

Homily, St. Andrew's  
Proper 22A, Sunday, August 31, 2014  
Exodus 3:1-15

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

There is a monastery called St. Catherine's at the base of the mountain where Moses encountered God. In the wilderness of the Sinai desert between Egypt and Israel... between slavery and freedom... between life and death, this monastery stands as the oldest Christian monastery in continuous existence in the world. First built to offer sanctuary and security for ancient pilgrims by Helena, the mother of Rome's Emperor Constantine in the mid-4th century, it remains today as a place of hospitality for those in search of God and their own souls.

A journey to St. Catherine's today may not be as difficult or as long as it once was and yet still, dangers abound. The Sinai desert remains between political and religious worlds, and it remains a wilderness where you can too easily get lost in the rock and sand and die of dehydration far too quickly. It can be uncomfortably cold at night and blistering hot during the day under the scorching sun. There are few places that provide any shade. The desert is desolate and yet holy; barren and yet the crucible of life. It is a wonder, beautiful in its own way but still, the sun and the sand can take their toll such that the imposing rock walls of St. Catherine's are a welcome sight for pilgrims today as much as in ancient times.

It was there, at the base of a mountain - in midst of the barrenness and beauty of the desert - that Moses saw an incredible sight. An angel of the Lord appeared in a flame of fire out of a bush. The bush blazed and yet was not consumed... and so Moses turns to look and wonders why? When God sees that the great sight has gotten Moses attention, God calls: "Moses, Moses!" And Moses replies, "Here I am." "Come no closer!" God commands, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." Holy indeed, and Moses knows to hide his face, for though God is visible, God is not to be seen. God is to be heard.

I wonder if Moses' feet burned beneath him as he stood there, presumably sandal-less and awestruck? The story doesn't tell us what happened to the bush or how long it blazed, for God has gotten Moses' attention with the strange sight, and it seems that is enough. Moses is ready to hear, and so the awesome sight disappears from view and Moses is left with God's presence and God's voice.

And so the Lord God speaks what is on the Divine Mind: "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, and 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, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them."

God is not passive and is not ignoring the terrible circumstances of God's own people. God observes and hears us. God knows our suffering and strikingly, God comes down to do something about it! God has seen God's people and the trouble that besets them. This is more than promise, this is God come to earth to offer salvation, live and in person! God is visible and present and the best part - God has a plan to make everything better - to raise all oppressed

people from a land of slavery to a land of freedom and prosperity. It is such incredibly good news! All that remains is for God to speak the Divine plan and all shall be well.

So that's exactly what God does, and it changes everything: "Come..." God continues, "I will send you..."

It's such a shocking next statement, let's pause for a moment to review. God - the all powerful creator of the universe - has just shown up in spectacular fashion speaking words of comfort and compassion, with a plan to save us from terrible and long-standing troubles. It would be better for God to have stopped speaking at verse 9. Because verse 10 comes with a very cold bucket of water on all our hopes and expectations of an all powerful Creator, for "...the grand intention of God has [suddenly] become a specific human responsibility, human obligation, and human vocation." (NIB, 713) "So come," God says, "I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

As one writer describes, it turns out that "it is Moses who will do what Yahweh said, and Moses who will run the risks that Yahweh seemed ready to take. The connection of God and Moses, of heaven and earth, of great power and dangerous strategy is all carried in the statement 'I will send you.' After the massive intrusion of God, the exodus has suddenly become a human enterprise." (NIB, 713) Incarnation - the intrusion of God into the world was unique with Jesus Christ, but it wasn't the first time that heaven and earth - God and people - all powerful divinity and limited humanity collide in spectacular, even miraculous fashion. For there stands Moses, barefooted and awestruck, standing on holy ground, with a life-long mission suddenly opening before him. Pious promise has become rigorous command with one little word: "Come..."

Moses is understandably uncertain... which is to say that he is completely flummoxed. We know this because the interaction between Moses and God continues to the end of the next chapter, chapter 4, as Moses offers a series of five objections to God's command. Today we hear only the first two, but those two are enough, even the first is enough, to strike great fear into our own hearts if we are sensible enough to question right along with Moses.

Of Moses' objection, Kathleen Norris writes: "Not daring to ask God who he is, Moses says instead, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and lead the Israelites out of Egypt?' God's answer is hardly comforting: 'I will be with you.' And then follows one of the scariest passages in the Bible. God tells Moses that he will know for certain it is God who has called him to this task *only* when it is accomplished. Only when he has brought the people with him to worship on this mountain. This is a God who is not identified with the help of a dictionary but through relationship, one that demands great willingness to trust and to take risks." (*Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, 110)

Moses didn't immediately believe in himself the way God believed in him. Moses must have wondered why on earth God would choose him. And so Moses objects to God's command first on the basis of his own personhood because he was convinced that someone else would be better. This belief comes to a head later in the next chapter when in the last of his objections, Moses resorts to pleading: "O my Lord, please send someone else." To this deep uncertainty and personal doubt, it is cold comfort to be assured that he will know for sure that all this is real and not just some crazy dream, when it is finally accomplished. It is an assurance that goes against every impulse we have to try and determine outcomes before we start and to be in control of our future. We want to be assured of success before we say yes. And yet God asks us to trust and to risk and to follow, one step at a time.

Not even the solid and imposing stone walls of St. Catherine's can protect us from this wild call of God. At the base of a mountain, in the midst of a wilderness, for the sake of freedom and in the hope of new life in a land flowing with milk and honey... this is the place from which God miraculously speaks, calling us away from the place we have known for so long: "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." "I will be with you... and when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

To begin our ascent up the mountain of God's promise, we must set out in the dark of night, before the first rays of sun can yet be seen. The darkness may cover us such that the incline will not be visible and yet all we have to do, all we can do, is put one foot in front of the other - shedding the extra layers of clothing along the way, as we heat up from the exertion. Soon enough we will encounter the camels that will take us the rest of the way and with legs quickly numb from cold and the pinching of the saddle, we will teeter on the very edge of the path as we journey up and up, barely able to see where we're going.

But then, as the first rays of dawn poke through the darkness, we will reach our destination. And with the sun climbing higher in the sky, on the side of God's mountain overlooking the breathtaking wilderness, we will worship the God of Life and we will be fed with holy food. And in that moment, when that moment comes, we will realize that God's assurance that when it is all accomplished, we will know for sure... that assurance was enough.

We are here today on holy ground, because God has remained with us in our journey to date. This place on which we stand has been sanctified by numerous faithful people who have said 'yes' to God's wild call: "Come, I will send you..." May their faithfulness, and that of Moses, encourage us also to take up God's call, to let all our objections, however sensible, fade away and to simply say: "Here I am."