

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
August 28, 2011
Exodus 3:1-15
“Taking the First Step of Faith”

There’s a conversational game that people sometimes play when they get together, something called “Where were you when?” During recent weeks here in Pittsburgh, we’ve asked one another “Where were you when the earthquake hit?” or “Where were you when the tragic flash flood happened?” After this weekend our neighbors to the east will be asking “Where were you when Hurricane Irene hit?” There are lots of options for this game: where were you during Hurricanes Katrina, Ivan or Hugo; when the war on Iraq was declared, when the Twin Towers were attacked on 9/11, when the space shuttle exploded, when President Kennedy or Dr. King was assassinated, and so on. Important events in our life are often remembered spatially; we remember where we were or what we were doing when such and such occurred.

Moses had one of those moments when he encountered God speaking to him out of a burning bush. On one level, it may not seem like Moses has a particularly interesting answer to the question “Where were you?” He might say, “I was out tending sheep in the hills of Horeb when off the path I saw a thorn bush on fire.” When we re-tell Moses’ story, we generally focus less on *where* the event happened and focus more on what God said to him. But let’s take a moment today to consider *where* this dramatic event in Moses’ life actually occurred.

Question 1: Why is Moses out in the wilderness tending sheep? Wasn’t he the Hebrew boy-child whose mother put him in a papyrus basket on the River Nile and who the Pharaoh’s daughter rescued from the water and accepted as her own child? Wasn’t he raised in the palace as a Prince of Egypt, to borrow the title from the Disney movie? Remember that Moses, as a young man, had shown little tolerance for injustice. When he had witnessed an Egyptian overseer savagely beating a Hebrew slave, Moses had a violent reaction to this abuse of a kinsman. He killed the overseer and buried his body in the sand. When Pharaoh heard of the crime, Moses was a marked man in Egypt. So he fled far to the East, across the Sinai peninsula and the Red Sea, and settled in the land of Midian, where he met a family, married a daughter, and supported his new relatives by tending their flocks of sheep and goats.

Question 2: Let’s narrow things down a bit. What do we know about the mountain where Moses encountered God? There are lots of mountains in the wilderness between Egypt and Israel, and we’re not entirely sure which one might be the one called Mt. Horeb. But Horeb was also known as Sinai. So it is worth noting that the same place where God told Moses to go and set God’s people free, God would later talk with Moses again and give him the Ten Commandments. This spot of physical, “get out of Egypt” freedom is also the place of “here are my commandments” spiritual freedom.

Can we be any more specific about the location of this epiphany from God? It was somewhere on Mount Horeb and likely not on a well-worn path, because 1) Moses was tending animals that like to wander wherever they can find tufts of grass to eat, and 2) Moses himself said “I must turn aside and see this great sight – a bush that burns without being consumed.” What does this tell us? It tells us that the pivotal event in Moses’ life occurred when he stepped off the path, when he took a step of faith in a new direction. *That* made all the difference in the world.

If you are sincere about wanting God to be the Lord of your life, for Christ and the Holy Spirit to be the guide for all you do, but every day you carefully chart out your itinerary and know exactly where you’re going and when you’ll arrive at each destination, you’ll likely be unsuccessful in your faith goals. Taking the first step of real faith is almost always a step in an unexpected direction: a step off the well-worn path, away from the crowds, in a direction different from the typical ways of the world. Why is this? Because God is in the world, but not of the world. God is almost always found off the path – somewhere over there – a place we see from the corner of our eye, or sense with a feeling in our gut or a tweak in our conscience.

Let me give a few examples, which aren’t perfect but they help illustrate the point I’m trying to make. I recently saw the movie “The Help,” which is about white, Southern families with African-American domestics back in the early 1960s. It was a time of Jim Crow laws, segregated bathrooms, and rampant racism. The movie is imperfect in that it largely looks at the civil rights’ movement through the eyes of whites in the south. But the movie’s premise is that an idealistic white girl decides to write a book about the things experienced by the black help all around her. Her life changed only when she stepped off the beaten path of white privilege and sat at a black maid’s table and heard stories about what life was really like. That was for her a burning bush moment.

Second, over the past weeks, I’ve tried to read up on the Marcellus Shale controversy in Pennsylvania. People have given me newspaper articles and Internet links, and it’s clear that this topic is thick with political in-fighting on all sides. People argue about the potential for future jobs, while money is changing hands now, contracts are being signed, and arguments are raging about tax revenue and long-term affects on both individuals and our state. Continuing down the main road on this discussion doesn’t appear to me to be very fruitful. So I’ve decided to step off to one side for a while. I’ve put in a request to our Presbytery that Pittsburgh Presbytery, its member churches, and Camp Crestfield agree to a moratorium for one year banning any contracts regarding exploration of natural gas reserves under any church property. During that time I hope we will focus on just two questions, namely, what is the environmental impact of natural gas “fracking” methods on water supplies, and whether technology exists now to ensure that water used to extract the natural gas can be safely purified and made available for future human consumption. To me this is a faithful way to step off the fast-track approach and pause to ask a basic question about how to be good stewards of our water and natural gas resources.

One last example. There is a growing concern that large sections of our nation are either food deserts or food swamps. A food desert is a place where people, especially those existing below the poverty line, have to drive more than a mile to buy fresh meat, dairy products, and vegetables. The USDA has estimated that as many as 24 million people live in “food deserts” in America. Others dispute this category, claiming that since 93% of American households have access to a car, the distance factor isn’t such a big thing. What is of greater concern, however, are “food swamps.” These are places where unhealthy fast-food is tightly concentrated in one place: convenience stores selling packaged foods full of chemical preservatives, gallon cups of sodas and sugar-drinks, fast-food chains selling burgers, fries, and fried chicken clustered on every corner. There are now five fast-food restaurants for every supermarket in America.¹

To step off the path faithfully in these three cases means that you would go out of your way to listen to someone else’s story – especially someone who is different from you, racially, economically, in sexual orientation, age, whatever. It means you would stop the frantic rush for easy money and ask important questions about what today’s choices regarding energy usage and water consumption mean for tomorrow’s world and our children’s lives. It means you would go out of your way to look at what options are available for buying fresh food for your meals, and see how a little thing like fresh vegetables or a community garden can have an impact far greater than you can ever imagine.

The first step of faith is almost always a step in a new direction, somewhere different from where we thought we were heading, towards someone we’d likely overlooked or something we’d not given much thought to before. For Moses that step was over to a burning bush that turned out to be a place where he experienced the Lord God directly and powerfully. It was over there that he encountered the God of his ancestors. It was over to the side that God shared how the Hebrew people, from whom Moses had fled years before, had never been far from God’s heart or mind.

Why was this side-step so important? Because without it, Moses would never have been the Moses we know. Without it, he would just be a man living in isolation, herding sheep in far-off lands. But with it, Moses had a “Where were you?” moment that stuck with him for the rest of his life, a moment when God refuted every concern and doubt he offered, when God shared with Moses God’s own name. It’s hard to put God’s name into English, but one way to think about it is to imagine God saying “I have been, I am now, and I will be ever as I’ve always been – with you and committed to you from henceforth and forevermore.”

¹ THE WEEK, August 19-26, 2011, p. 11.

After the first step of faith took Moses to the burning bush, a second step of faith sent him right back to the people he'd deserted years before. See, God doesn't pull us off the beaten path to keep us isolated over in some safe, spiritual cul-de-sac. No, God pulls us off the road just long enough to give us what we need for the journey ahead so we can re-join the daily traffic and return to the places where God needs us to be. That's why the first step of faith is actually two steps. One step off the beaten path of the world followed by a second step, when God sends us back to merge onto the highway of life, to re-engage with those we've always known, yet doing so now with a new story to tell the world.

Where was your burning bush? Or where is it now, there, just off the path you're on? Where were you when life suddenly changed dramatically – when God became real and not just a noun for Sunday mornings – when hope and action and faith and passion all came together? Now *that's* a story worth talking about.

AMEN