt like I should take off my sandals. This was holy ground. God was speaking to me saying, "You, Ken, and my flock you've been keeping, have been staying in Midian, maintaining, trying to keep business as usual. Status quo. Meet the budget. Keep the staff. It's been eight years since we began building the Family Life Center, and, yes, we've gone through the biggest recession in nearly a century, and we've had to borrow from Peter to pay Paul, but, still. It's been eight years since we last left Midian, and Midian is not where we're supposed to stay."

That burning bush in Minneapolis said that there's an Egypt out there, a whole world of people, God's people, needing to be set free. Free from despair, free from poverty, free from homelessness, free from greed and prejudice, and the idea that anything but God's grace will set them free.

Friends, I believe God is calling us to leave Midian.

What does that mean? I'm not sure. It isn't all clear because I think part of what it means is that God wants to speak to you, too, and work through all of us to paint a clearer picture of what leaving Midian means. But here's the sketch.

Leaving Midian means leaving our comfort zones and becoming more mission-minded and outward focused.

Our Missions committee has been encouraging us this year to be more personally involved in sharing God's love in hands-on ways in our community. Each month they've offered a different way to do that, and not with a lot of response. Instead of just giving money, which is still important, we need to give more of our time to Open Door, High Point Jail Ministries, Ward Street Missions, and so many more ministries. We live in one of the most food insecure areas of the country and there are churches who are doing a lot more than we are about that problem. They've have already headed toward Egypt, and we're still here in Midian. Midian is a lot more comfortable, but, it isn't where we're supposed to stay. Egypt is way out of our comfort zone, but it's where God's people need to be set free.

Our Nurture ministries, especially, but not limited to, Sunday school are about as stagnant as they can be. I know our parents want their children to grow up having faith, but they're not showing or acting on it. That's partly on them, but it's also partly on us. And, what about the kids and parents in the neighborhoods surrounding us? What are we doing to teach them the stories of God's love for them?

For the most part, we're pretty good at welcoming people who come here to worship. We miss some, but, we are exceptionally good at making visitors feel welcome. I love hearing from new visitors that several people made a point to talk with them. That's the rule, hearing that no one spoke to them is the exception. But, what about inviting people to come to church with you? What about being other-focused instead of what we want? Is it time to find a way to begin a worship service that isn't traditional? When we designed the Family Life Center, we designed it with the capability of having a contemporary worship service in there, and money has been an issue. But so have Midian-like comfort zones. And I'm talking about my own as much as anyone.

If you have watched the testimonial videos we've shown the last four weeks, the one thing you've heard repeatedly is how loving and kind and caring this church family is, and that makes my heart swell with pride. I know lots of churches where that is not the case. We can't stop doing that. But also, you haven't heard anyone say they love this church because it is so outwardly focused. It's not that we don't do any of that, but, it is not our strong suit. It's time to leave Midian and go to Egypt; time to leave our comfort zones and go out where the need is, open our doors wider, and don't just sit here waiting for people to come – go out there and invite them in.

When God spoke to Moses in that burning bush and told him to go to Egypt, Moses had all sorts of stall tactics and excuses.

"Who am I?" has asks, "that I should go to Pharaoh?"

"Well, if I go, who should I say sent me? And what if they don't believe me?"

And then he says, "But, I'm not much of a public speaker. You should get someone with rhetorical skills to do this."

Excuse after excuse. We have them, too. We don't have the money. These days it's dangerous to let people we don't know in the church. Everybody's so busy.

But God has an answer for every excuse. There is suffering out there in Egypt that we cannot do anything about sitting here in comfortable stained glass Midian.

I began by asking *why* Moses went beyond the wilderness, and I believe the answer is that God led him there. God wasn't just waiting in the burning bush. God was using a restlessness in Moses to lead him beyond the wilderness to the mountain of God. I also believe God led me to Minneapolis, not just to go to a good preaching conference, but to share the message that it's time to leave Midian again.

Today is the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my first Sunday as your pastor. It was the first Sunday of November, 2001 that I first stood in this pulpit as your pastor. We've been through a lot together, and we've not always stayed in Midian. There have been times when we have ventured out and kept walking until we found ourselves on the mountain of God. We've seen a few burning bushes and we've been to Egypt a couple of times.

But it's been eight years since we really took a leap of faith and answered the challenge of God to venture out of Midian. A month ago, I ran into another burning bush in Minneapolis, and the message was pretty clear: it's time to stop keeping, maintaining, preserving. It's time to become more outwardly-focused, mission-minded, willing to take some risks and trust that God will not desert us. It's time to leave the familiarity of Midian and go to Egypt. This sermon is just the beginning of that journey. Let's begin to ask ourselves where Egypt is and what are the things God is calling us to do that will set God's people free.

So, let me ask you, when was the last time you left Midian?