

Everyday Deliverance
Exodus 3:1–15
Sunday, August 30, 2020

So we have been doing *this* (quarantine, distancing, worshipping virtually) for almost 6 months now. And I don't know about you, but the past couple of weeks it has *really* started to wear on me. Our Office Administrator Lara had to go back to working remotely six weeks ago, Ridgley has been remote the whole time, and our sexton Moses comes either early in the morning or late at night to clean when no one else is here, so most days I am the only person in the church building. And it has become a very quiet, isolated, *lonely* place. I spend most days in this 11x13' room. I still interact with people every day on the phone and Zoom meetings, but it's not the same as *physical presence*, being *face to face* with someone.

Well, earlier this week, I was coming to work one morning, but I wasn't really looking forward to it. I knew I was going to be here by myself all day, and it was going to be quiet and lonely, and I just wasn't feeling it that morning. But when I pulled up, there was a car in the parking lot, so I got all excited like, "Who's here?!" It was Jim and Sue Tiede with two of their grandkids, and they had come up to pick some vegetables from the community garden and take them over to the food pantry. We stood in the parking lot and talked for 10 or 15 minutes as the grandkids ran around laughing and playing. It wasn't anything huge, just a normal conversation. In fact, if this same thing had happened 6 months ago, it would have been nice, but we probably wouldn't have thought anything of it. It was just a normal, run-of-the-mill, everyday interaction. But for *me*, *that day*, it was a *God send*. It brought *life* to what had been a quiet, lonely, isolating place, and it lifted me out of the funk that I'd been feeling. I came to the office feeling *good* that day!

And when I did, I started thinking about Moses. (Not our sexton...the one in the Bible.) And I thought about how Moses experienced something very similar. Moses grew up in Egypt in the

household of Pharaoh, but also knowing that he was the son of Hebrew slaves. So he was torn between two people. One day he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, so he *killed* the Egyptian and hid his body in the sand. Well, Pharaoh found out about it and wanted to kill Moses. So Moses ran away from Egypt, from *all* his people – Egyptians *and* Hebrews – and went to Midian, which was *far*. It was like going from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, around 300 miles. It would be like if you just took off running all the way to southern Maine. He meets a woman and gets married, but he was still cut off from all his people. It had to be very lonely and isolating for Moses.

Our reading today says that, one day, he was out tending his father-in-law's sheep beyond the wilderness – so not even *in* the wilderness, which is isolated enough, but *beyond* it – when he came to a mountain called Horeb. Horeb comes from a Hebrew word that means *wasteland*. It was a desolate, isolated place, cut off from civilization. There was no *life* there. It was a *lonely* place, and Moses had to be *feeling* that.

It was just a normal day for him, going about his everyday business, tending the sheep. And *that* was when God came to him. Moses doesn't encounter God in a worship service in a temple, even though he has married into a family of priests. This takes place far from the religious community – far from *any* community – out in the world, in the common places where everyday life takes place. In fact it's even in the *wasteland* that seems desolate and isolated and lonely; *that* is where God comes to him. And God tells him to take off his shoes, for the place on which he is standing is holy ground.

Now, as far as we know, there was nothing inherently *special* about this place. It has never been mentioned before as a holy site. Remember, it is a desolate, isolated *wasteland*. And that's kind

of the point. The ground on which Moses is standing is holy, not because there is something inherently special about it. Not because it possesses magical powers. It is *holy* because *God* is there, in that moment, and Moses has recognized it. This building and sanctuary are not inherently holy on their own, possessing some natural sanctity. There *are* no inherently sacred or holy places. Places are made holy by our recognition of God's presence in them. It's when we become aware that we are in the presence of God *wherever* we are that that place becomes holy. That can happen in a sanctuary. It can happen in a parking lot. It can happen in a garden or a hospital room or at a kitchen table or on a mountain.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning is a poet who once wrote,

Earth is crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes –
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware...

She's saying that the *whole earth*, every place, is filled with the presence of God, but not everyone *recognizes* it. They just treat it like a normal everyday place. But when we *do* recognize the presence of God in the common, everyday places of our lives, we take off our shoes and know that place as holy.

There's a movie called *Joe Versus the Volcano* with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan that says this a different way. The two of them are on a boat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean under a star-filled night sky that they are just in *awe* of, and Meg Ryan says, "My father says almost the whole world's asleep. Everybody you know, everybody you see, everybody you talk to. He says only a few people are awake. And they live in a state of constant, total amazement." It's when we awaken to the presence of God in the ordinary everyday places of our lives – or even in the isolated wastelands of life – that the *place* becomes holy, and *our lives* begin to become holy.

So Moses recognizes the presence of God in the ordinary, everyday places of his life, in the midst of his isolation and loneliness, and it is *there* that God speaks to him. God says, “I have observed the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries. I know their sufferings. And I have come down to deliver them.” God is not far-removed and unmoved by human suffering and pain. God *sees* their misery. God *hears* their cries. God *knows* their sufferings. And God *comes down* to do something about it. God *draws near* to Moses in his lonely wasteland, and God *draws near* to the people of Israel in their brutal oppression in Egypt, because God wants to *deliver* them from that.

This is not just some offhand comment that God makes to Moses. *This is who God is. It’s what God does.* This is God’s very *nature*. And we see this same promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God *sees* our misery, God *hears* our cries, God *knows* our sufferings, and in Christ, God comes down to *do something about it*. God enters in to the lonely wastelands of *our* lives and draws near to us in our pain, our sadness, our suffering, our oppression, our isolation, and our loneliness.

And there is *so much* of that right now. So much pain. So much suffering. So much death. So much fear. So much uncertainty. So much oppression and injustice. So much sadness. So many tears. And in the midst of all *that*, so many of us are so isolated and so lonely. **(PAUSE)** But we are not alone. God *sees*, God *hears*, God *knows*, and God *comes* to deliver. The funny thing is how God *does* that.

God says to Moses, “I have come down to deliver my people from the Egyptians. So come, *I will send you* to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt.” God doesn’t deliver with the snap of

a finger, even though God *could*. God says, “We’re going to do this *together*.” God draws near to us by drawing us near to each other. God delivers us by delivering us *to* each other. God drew near to *me* in Jim and Sue Tiede and their grandkids and delivered me from my lonely isolation by delivering them to me, even though they had no idea. Who is God using to draw near to *you*, delivering *to* you in order to *deliver* you? And just as important, who is God using *you* to draw near to? Who is God delivering *you* to in order to deliver *them* from whatever suffering and sadness and loneliness *they* are experiencing?

There *is* so much heaviness in the world around us right now. So much sadness and suffering and oppression and injustice and pain and loneliness. And it is through the power of God’s Holy Spirit, God’s presence *in* and *among* us today, that God *uses us* to draw near to each other and deliver us from that. But like God, we have to *see* the misery of our neighbors, *hear* their cries, and *know* their suffering. We have to open our eyes and ears and hearts to the people around us. We have to stop looking *up*, because God has come *down*. We have to start looking *around* at each other, asking, “How is God sending *you* to *me*, and how is God sending *me* to *you*?” Shane Claiborne is a Christian activist and author in Philadelphia, and he said just the other day, “When you ask God to move a mountain, God may hand you a shovel.” How is God handing *you* a shovel and asking you to use it for the work of deliverance?

When Moses got *his* shovel, the first thing he did was to express hesitation, fear, and doubt. He says, “Who am *I* that *I* should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” And God says, “I will be with you.” But Moses wants *more* than that. He wants something tangible and verifiable. He wants *proof*. He says, “Okay, well, who are *you*? If I go to the Israelites and say, ‘God has sent me to you,’ and they say, ‘Well, what’s God’s *name*,’ what should I *say* to them?” And God says, “I am who I am. Tell them I AM has sent you.”

Now, the funny thing is, that's not much of an answer. It makes sense to *us* with thousands of years of hindsight. But let's imagine that Moses goes to the people of Israel and says, "God has sent me to you," and they say, "Yeah, well, what's God's *name*," and Moses says, "I AM." Uhh...I am *what*? All throughout scripture up to this point, God has been referred to by names like *El Shaddai*, "God Almighty," and *El Elyon*, "God Most High." But this name, *Yahweh*, is totally new. If Moses says to them, "Yahweh sent me," they're going to say, "Who?!" Because they haven't *heard* that name before. So this isn't exactly giving Moses the hard, verifiable proof that he wants.

But again, that's kind of the point. In expressing his fear and hesitation and doubt to God, God says, "I will be with you," and when Moses asks for *proof*, God doesn't really *give* him any. God has said, "I will be with you," and God is asking him to *trust* that promise. Faith is not about *proof*. It is about *trust*. Trusting that God is with us. That God *is* who God *says* God is.

When God hands *us* that shovel, the natural tendency is to feel like, "Who am *I*? I can't do this thing. I can't bring deliverance to people who are suffering and lonely and oppressed." We see pain and injustice in the world and don't know how we can do anything about it. But you know what you *can* do? You can make life better for *one person* standing right there in front of you. Every day, right in front of you, is someone who needs *love* or *food* or *forgiveness* or *laughter* or just a shoulder to cry on. Every day, right in front of you, is someone who needs the presence of God in their life, and you can show that to them, because God is *with* you. All you have to do is *trust*. Focus on that person right in front of you. See their misery, hear their cries, know their suffering, and *love* them, the best that you can.

What this story shows us is that in the common, everyday places of our lives – even in the *wastelands* where it seems like nothing good lives – God meets us and calls us to deliver people from misery, suffering, and oppression, trusting that God is with us in that mission. If you need proof of God’s presence in this world and in your life, maybe God is sending you someone right now who is saying, “I am.” And if someone around you needs proof of God’s presence and love in this dark and lonely time, maybe God is calling you to go to *them* and say, “I am.”