

Bill Countryman

Good Shepherd Berkeley

16th Sunday After Pentecost, August 31, 2008

Proper 17A: Exodus 3:1-15; Ps. 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

Moses used to seem a very remote character to me – bigger than life and living in a world where miracles were just petty change. But lately, he's been looking much more contemporary – more and more like a real figure intelligible in terms of our own times.

Think about it. To start with, he was a childhood survivor of genocide, barely escaping the royal command to kill all male Hebrew infants. Then, to make things more complicated, he was raised first in the Hebrew community for maybe five years or so, then adopted into the same royal household that had intended to kill him. He embodied both the oppressed and the oppressor; he combined two opposite and hostile ethnic identities in one person.

It's not surprising if all that came flying apart in an act of violence, when he saw an Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew slave and killed the man. In flash of anger, he became a terrorist. After that, people on both sides were afraid of him and he had to run for his life.

In exile, he did pretty well for himself – fall in with a powerful Bedouin leader in the desert and married his daughter. Still, can you imagine his sense of dislocation? He's gone from childhood in an Israelite slave household to a pampered life at the Egyptian royal court to being a shepherd in the desert – a fairly big-time shepherd, but still a shepherd.

He'd gone from being served dates in a silver bowl on a verandah overlooking the Nile to trudging through dust and prickly scrub with a following of woolly animals. The water at home was right there in the river, waiting to be dipped up. The water here was at the bottom of deep wells; it took heavy labor just to give all those sheep a drink. He was bicultural and post-colonial; he was an émigré and a displaced person.

And then something else happened that took all of that and focused it on a new purpose – an amazing transformation. As I suggested, it would be easy for a person in Moses' place to become a terrorist, striking out at anybody who got in his way. Instead, he

wound up in a line of distinguished people who have somehow seen beyond their present moment into a future that could be different and better. He was, in his own way, not unlike Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu – to name a few from recent decades.

And, right in the middle of it all, there's this episode of the burning bush. What do we make of that? It's a great story, no doubt about it. It's one of the most memorable stories in the whole Bible. But it's also the kind of thing that tends to make most Episcopalians, most Anglicans of all sorts a little nervous.

We have reasons for that. Some of them going back a long way. In the 16th and 17th centuries there were a lot of people who getting messages from God. Some of them, like the Friends or Quakers, were hearing messages of peace. Some of them, like the Anabaptists of Münster or the Fifth Monarchy Men in England thought God was encouraging them to fight and destroy.

After the Commonwealth period ran its course and the king and the bishops came back to England, our episcopalian forebears wanted nothing more to do with people who heard voices from God. Even John Wesley seemed pretty threatening. When Joseph Butler, the very rational theologian who was also bishop of Bristol, met Wesley, he said to him, "Sir, the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Spirit is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing!"

And, of course, the danger isn't just in the past. There have been some horrid things in our own time. Some of us are old enough to remember reading in the newspapers about the Jonestown massacre, and the whole role of religion in modern conflicts is enough to make one question anything that might even hint of fanaticism.

In one sense, there's nothing surprising here. Human beings can make a mess of anything. We don't always. Sometimes we do rather well. But nothing is proof against our ability to turn good into evil, not even the voice of God. Even if we really have heard it, we can pervert it. And if we haven't heard it, we can make it up, consciously or unconsciously. There's reason to be suspicious here.

Yet, the story of Moses really hinges on this moment, doesn't it? Before this, he was a man of uncertain ethnicity, an escaped killer,

a refugee fallen far below his former rank in his own country, filling out the remainder of his life herding sheep. After it, he was a world-changing figure.

Let's look at the story again. Here's Moses trekking through the wilderness with his father-in-law's sheep, watching out for poisonous plants and dangerous animals and marauding neighbors. It's not a very stimulating life, but he's grateful that he's landed on his feet, even if it is the middle of nowhere. He doesn't have a real home any more anyway, no place he really belongs. He's not going anywhere.

Then the strange phenomenon of the bush that burns but isn't consumed. It's interesting that God *invites* his curiosity rather than *demanding* his attention. God wants Moses to be alert, to be paying attention with his mind, not just cowering in the divine presence. Only after Moses turns aside to investigate does God tell him that he's standing on Holy Ground.

Moses, reasonably enough, asks for God's name. And what does he get? A riddle. We're not even sure how to translate it: I am who I am? I will be who I will be? I cause to be what I cause to be? The ancient Greek translators turned it into something like "I am the one who really is."

Then God gives Moses an impossible task: liberate the Hebrew underclass from slavery in Egypt. Lead them across the sea and the desert into Canaan. Take the land away from the rich and powerful cities that currently control it.

And when Moses asks for a sign – a little reassurance please, God gives a sign that's absolutely no help at all: After you've done all this, you'll come back and worship at this mountain. Thanks a lot!

A natural curiosity has turned into a conversation with someone who won't even give a proper name but wants to send Moses off on an impossible task without any proof that this is going to work at all.

Moses is in a tough spot. The experience he's just had was far too intense for him simply to walk away from it. But he has no real idea how to go about the task he'd just been called to. God does give him some helpful tricks he can perform to impress people. But he has no conclusive proof, even for himself, that he's doing the right thing.

So what does he do? He tries anyway. He really *isn't* so very different from Martin Luther King, Jr., or Nelson Mandela, or Desmond Tutu. Like them, he's had a vision in which the world could and would be different and better. It's a vision he can't shake, and it won't let him go back to business as usual.

And like them, he then has to make it up as he goes. He doesn't have a set of directions, a blueprint, a map. He's not even sure you *can* get from here to there.

And also like them, he winds up creating a new reality in which a group of marginalized people who were having trouble thinking much of themselves discover that God has taken a special concern for them and that they could not only come out on top in all this, but they could do things differently, more generously, more humanely than their oppressors did.

Now, you and I can breathe a small sigh of relief. The world can only accommodate a limited number of Moseses at one time. God is probably not going to put you or me in that spot. But it doesn't mean that we're completely off the hook.

God, after all, really does sometimes strike up a direct conversation with us, even if it's not always in words. How many people active in ecological causes today can trace the beginning of their involvement to some moment or moments when they were overwhelmed by the wonder and holiness of the natural world? Their sense of commitment isn't just a prudential thing. It's a sacred thing.

I AM WHO I AM is still encountering people in all sorts of ways. God may well be as cagey with us as with Moses. It's easy for us to convince ourselves that we know exactly who God is; and I don't think God wants to encourage that. The important thing isn't that we come out of the experience knowing all about God. The important thing is that the encounter will point us toward work that gives life, not work that oppresses and harms.

For most of us here, church is part of this conversation with God – not the only form of it, but one way we do hear the voice of God. I remember fifteen or so years ago, when we had a serious conversation with one another about Sunday morning worship at Good Shepherd, the strongest single response that came from people

is that this is a point at which we regain our sense of direction and hope for our everyday lives. I suspect that that's still the case.

So whether it's as unpredictable as a bush that burns but is not consumed or whether it's as familiar as Sunday morning Eucharist, God is drawing every one of us to look anew at the world around us. We get a glimpse of some work that needs to be done. We aren't sure how to do it. We don't imagine we can do it all ourselves. But we at least wonder what our part in it is to be. And we try to respond in a way that will help build a new and different and better world.

And in that, we are not unlike Moses. Don't expect to get it perfect. He didn't, after all, and it might seem a little rude to excel him at it. But give it your best shot. This story isn't about a strange thing that once happened to someone long ago who was completely different from us. This story is about times like ours and how God draws people in – people not particularly different from us – and gives them a new sense of reality, a new sense of what's important, and sends them – us – out to start doing something about it.