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August 13, 2006
Exodus 4: 1 – 12
Matthew 17: 14 – 20

Life Changing Questions: “What Is That In Your Hand?”

Have you ever felt inadequate to a task? Felt you could use a hand? Then you know what Moses feels.

Here he is minding his own sheep-business on a pleasant afternoon, when he sees something burning and decides he just has to go and check it out.

Well you know what they say about curiosity killing the cat! Only cats have nine lives and Moses is about to enter his third. Yes, his third—because you know this story. How Moses was set a drift as a baby boy among the reeds of the Nile River when Pharaoh decided the Israelites were getting too numerous. Pharaoh ordered all the baby boys killed.

But Pharaoh’s daughter finds Moses in the river and she loves him and brings him into her home to raise as her own son. His sister seeing Moses safe in the Princess’ care, offers to provide a wet nurse for the child—none other than Moses own mother.

And so Moses is raised with a foot in both worlds: the palace elite of Egypt and the lowly slave huts of the Israelites.

But that was long, long ago. As you know or may recall, Moses grows into a fine young man— and begins to sort out who he is—begins to question-- as all young people do. His heart burns with the injustice of the plight of his people—their slavery and mistreatment and misery. Seeing a fellow Israelite beaten by an overseer, he lashes out and kills the Egyptian. End of first life.

In fear of Pharaoh’s anger he flees to Midian where he marries and becomes a herder of sheep: His Second Life.

Which brings us back to this bush that is burning but is not consumed:

“Moses, take off your shoes!

You are standing on Holy Ground!”

It’s the voice of God. The voice that calls him into his third life. God has a task for Moses. Something to do with that righteous indignation in his own soul. A burning he had buried long, long ago.

But God knows our hearts. And God knows more. God knows our gifts—or I should say how to point out and use the gifts we have.

I mean if you were a head hunter and needed to hire a candidate to go to Egypt to set your client’s people free—what requirements would you look for?

Let’s see, the first thing to do is to consider the context: Egyptian King enslaves Hebrews. Two different cultures. Two different languages. Hmm.... Says here on his bio that Mr. Moses was born a Hebrew slave, raised and educated as the son of a Pharaoh, -bi-lingual, bi-cultural, good fighter—responsible provider for his family—good experience on both sides of the socioeconomic realities of life, good references supplied by his father in law Jethro. Lots of gifts here. Obviously the first choice for the job.

Unfortunately, Moses doesn’t see it that way. He can’t see any gifts in this situation—just complications and the biggest one, as far as he can see—is the choice of candidates—Moses just doesn’t have the same image of himself that God has. He tries to beg off but God isn’t about to let him. Instead God makes the most of what Moses has.

Moses complains, “If I say the LORD has sent me, they won’t believe me!” God says, “Moses, what is that in your hand?” Moses looks at his hand. What’s the story tell us he is holding in his hand? Do you remember? Well, what is he out there doing? Herding sheep, right! Yes, he’s holding a wooden stick—longer than a walking stick—a staff for herding sheep.

So Moses says, “A staff.” God says—“Throw it on the ground.” Moses throws the staff down and it turns into a writing snake! God says, “Now pick it up.” So Moses grabs it by the tail and it becomes a staff!”

Moses didn’t think he had much, but God took what he had in his hand—which was far more than that wooden staff—that was just

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something to kick start his confidence—after all, even Pharaoh’s magicians could turn their sticks into writhing snakes---but God took what Moses didn’t realize he had ---his pain and suffering, his hard experience including his mistakes, his long forgotten youthful idealism and used it to good effect with old Pharaoh—until that day came when Pharaoh was GLAD to let the Israelites go! At least for the first 24 hours. But even then—or I should say, BY THEN Moses trusts God. Moses trusts God to give him what he needs for the task—whether it’s parting waters or causing water to flow from old dry rock in the desert. Is it easy? No. Is it a lark? No.

But it is a LIFE. A life worth living. A life with a purpose.

The point is, if you don’t want any God tasks, you’d better drown those burnings in your soul, those deep burning desires for peace, for justice for compassion, those feelings you get when you read the newspaper that give you the acid reflux of righteous indignation, those feelings that bring tears to your eyes and a cry to your throat because you can’t take any more pain or suffering, or those feelings you have of being at your wits end—those feelings that kindle up in your heart and stick in your throat and make you feel more like a victim than a Knight in shining armor.

Those are dangerous feelings, I’m telling you! Don’t go talking to any burning things you feel or see in your heart’s eye... because if you do, well, then I’m hear to tell you today—God will turn the tables on you. God will talk back. God will call you out from the ordinary, hum drum existence of your life and give you a purpose. God will give you a mission. And God will hound you until you go—there will be no excuses good enough for God to let you off the hook.

Because God is in the business of morphing the victimized and the righteously indignant, the whiners, the woe is me-ers, the truly down on their luck and the less than adequate and ineloquent into transformers! LIFE transformers.

And when you say, “But God, not me! How can it be me?” God will say to you, “What is that you have in your hand?” And whatever it is—believe me it is related to some burning in your soul, and God can and will use it.

I know. I remember. I remember an experience that wasn’t very noticeable to anyone—nothing exactly earthshaking—well—I take that back. It was earthshaking for me.

When I was a very young pastor with a new born, Kim and I were sharing one pastoral assignment. We didn’t have a lot of time or money or anything else. When it was time for our week long annual conference meeting in Sacramento, we couldn’t afford childcare and besides that I was nursing. The baby was pretty portable so we just took him with us.

I remember having my son Ian in a stroller on the floor of annual conference. That worked the first year, but the second year, he was a squirmy, noisy baby. The stroller wasn’t going to work.

I remember that burning feeling of need, of frustration and helplessness, of feeling captive to circumstance and without recourse. There was this burning down in my soul. I remember a very angry conversation with God saying, “Well, YOU called me into this ministry, YOU do something about! I need help.”

And God said, “Gotcha!” And then I heard God say, “What is that you have in your hand?” Well, I had my hands full of an infant. And God said, that’s right—I have gifted you with this beautiful child---now go and organize childcare for annual conference and see to it that it’s provided each and every year.

And I said, but God it takes me all morning just to pack the diaper bag, get the baby and myself ready, not to mention my pastoral duties—HOW am I going to organize childcare for the entire annual conference?

And God said, “Who made mouths anyway? I will give you what you need to speak. Now go!” And I went. Karen McClintock, another clergy woman in the same boat as I was —we went.

I became her Aaron in this story. She had an idea. I ran with it. Saw all the possibilities and

• Life Changing Questions: “What Is That In Your Hand?” by Rev. Denice Leslie. I fleshed it out, advocated for it and cheered it on. Wrote the legislation and spoke to it.

Along the way, we found the support we needed from the Commission on the Status and Role of Women who helped me write legislation to provide childcare on-site childcare. I’ll never forget the day I got up to make that presentation at the Annual Conference session! I know how Moses felt the first time he walked into face Pharaoh—and I was among friends! But I’d never spoken in front of such a large audience before—many people I looked up to. Far more experienced than I. I was thoroughly intimidated.

I did fine in making my prepared presentation but when it came to the discussion I looked out over the 1200 plus people sitting out there on the floor and I froze up. A member of COSROW on stage with me, Fran Eldridge, said, “Denice—accept the amendment!” I almost said, “Denice, accept the amendment.”

The whole event proved to be a life changing experience. God took hold of my powerlessness, my inexperience, my righteous indignation, my need, and turned it into something that not only moved me to a new level of leadership, but that made it possible for more women and families to participate in the leadership of the whole conference for years and years to come—its been 23 years now but my burning bush vision is a reality today. There is childcare for infants through high school every year.

God has steadily called forward leadership for it has evolved and grown into a special ministry that graces everyone at annual conference. God did that. GOD DID THAT!! Like a Mother hen shoving a fledgling out of the nest—God shoved me out and said, “Fly!” And much to my utter amazement I did.

A little, life transforming thing.

What do YOU have in your hand? A frustrating, draining work experience that beats you down everyday? A difficult marriage? An unexpected physical malady that knocked you off your feet. Unemployment with no hope of getting another position in the area in which you trained for? An unexpected early retirement that

has stunned you or delighted you. A successful hip replacement? The loss of a spouse? Remarriage late in life? The care of an invalid family member? A brand new baby? An unexpected windfall of cash? A special needs child? What is it that you have in your hand?

“In his book, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*, Os Guinness reviews the theology of call and just what is involved when one is called of God. □

Guinness describes the call of God as “the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are everything we do and everything we have is ... lived out as a response to his summons and service.”¹

There are two dimensions to the call of God, the first being our essential role as a disciple of Jesus and the second being the call to function in the church and the world using the gifts God has given us. When we are faithful to these two callings, God is glorified.”

When we are faithful to these two callings WE are fulfilled! WE are rounded out to the fullest humanity God has in mind for each and every one of us.

God isn’t calling the vast majority of us to go out and bring world peace—God IS calling each of us as followers of Christ to be about making real one small piece of God’s shalom—all that which makes life whole and blest.

God is calling each of us to transform the particular context of life we find ourselves in—and I would add—most often an unplanned, unexpected life place we had no idea we would find ourselves in.

But the thing to remember is this: God doesn’t call the qualified. *God qualifies the called!* So get out there and move mountains—one spoonful at a time.²

¹ HomileticOnline, illustrations.

² God qualifies quote: Homiletics, Illustrations. Words on a bumper sticker.