

Be Curious

Scripture Reading: Exodus 3:1-6; 10-12a

This fall as we welcome you to the new church program year, we can feel two emotions competing with each other, the excitement of change and the security of routine. As the fall starts and school year begins there's a lot that is new, and a lot to learn, but there is also a sense of relief as we settle into our routines. Life's always a balance of adventure and boredom. Throughout our lives we all seek to find the right balance between days that are predictable, times that are exciting. In a good life you have both. Too much routine you get tired. Too many surprises you get jittery.

Moses understood this. You may remember that his life included a series of adventures, more than most. Born in Egypt, his parents were slaves and his mother thought it best to put her infant into a basket on the Nile, near the Pharaoh's palace. Pharaoh's daughter found the baby and adopted him. So, he grew up in the palace and enjoyed the privileges of wealth. But he could never forget his Hebrew lineage. One day as a young man he spotted a Hebrew slave being beaten, and Moses grew so enraged he killed the overseer. Then it was too dangerous to remain in the capital, so he fled from Egypt, crosses the Sinai into the Arabian Peninsula where he settled in Midian on the Western coast. There he entered a new world- fell in love with the daughter of a local priest and settled down to have a family. Now, instead of roaming the palace he was tending the family's flocks. Suddenly his life became routine.

So our story today finds Moses on an average Monday exploring a stretch of wilderness, about as mundane as it gets, but adventure's never far away. Moses spies a burning bush that captured his attention. It's strange; there's fire but yet it's not consumed, so he grows curious. And Moses turns aside to see what's happening. History takes a turn too. Let's take a close look and see what we can learn from Moses for our lives today.

In the first place the story says we need to believe in the future. When Moses came up to the burning bush, he heard a voice telling him to take off your shoes. "You are standing on holy ground." Moses might have been terrified. He might have run in the other direction. He'd walked in after all. He might have said, "This is all too weird." But suddenly Moses was intrigued. Led by curiosity, he stayed. A creature of shifting sands, accustomed to two worlds, Moses was driven to learn more. He'd been through scrapes before and knew how to handle his nerves, so he engaged with God that day.

I think Moses would have understood some of what we are going through right now. He would have understood this season of change in all our lives. He would have identified with all the uncertainty of the new school year, all those times when we feel like strangers in a new place, all those moments when we feel we've come to stand on foreign soil. He would be sympathetic with a congregation in transition and appreciated all the questions of a church in search, all the fears of transitional times. He knew what it was to be scared and apprehensive. A creature of liminal spaces. He knew what it was to leave home, to explore new places, to trust his gut when his mind was overwhelmed, to make a new path in the wilderness.

Somehow Moses was able to face his fears because he believed in the possibility of the future. He believed that those possibilities, were not going to find him. He had to find them. His curiosity about what lay ahead and what God had in store for him kept him at that bush, because his openness to this possibility was stronger even than the tight nerves in his stomach. Moses' story is ancient, but curiosity is inherent in all of us. It is curiosity that had propelled us from days when

everyone herded sheep in the desert through centuries of scientific discover, medical advance, human experiments. Its curiosity that leads us to the moon.

Watch a toddler one day. It's dizzying to see how they check everything out. They creep, they crawl, they walk they fall they cry and get up and do it again until it's time for a nap. That sense of adventure takes us a long way when we're young. People who stay open to new possibilities all their days lead inventive lives. Albert Einstein, whose name is synonymous with genius, explained that it was his curiosity that made him seek to solve daunting math problems. He said, "I don't think I have special gifts, but I am passionately curious." Steve Jobs said something similar, "Much of what I stumbled into, I did by being curious" and allowing my curiosity to lead my intuition into new areas, I discovered things that turned out to be priceless later.

It's okay to be scared. Everybody is. But don't let your fears define you. Consider the possibilities in your life. Believe in the future and believe that God is on the side of new discoveries. Then everything opens up – the path widens. You may be far from home, or far from where you started but God is with you in this adventure.

Secondly, the story says we need to ask our questions. Respect your questions. When Moses saw the bush burning that did not burn up, he stopped and wondered what was happening. What is this? What is happening here? But his questions didn't stop there. God told him Moses to save his people and he asked Why me? Why choose someone who isn't even a good speaker? Why choose someone who has broken the law? What are you thinking O Holy One? Instead of discounting this idea, he raises every question he can think of. He debates with God.

As he gives voice to his questions, Moses trusts himself. He also begins to trust the voice of God. This kind only grows through questioning and testing. A lot of people will tell you that religion is supposed to give you answers. Some evangelicals tell you the bible will answer every question. I don't know what Bible they've been reading. My Bible is full of stories that pose hard questions. Why? Because at its best religion is meant to offer a space to ask your questions of God. Test your relationship with the Creator. That's what rabbis do. They debate and no question is off the table. These debates don't ruin faith; they enhance it.

It was the way God listened to Moses' questions that day that won Moses over. It was the first of many conversations with God that convinced Moses to stop laboring in obscurity, and settling for so much less, a predictable life when there were adventures to be had.

If you are starting confirmation today, I hope you will ask a lot of questions. Ask your mentor. Ask Pastor Nick. Ask yourself? Why read stories from 3000 years ago? Why do I need faith? Why join a church? Some of the most faithful people in the history of humankind have also cherished their doubts. So I hope you take this experience seriously enough to really ask your hard questions.

I also hope that this congregation will use this interim time while we search for a new settled pastor to ask hard questions too. Do we need to do things the same way we've always done them? Are there other adventures calling on the horizon? In this time when we stand on holy ground can this congregation have a holy conversation about what God is calling us to do? Is the call to newness going to be generated by someone new? Will it depend on our new permanent leader, or will it be something we hear now in this time of burning bushes, so it is organic to us? Let's ask all our questions because they will spark holy conversations.

Finally, God is always calling. A few years ago there was a television show called God Friend Me. Miles Finer, a podcaster and outspoken atheist in New York City gets a friend request on Facebook from an account named God. In each episode Miles gets a message telling him to go help someone in need. Miles often wishes he could ignore these messages but ends up trying to

help. Each time he makes a difference. As the season matures and Miles with it, he starts to wonder who this is, and whether God is, indeed, is trying to have a conversation with him.

Wouldn't it be easier if God sent us text messages from time to time. Wouldn't that be easier if you just knew what God wanted?

The bible tells us that God calls in all kinds of ways. God called Samuel, at night. God spoke to Zechariah in a dream and Mary in a garden. God called Paul with a blinding vision on a road. God called Esther, in the harem where she lived in the Persian palace and told her to get involved in politics. Nobody I know has seen a burning bush. But I wonder if maybe the bush was a metaphor. Maybe as he wandered in the open grazing land Moses couldn't stop thinking about his past, his people still in slavery, and the brutal hardship they faced each day. Maybe his heart burned for them, or the fires of faith made Moses wonder what he could do to change their lives. Maybe he grew angry, feeling helpless, far away, burning within but not consumed. And maybe God planted that fire in his soul. Who knows?

Maybe God calls us still. Maybe when you see a bully at school or work, and this sense of urgency overcomes you, even the part in you that is afraid to speak, but you cannot be still. So you speak up and God is in that moment. Or maybe you meet someone who is differently abled and they need help but they struggle and you know you have to do something. And God's whispering at your ear. Or maybe you are listening to a podcast, and you realize there is some injustice that needs to be protested and you just feel God is in that too.

Long ago, Moses saw something that caught his eye and he turned to take a closer look and that moment changed the world.

Let us pray: God we don't ask for miracles unless of course a willingness to be alive to your purpose is the best kind of miracle there is. Amen.

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Susan Cartmell at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
on Sunday, September 11, 2022 at 9:30 AM