

Faith: the Final Frontier ~ To Boldly Go Where No One Has Gone Before

It was a “nowhere” place—no TV, no phone, no running water or indoor plumbing, no vegetation, no people, out there in the desert with the sheep. It was a “nowhere” place, and he was “nobody”, and, thank you, he’d like to keep it that way. There were some Post Offices back in Egypt that still had his picture in the lobby.

Back in Egypt there were some officials who still wanted to talk to Moses, about that day when the body of an Egyptian Work Supervisor was found buried in the sand. “You don’t know anything about that, do you, Moses?”

But here in Sinai, it was safe. Nobody asked any questions. The past was the past, and nobody hassled him, out here in the desert with the sheep.

And then, one day, he came around a bend and there was an object and an event that would transform his life forever: a bush that was blazing, but not consumed by the fire. And Moses said, “This I gotta’ see!” And, with that, he “boldly went where no one had gone before!”

And then Moses heard his name called: “Moses! Take off your shoes, Moses; you’re standing on Holy Ground.” And the voice said,

(EXODUS 3:6-12 NRSV) *“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. ⁷Then 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, ⁸and 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... ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” ¹¹But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” ¹²He 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.”

I want you to note that this was a two-way conversation. Moses “talked back” to God. And, incidentally, God seemed OK with that.

Moses said, “Who am I? I’m nobody and I want it to stay that way!” Nobody will listen to me!” Then comes the Holy Name: “YHWH”—“I am—will be with you.”

So, Moses said, “When I say, ‘The God of my fathers says, ‘Let my people go’ they will say, ‘Who?’ Whom shall I say sent me? On whose authority am I to speak. Who are you, God?” Then comes the Holy name again: “Tell them “YHWH”—tell them “I am”—sent you.

But Moses said, “I s-s-s-stutter. W-W-W-When I speak, they won’t l-l-l-listen. They’ll be rolling on the f-f-f-floor laughing too hard to listen.” And God said, “I will send Aaron, your brother; he will speak for you.”

“Go Down, Moses, ‘Way down in Egypt land.

"Tell old Pharaoh, "Let my people go!"

Don't you wish you could go back to that place in Sinai—to boldly go where no one but Moses has gone before—to the Holy Name—to hear your name called by the Holy One; find that clarity of call, direction, purpose.

I probably can't do it as well as he did, but Peter Morgan was keynote speaker at a ministers' retreat some years ago, and he led us on such an imaginary trip:

As I recall, it was a tour, sponsored by Global Ministries. We'd fly to Cairo and board a bus to motor across the desert to the Sinai Peninsula. We arrive in the middle of the afternoon at a monastery nestled in a shady crevice at the eastern foot of the mountain, and are welcomed by a monk who speaks in a heavy middle-eastern accent. Each of us is assigned a sparsely furnished room, and after splashing a little water on our faces, we meet the group in the dining room for a Spartan meal and an orientation. The next three days are spent in Bible study and prayer, and then the entire group participates in a prayer vigil throughout the night.

At sunrise on the fourth morning the group assembles at the front gate, where everyone is given a small shoulder bag with two bottles of water, a sandwich and an orange, and the trek begins up the mountain. At midmorning, the group rests under a shady overhang before continuing up the mountain. Just before noon, the leader signals for quiet, and then leads the last few feet along a narrow trail that leads to a gate. Inside the gate is a terraced garden, irrigated with water from who-knows-where, and manicured immaculately. And in the center of the garden is the bush, glowing radiantly with an awesome presence.

One of the group members takes off his shoes, and soon the rest of the people follow suit; and one-by-one the people inch closer to the bush, each one hoping to hear his own name called; each one hoping to hear that Holy Name.

Wouldn't you like to go back there?

Or, maybe you don't want to go back. We're spoiled to our "creature comforts", and outside the compound is the desert. It's hot; and dry; and isolated—nothing but snakes and lizards—out here in the desert.

Maybe you don't want to go back there—to boldly go where no one but Moses has ever gone before.

Maybe we don't need to go back. Maybe we're already there.

Rampant, unrestrained racism is all around us—even in this room, right now. Some of us are eaten up by it; I struggle against it in myself—almost every day. It is pervasive, like sand in the desert!

Poverty, unemployment, crime is all round—unavoidable as the heat in Sinai.

The air we breathe, the water we drink; environmental issues confront us like serpents in the wilderness; and public apathy and denial blur our vision like the clouds of sand that blow across an arid land.

Medical science has blessedly and mercifully prolonged not only life, but also quality of life. But the very blessedness becomes a major problem as our own parents begin to live beyond their ability to take care of themselves. The moral and ethical questions surrounding medical care for the poor overwhelms us like thirst.

And, even in our own neighborhoods—our own streets—there are people who have not heard the gospel shared in a compelling, convincing way. People whose names we know who face death—and life—without a personal, transforming relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Maybe we don't need to go back to Sinai. The problems all around us define our ministry—and thus define our call. And, remember, when Moses encountered God in the Sinai desert, God sent him back to Egypt, to deal with the issues of human bondage and injustice that remind us of our own desert, here at home.

Were we able to go back to the burning bush, would we not be sent right back here? Are not the problems at our doorstep our burning bush? Do they not blaze with the heat of human need, and yet without being consumed in the flames?

And, here's the thing: I would be the last person in the world to encourage a sense of complacency, or to suggest that we have accomplished all we've been called to do; and yet, when I consider what this small congregation does, I have to leave open the possibility that, not only are we in the presence of our own burning bush, but also that sometime in the not too distant past, someone, or, more likely several ones, heard the Holy name—heard their names called by the Holy One. And they responded—not with excuses, but with obedience.

And, since it all began before I became your minister, it won't be bragging when I point out all you are doing: Soul Food; Haven House; Bethlehem House; Disciples Mission Fund; Week of Compassion—Hurricanes Harvey and Irma; "Shop With A Cop"; Easter Offering; Pentecost Offering; Reconciliation Offering; Thanksgiving and Christmas Offerings.

And so, keep listening. Because it is out of the very problems we'd like to escape—those crushing issues of human need and injustice at our doorstep that we can most clearly hear our name called; and then, can hear the divine name, as if carried on the desert wind: "Yahweh!" "Yahweh!"