

Afraid to Look

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Third Presbyterian Church
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Exodus 3:1-15

In the ethos of the agricultural Midwest where I grew up, the highest compliment one could ever give or receive was, “He/she sure is a *hard worker*.” Across the miles, I can still hear Aunt Marjorie say it, drawing out the last two words of the phrase with her Nebraska inflections. “She may not be very good in school, but she sure is a *hard worker*.” In that context, wealth, intellect, or ability all run a distant second to the value of hard work.

I guess it’s something I still value – it’s hard to shake what’s in your cultural DNA. If you meet someone new at a party, what’s one of the first questions we ask? “What do you do?” Meaning, what kind of work do you do. It’s a shortcut we use to find out about a person, as if their work or employment is the sum total of who they are. I remember one seminary professor sharing in class about a time she was telling someone about her then-fiance (now spouse), and that person asked her, “What does he do?” She replied, “Oh, he rubs my feet! He gives me backrubs.” To which they responded, “No, what does he DO?”

Of course, we think about work this weekend because tomorrow is Labor Day. In theory, at least, we give thanks for the contributions that workers of all types make to the well-being of our society. If we’re lucky, we have a day of rest from our hard work, and will get to grill a few hamburgers and hot dogs to eat with all the fixings.

Yet sometimes, hard work is overrated. We know that many who work in this country work very, very hard, yet do not receive a living wage, or can’t find meaningful employment, or can’t find work at all. Some work in jobs that demoralize them – what one writer, in reference to the comic strip *Dilbert*, called “the Dilbertization of work.” There’s one strip where Dilbert is in the office of his pointy-haired boss, trying to problem-solve a customer request. Dilbert says, “The request we got for a quote is vague, and the deadline of our response is tomorrow. If I ask for clarity, we’ll miss the deadline. If I don’t, our bid will either be below our cost, or too high to win. Which path of certain failure do you prefer?” And the pointy-haired boss replies, “I like the one that makes you work the hardest.”

It’s one thing to work hard because you want to or because you find value in it. It’s another when a premium placed on hard work is simply a cover to legitimize oppression, as it was for the Hebrew slaves in ancient Egypt. There, every day was Labor Day. According to the Exodus narrative, their Egyptian taskmasters were ruthless in their demands. They made their lives bitter with hard labor. And as their suffering grew, their cries of misery grew louder and louder. When an entire people group is oppressed, how loud do they have to cry before someone hears? How oppressed do they have to be before someone sees?

In the text leading up to today’s Scripture, we learn that Moses saw and recognized the tyranny against the Hebrew people. And I suggest he was in a position where he could have done something about it. You may recall that he actually had the DNA of a Hebrew slave, but thanks to the clever actions of his birth mother and sister, he escaped being killed as a Hebrew boy baby. And thanks to the compassionate response of an Egyptian princess, Moses grew up living the privileged life of royalty.

While a prince, he did see the forced labor of his native people; he saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave. And in the heat of the moment, thinking no one was looking, the privileged prince turned into an angry murderer. For he took matters into his own hands, killed that taskmaster and hid the evidence. But someone **was** looking, reported it back to Pharaoh, and the angry murderer quickly turned into a wanted man with a death sentence on his head. Think about it – as royal insider, Moses could have used his influence to sway the Pharaoh to a change of heart; he might have had a chance to really do something about the slavery, but he ruined it with his impulsive anger. So he fled the country to start a new life in the wilderness, get married, and tend sheep. And back in Egypt, the oppression continued unabated.

One day, Moses led his flock up to the mountain of Horeb. And on this mountain, a blazing bush appeared in all of its fiery, fantastic glory – a bush that burned but was not consumed. Very dramatic. As Moses turned to look, none other than the God of his Hebrew ancestors called out to him to take off his shoes for he stood on holy ground. “I’ve **seen** the misery of my people,” God said. “I’ve **heard** their cry; I **know** their suffering; and I’ve **come down** to deliver them. So come, and I will send **you** to lead them out of their oppression.”

Three things about this are ironic. The first is that even though God plans to intervene intrusively and decisively, in the end God is much less direct. God says, “**I** will deliver,” - language that Walter Brueggemann says is an “abrupt physical act of grasping or seizing.”¹ Yet in the end, it’s **Moses** who will go, “who will run the risks, who will be the point man with pharaoh...[God] is engaged, but not without human agency...”

The second thing I find ironic is that of all people, God chose someone like Moses for this work - Moses, who’d already failed in monumental fashion. It’s even more ironic than seeing radio Shock Jock Howard Stern – known for his expletive-filled rants – become a well-reasoned, articulate, compassionate, and in my humble opinion, best judge on *America’s Got Talent* (my summer guilty pleasure).

It seems Moses himself found God’s choice incongruous. “Who am I, that I should be the one to bring the slaves out of Egypt?” After all, God is asking him to go back to the place he fled – go back to where the death threat is still real, go back to where his people are still slaves, go back and do this work of liberation, all because he stumbled upon a blazing bush on some mountain.

And there’s the third ironic thing about this story. It’s the burning bush that we remember - the image from the Sunday school story of our youth, the image from the children’s bible that we read to our kids. Yet once God begins to speak, it’s as if the burning bush vanishes from the story. It’s never mentioned again, and we’re left only with the voice of God. Blogger Keith Anderson writes that now it’s no longer the **bush** that burns; it’s the “beating heart of God” that burns – “burns with compassion and justice for the oppressed of every time and place.”

No wonder Moses couldn’t look at God. How do you answer the God of your ancestors who gives that kind of call? How do you get beyond the reluctance that comes with a charge so impossible? What do you say when God says, “Go lead my people out of their misery”? What do **we** say when God says, “Go lead my people out of their misery”? We respond with the same question Moses did: “Who am I, that I should be the one to do this?” And in turn, God answers us with the same response given to Moses: “I will be with you.”

Keith Anderson, whom I quoted earlier, has likened the groaning of Israel to the despair rising up in Ferguson, Missouri. He recalls an interview with an African-American woman, who with

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 170-180.

deep pain in her voice, said she no longer wants to have children, “Who would want to raise children, especially a young man, in this kind of world?” she asks.

In our own city of Rochester, we are hearing the cries of children for whom their educational system is not working, and so have no way to escape the enslavement of poverty. The cries have been getting louder and louder. And perhaps this is our own burning bush moment where God is saying, “I have observed the misery of Rochester’s children; I have heard their cry and I know their sufferings; I have come down to deliver them. So come, I will send you to bring them out of their oppression.”

I’m thankful for the long-standing work of tutoring in our public schools by so many in this congregation, as well as by our community partners. I know that those who are called to this work are moved by compassion and love for these children. I hope and pray that our tutoring ranks will grow exponentially as we work one-on-one with these beautiful children of God. If you believe God is nudging you in that direction, I hope that you will take the plunge!

And I’m so thankful to those from here and from our fellow Urban Presbyterians Together churches who have also heard the call to work for systemic change so that all children can go to a great school. A few years ago, prior to my arrival at Third Church, the UPT Education group heard this cry and began reading a book by Gerald Grant called “Hope and Despair in the American City,” which compared the struggling urban education system of Syracuse, which mirrors Rochester, to that of Raleigh in Wake County, North Carolina. And they were intrigued enough to think maybe some folks ought to go and check it out; maybe we could learn something. So this past April, a group of eleven went, and learned, and was transformed. We shifted some of our paradigms, and we were moved to offer the energy we have to what seems to be a decades-long, if not impossible, quest. And I have to say that personally, it **was** a kind of burning bush moment for me, with a compelling call to work for educational justice, and an equally compelling sense of “Who am I, to be part of this work?”

That is the essential question behind Christian vocation, isn’t it? “Who am I, who are we, that we should be the ones to do this?” It’s a curious thing that God does – calling humans to work in partnership with the divine to bring forth God’s intended future. It’s really quite extraordinary.

Over the summer, the group has been hard at work behind the scenes, meeting with individual leaders in the community, gathering others into this conversation we are calling “Great Schools for All,” eliciting their responses, and seeking where we can collaborate for the common good. We hope beyond hope that this effort will broaden and deepen throughout the metropolitan area. This fall, on the evening of September 30, specifically, we are inviting every Presbyterian we can think of to hear our story and find a way join this important effort for justice in education. And again in October 19, we will talk about it at a Sunday morning adult education seminar. I hope you will reserve those dates. Then in November, we will bring a large group of community leaders together in yet another forum to further our collaboration.

Whether education, or hunger, or poverty, or working conditions, or oppression of any sort, our Christian vocation is a sacred calling. It’s a sacred calling to work on behalf of God’s vision for justice, mercy, and peace. Hard work? Yes, absolutely. Even Aunt Marjorie would agree with that! More than that, however, it’s God’s work. Thanks be to God for that, and Happy Labor Day. Amen.