

## **You're the Gift ( A sermon in four parts)**

**Exodus 3:1-12, 4:1-17**

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### **Part 1: Exodus 3:1-6**

"One day," the poet Mary Oliver writes in her life-changing poem "The Journey," "One day you finally knew what you had to do, and began." Many times, however, we don't know what to do, we only know what we can't keep doing. Deep within our soul, a voice speaks, "that's enough of this, go in search of something new" and we change directions, not knowing where we are headed.

David Whyte, in his equally powerful poem "Start Close In," advises "Start close in, don't take the second step or the third, start with the first thing, close in."

In 1967, a little known country songwriter by the name of Mickey Newbury appeared with several other folk singers at a club in San Francisco called The Bitter End West. On that particular night, Newbury didn't want to sing his country songs. He was tired of them and wanted to deal with deeper themes than cheating, drinking and going to prison. He felt a deep longing to sing "Dixie," not as battle anthem, but as a plaintive expression of southern blues. So, when his turn came around, he began singing the song, slowly, mournfully, soulfully.

Immediately, he noticed the alarm and anger in the faces of his audience. Fearing a volatile reaction based on misunderstanding, Newbury instinctively moved into a verse of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." Singing with the same sorrowful pathos, Newbury felt his way through the verse, not knowing how to end his performance. Then, a third old song entered his consciousness and he seamlessly floated into "All My Trials Will Soon Be Over."

When he finished, the audience rose to their feet with applause. In 1968, Newbury recorded what he by then called "An American Trilogy" and it became a top ten hit. Elvis Presley heard it, recorded it numerous times and included it in every concert until his death in 1977. Mr. Newbury's uncertain exercise in simply taking the next step without full knowledge of his destination provided him with enough money to sustain him for the rest of his life.

I'm not sure that Moses awoke one morning and new what he had to do. I do believe he entered the day knowing what he could not do any longer. He had been raised in the household of Pharaoh as a prince of Egypt with all the education, training and benefits that status afforded. He was born and bred to be a shaker and mover in the halls of power and yet found himself, as he moved into mid-life, doing a boy's job, shepherding sheep for his father-in-law. For years, he had numbed himself into the occupation, but on this particular day, he just couldn't do it anymore, so, the text tells us, he led his flock beyond the wilderness to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Let's say you get up tomorrow morning and go to work. Nothing special happens until 10:30 a.m. when you simply drop your work tools, shut off your computer, leave your class, walk away from your cubicle, put down the telephone and take a cab to the National Cathedral. Without fully knowing why, you walk inside and sit in a pew. That's what Moses did. He left the wilderness where he always fed his flock and walked to the mountain of God. A change is coming on.

When Moses arrived at the foot of the holy mountain, he saw a bramble bush ablaze with a fire that did not turn it to ashes. He stopped, looked and listened and God spoke. "Moses!" "Here am I." "Take off your shoes Moses for you are on holy ground." Moses, removed his sandals and heard words that thrilled his weary soul. "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." The shepherd did not know for sure what was going to happen next, he only knew that his life was about to change forever.

Here we are, you and me. We awakened this morning and took a step, came to church, sat in a pew. Maybe we love our

life or maybe we have realized that something has to change, we can't go on like this anymore. Whatever has brought us here today, we are on holy ground. I'm not sure what is going to happen next, but let us answer the Lord with "Here Am I" and see what the next moment brings.

## Part II Exodus 3:7-12

One of the great Catholic writers of our time, Richard Rohr, says that one of the five things everyone must learn in order to grow up is that our lives are not just about us. I'm not sure what Moses hoped to receive from God when he journeyed to the base of Mt. Horeb, but I am struck at how quickly Moses moves from telling God, "Here Am I" to "Who Am I?" When God first calls Moses' name, he steps up and says, "Here Am I Lord." Did he expect a word of grace, a blessing, an endowment of resources? Was he hoping for forgiveness, empowerment, to be taken home to glory? We don't know, but he seemed eager to identify himself in the presence of a holy God.

Within minutes, however, Moses changes his tune. God did not shower him with blessings or take him home to glory; instead, the Lord gave him an assignment. "Go to Pharaoh and get my people out of Egypt."

Let's assume for a minute that before Moses became one of the top ten saints of all time, he was a lot like you and me, hoping that his faith would produce something rewarding for his life and family. Sick of tending sheep, weary of living off his father-in-law's good graces, nostalgic about the food, clothing and comfort of the palace of Rameses, Moses might have thought a visit with the angel of the Lord would produce a gift that would make his journey easier.

Our prayers are often motivated by self-concern. If we tabulated the topics of our prayers, I'm afraid most of us would find our conversations with God stay focused on ourselves and those whom we love.

God, however, was not primarily concerned with Moses. "I have heard the cries of my people who are suffering in slavery" the Lord declares. "I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them." God has justice and mercy on His mind. Not mercy for Moses, but for the masses of people who labor under horrible conditions. Not justice for Moses, but for the power brokers of Egypt who exploit the weaker nations.

When Moses hears God's agenda for him, he no longer says, "here am I." Instead he cries, "who am I?" The minute he realizes he is being recruited for a difficult mission, Moses starts backing away from his divine encounter. Essentially he says, "if you are looking for someone to confront Pharaoh, you've got the wrong guy, I don't have those kinds of gifts."

Sometimes, in order to hear the word of God for our lives, we have to quit looking at ourselves and catch a glimpse of the Lord's larger concerns. Moses isn't quite there yet. The Lord will have to talk a little longer to help him see the immensity of the need of his people and the incredible power God has to liberate them.

Before we continue with this journey, let's pause for a moment and pray for those in need in our church, community and around the world. Certainly, we should pray for ourselves, but this morning, let us expand our vision to the needs of others, especially those who suffer in deplorable conditions due to the oppressive behavior of the power brokers of this world.

## Part III, Exodus 3:13-18

Despite Moses' objections, the Lord would not let him off the hook. The old shepherd protested, "I'm not gifted to do what you have asked me to do." The Lord replied, "go any way and leave the outcome to me." God's unwillingness to dismiss Moses forced him to think more concretely about the task.

First, Moses reflected, I'd have to go back to Egypt (where he was wanted for murder by the way) and speak to my people. I'd have to convince them that I, the man who ran away years ago without so much as a goodbye, have been sent to deliver them from the most powerful ruler on earth. That's not likely to go well. Let's suppose however, by some miracle, the elders believe me, then we've got to go to the palace, get an audience with Pharaoh and demand that he let the fundamental resource of his economy, namely his slaves, go free without further compensation.

God, who heard all of Moses' concerns responded with simple assurance. Tell your people and the Egyptian leaders the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has sent you and they will listen to your voice.

Every time we receive an assignment from God, our first impulse is to wonder what difference our one voice could possibly make. Mahatma Gandhi must have wondered what difference his voice of peace could make in the presence of millions of voices of hostility, but it did. Rosa Parks had to wonder what difference her voice would make in the face of the entrenched powers of discrimination in this land, but it did. Curtis Ramsey Lucas told me he wondered what difference his voice could possibly make in fighting the power of big tobacco, but it did. Even though he was a former president, Mr. Clinton could have thought, what difference will my one voice make to a ruthless dictator like Kim Jong Il, but it did and the journalists came home.

Think back on your life. How many times has one voice made a difference in your life. I remember the one voice of a band teacher that saw talent in me, a history professor who identified some semblance of intelligence in me, a seminary professor who recognized my ability to preach, a teenage girl who saw humor in me and a grandmother who warned me about the stress I carried. I'm sure you remember some voices that altered your path as well.

When God calls us to respond to the needs of this world with our one voice, whether it is to teach teenagers in Sunday School, visit a homebound senior adult, write a letter protesting unjust behavior or telling the neighbor kid you see the shine in his heart, our one voice matters. God has promised us they will listen to our voice and hear not only our own intonations but the resonance of the God who sends us.

#### **Part IV Exodus 4:10-17**

There are a group of cultural myths which we might label, sappy happy. These myths are often provided as the morals of the feel-good tv movies that entertain us. You can see them coming a mile away. A young man shows up at college and encounters two young women. One is drop dead gorgeous and rather stuck on herself. The other is rather plain with a heart of gold and sterling qualities of loyalty, honesty and compassion. Within fifteen minutes, you know how this one is going to turn out. After falling for the beauty, the young man will realize that he has evaluated the young women superficially and will finally see the true beauty of the less physically attractive woman, pledge his love and live happily ever after. The moral is clear: What matters in life is not physical beauty but that one is beautiful on the inside.

To whom? Surely to God, saints and the pure in heart, but to almost everyone else, physical beauty is going to win out most of the time. The incredibly handsome and stunningly beautiful generally get their way in this world regardless of how hollow, inept or ugly they are on the inside.

Another common sappy, happy myth goes like this: what counts in this world is not the gift of our money, influence, talents or skills but the gift of ourselves. The story teaching this lesson will open with a wealthy man, talented woman or child prodigy. Every where they go, people honor them for their money or ability, however, sadly, they feel like no one loves them for who they really are. There is actually a couple of ways this story might wind up. Something might happen to the central character that destroys their fortune or disables their talent and, after everyone else turns away, they will meet someone who loves them for who they are. Or, they will be put in a situation in which they meet someone who, for whatever reason, doesn't know they are rich or talented and that person will love them for their true nature instead of their celebrity status. As the beautiful music swells, we will be told, our greatest gift to one another is not what we do or what we own, but who we are.

The problem that I have with these sappy, happy, cultural myths is not that they are false. In the deepest sense inward beauty is more commendable than physical attractiveness and our greatest gift to others is ourselves. What gripes me about the usual way these morals are presented is that the story teller acts like once we make these grand discoveries, a sublime peace will reign in our hearts and everything in life will be easy after that. Once we know that inner beauty is what matters, we won't be bothered that the pretty girls and cute boys get all the dates. Once we understand that our greatest gift to others is the gift of ourselves, we will celebrate how easy it is to meet this requirement. "You mean I don't have to worry about accomplishing the necessary tasks or developing the required skill? All I have to give is myself? Gee whiz, that's great!" Although such sentiments make for a tidy conclusion to a t.v. movie, they aren't really the way life works.

Moses thought God had made a mistake in drafting him for this mission because he did not possess outstanding speaking skills. Moses said he was slow of speech and tongue. Did he stutter or stammer or did he have trouble putting his thoughts into words? We don't know.

When Moses protested to God that he was not up to the job, the Lord said, "It's not your technical ability that I need. Your brother Aaron can speak. We'll get him to do the talking. I need you Moses. I need who you are, not what you do.

The Lord would say the same to any of us. When called to respond to the needs of others in this world, we can all say, "I'm not a skilled listener. I don't have a lot of money. I've never related well with children. I'm too old to relate to young adults. I don't have political connections. I don't know any poor folks. I didn't get an education in that area. Lord, you need to send someone else." To which the Spirit will inevitably respond, "I don't need what you do or what you own or what you know, I need you. The greatest gift you have to give to those in need is yourself."

The problem with this truth is, it is a whole lot easier to give someone what I own, or to perform a skill for them than it is to give them myself. If Moses could have rolled into Egypt delivered his message impeccably and shuffled on back to the safety of his home, his mission would not have been that difficult. It's always easier to do a specific task for someone and then get back to doing what we want to do than it is to give ourselves.

Let me drop off some food to a grieving widow, don't make me hang around and sit with her misery. Let me teach an immigrant how to speak a little English, don't make me become his friend and suffer with him through the challenges of every day life. Let me send a check to a homeless shelter, don't ask me to welcome someone who has no place to stay into my home .

When God told Moses that his gift was himself, his response was not, "whew, is that all I have to do. I thought I had to be skilled, all God wants is for me to make myself entirely available to Him to do whatever He tells me to do." No, it was more like, "What? You are not just asking for a message, a deed, a task, you're asking for me?"

So it is when the Lord comes to us and says, "Don't worry about your lack of skills and resources, that's not what I need to respond to this problem. I can get people to do the skill stuff, I need you. I need you to bring your heart and hands and soul to this person. I want the full power and wonder of who you are."

Moses eventually responded and gave the greatest gift he had, the gift of himself. That gift, in the hands of God, changed the course of history for his people and altered the history of the people of God.

We didn't know where we were headed when we started this journey this morning. We started close and took one step at a time. Now we understand. The journey has always been headed for this moment of response: God calls us to give ourselves in response to the needs of this world. We are truly standing on holy ground, what shall we say?