

Moses in the Wilderness

Cycle # 1 – Session 4

Moses in the Wilderness

Text: Exodus 3 1:17

Gathering Time

Opening Worship

Light a candle. The act of lighting a candle is a simple one. It also serves to remind us that God's light is all around us and within us. We remind ourselves of that presence with the light of this candle.

Song: Go Down, Moses -- #663 Chalice Hymnal

Litany

Moses led his flocks, wasn't looking for God.
He had gone into the wilderness that the flocks
might be fed and grow fat,
providing food and clothing for his family.
Then he went beyond the wilderness
and there he encountered God
who called him to lead his children
out of bondage into new life.

Guide our journey. Lead us beyond the wilderness and show us the work
to which we are called. Amen.

Welcome One Another. Share briefly with one another where in your life this week have you experienced bondage, wilderness, hope or opportunity to serve others.

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Scripture

Exodus 3:1-17

¹ Now Moses was keeping the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the farthest end of the wilderness, and came to the mountain of G-d, unto Horeb.

² And the angel of HaShem appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.

³ And Moses said: 'I will turn aside now, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.'

⁴ And when HaShem saw that he turned aside to see, G-d called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said: 'Moses, Moses.' And he said: 'Here am I.' And He said: 'Draw not nigh hither; put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.'

⁶ Moreover He said: 'I am the G-d of thy father, the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac, and the G-d of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon G-d. ⁷ And HaShem said: 'I have surely seen the affliction of My people that are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their pains;

⁸ and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; unto the place of the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Amorite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite.

⁹ And now, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto Me; moreover I have seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them.

¹⁰ Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth My people the children of Israel out of Egypt.' ¹¹ And Moses said unto G-d: 'Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?'

¹² And He said: 'Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be the token unto thee, that I have sent thee: when thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve G-d upon this mountain.'

¹³ And Moses said unto G-d: 'Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them: The G-d of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me: What is His name? what shall I say unto them?'

¹⁴ And G-d said unto Moses: 'I AM THAT I AM!'; and He said: 'Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel: I AM hath sent me unto you.'

¹⁵ And G-d said moreover unto Moses: 'Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel: HaShem, the G-d of your fathers, the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac, and the G-d of Jacob, hath sent me unto you; this is My name for ever, and this is My memorial unto all generations. ¹⁶ Go, and gather the elders of Israel together, and say unto them: HaShem, the G-d of your fathers, the G-d of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, hath appeared unto me, saying: I have surely remembered you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt. (From the Tanakh, available online)

Exodus 3:1-16

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, *'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.'* When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, *'Moses, Moses!'* And he said, *'Here I am.'* Then he said, *'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'* He said further, *'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.

Then 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, 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. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.'* But Moses said to God, *'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'* He 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.'*

Dwelling in Scripture

1st reading – Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard. Note the word or phrase which drew your attention to this time.

2nd reading – Invite people to talk about what they have heard and where it might intersect with their lives.

Behind the Text

At the end of Genesis, Joseph reminds his brothers that even though they had intended him harm, God intended good to come from their selling him into slavery. It is God who has acted *“in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.”* (Genesis 50:20) In any good story, the beginning foreshadows the future. In this case the people will be preserved and there will be another chapter to the story. The people whom God has chosen in Genesis will be the people he chooses in the future.

The storyteller assures us God has remembered the long ago promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Not only has God remembered the promises, God has heard their cries for help and will respond. Within those few verses amazing events are recorded (NIB Vol. 1, pp 705-5) Sometimes events which do not seem to be necessarily related have a very deep unseen connection, not unlike a deep underground river. *A king dies and Israel finds its voice.* For a long time the people have been referred to as Hebrews, but at this point the word *Israelites* appears, a reminder of their connection to the God of their ancestors. They cry out and not only does God hear, decides to respond to their pain. That's where Moses' visible encounter with God begins.

Wilderness language seems to fit the experience of many individuals and congregations at this particular time. In many congregations we can see the old ways aren't working and we aren't sure where we want to go or even how to get there. There is the danger we will simply continue to do the things we've always done because that is at least familiar or that we will look around and see what some other group is doing and think perhaps if we do what they're doing that will fix whatever is wrong. Perhaps instead it is simply time to move from where we are, even if the future is unknown, and even if we aren't sure of our destination.

Observation

When I come to this part of the story, I want to say... *And now let the play begin.* Up to this point the story has been not exactly ordinary, but has *ordinariness* about it. A child is born and while its upbringing is unusual it is mostly about years of sunrises and sunsets and a child learning and growing. As a young man that child reacts to injustice and commits murder so that he is forced to flee far from the land and the people he knows. That also is not exactly ordinary, but may well have happened to some other people. He then lands in a place where he is taken in, his needs are provided for, he is married, has a child, has work to do. All of that seems to form a backdrop for events

about which Moses as yet has no inkling. And now he is with the flocks on Mount Horeb, God's mountain.

Consider

When all is in readiness Moses encounters God. Consider your own life. Have there been moments when you realized that you have been prepared for events you were about to encounter and weren't really aware that you were being prepared?

Observation

Moses sees an angel in a flame of fire out of a bush. The bush appears to be blazing and yet it is not being burned up. It seems to me Moses reacted one way, but why? Wouldn't it have been just as easy to run the other way or pretend that it was merely an optical illusion, seeing something that wasn't really there?

When he draws near to the bush the two amazing things – the angel who never says anything and the bush that is in flames appear to have no other purpose than to attract Moses attention. Once his attention is turned toward the bush and he begins to go toward it these two amazing things seem to become a part of the scenery. From that point on the focus is on God and Moses. From that point on there develops an amazing relationship between them.

Consider

What in this draws your attention? Have you ever encountered God in unexpected places or unexpected ways? How did you respond?

Observation

'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, *'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'* He said further, *'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.

Then 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, 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. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.'* But Moses said to God, *'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'* He 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'.*

At least as the teller of the story pictures this for us Moses seems to have immediately recognized the voice from the bush is to be obeyed and that indeed this is a holy place. His response is reminiscent of Samuel's response to the voice in the night. Moses responds and hides his face.

Consider

In times of difficulty and uncertainty it would be nice to have such a clear directive from God as seems to be happening in this scene. But did Moses see the burning bush the first time he passed it or had there been other times when it was burning, but he was not yet ready to see and hear God's call? Have there moments in your life when you have heard God and responded. When was the first time?

Observation

The conversation that follows seems very straightforward. God has seen the misery of the people and is going to deliver them from the Egyptians and give them a wonderful land which at the moment is occupied by some other people. Not only that... Moses is going to be the one to do this work, beginning with going to Pharaoh. It seems to me this may have been one of those moments when an idea sounded wonderful right up to the moment God said, "And it will be up to you to do this work." It's probably not all that surprising that Moses immediately began to think of reasons why this wasn't a good idea.

Consider

There are many other accounts of those called by God who seem to begin with the one being called responding.... "*But who am I to ...*" Yet often enormous tasks are carried out by people who may start by asking just that question and when it is clear there is something which needs doing and they are the ones who are there even if they don't feel they have the strength, the abilities, or the gifts, they do it. If you look around you, what do you see that needs to be done and there's no one else to do the task? Might this be something to which you are being called?

Observation

Once Moses understands he really isn't going to be able to wiggle out of this assignment easily he finally asks for God's name. Moses doesn't seem to have any difficulty recognizing God as the God of his ancestors. But now he wants something more than that. "*If I say, the God of your ancestors has sent me to you*" people are going to want to know what your name is. In many cultures knowing someone's name is to have power over the other. There appears to be some of that going on in this passage. If Moses knows God names it perhaps makes God a little less unknown and a little tamer." Rick Lowery in speaking about this at the conference in Texas said essentially God tells Moses, *it really isn't any of your business*. Clearly Moses will not

be able to control God. The answer is both answer and non answer, "*I am Who I am* or as I heard Ronald Osborn translate it in a class I was in many years ago, "*I am who I will be.*"

Consider

Spend some time considering what you know of God. If you were to list ten attributes of God what would you include? How do you perceive God's action in the world?

Activity (Optional)

Watch the scenes at the beginning of O God! (the movie)

Practicing the Presence

- 1) We usually consider that God rarely becomes visible, as in Moses' experience at the burning bush or the encounter the disciples had with Jesus on the Road to Emmaus or Paul's vision on the Damascus Road. It may be however that God is visibly present much more often. We simply do not see or hear the God who is here. This week look for God in your daily life. It may be in a moment when you have the opportunity to do an act of kindness for someone else or it may be a conversation or in a group of children. Each morning offer your day to God and each evening entrust God with your cares and give thanks.
- 2) Continue the practice of scripture reading. Choose some word or phrase to carry with you. The focus for the coming session is Exodus 16.

Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1st Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2nd Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – "evening and morning." You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3rd During the week read "Behind the Text" and the "Observations/Consider" on the text. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

Closing Worship

Meditation

Maya Angelou in her book, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*, tells the story of her grandmother. In 1903 the late Mrs. Annie Johnson of Arkansas found herself with two toddling sons, very little money, a slight ability to read and add simple numbers. To this picture add a disastrous marriage and the burdensome fact that Mrs. Johnson was negro.

After the marriage ended Annie kept their one room house while her departing husband took the cash to aid him in getting to Oklahoma. Annie decided she would not become a "domestic" and she didn't seem to have many choices. Maya quotes her, *"I looked up the road I was going and back the way I come, and since I wasn't satisfied, I decided to step off the road and cut me a new path."* She looked at her few assets. Her ability to cook seemed to be the most promising. She planned meticulously and practiced what she planned to do. And then she began. Every day for several years, she made meat pies which she carried along with lard, an iron pot and coals for a fire to a vacant lot near one of the two local factories. When the lunch bell rang she began dropping the savors into boiling fat. She alternatives between going to the cotton mill and the lumber mill first. For the hot pies she charged a nickel. For the cooler ones 3 cents. In time she established a stall and let the men come to her. In time the stall became a small store. Mrs. Johnson became a leader in her community and in her church.

She had indeed stepped from the road which seemed to have been chosen for her and cut herself a brand new path.

Each of us has the right and responsibility to assess the roads which lie ahead, and those over which we have traveled. And if the future road looms ominous or unpromising, and the roads back uninviting, then we need to gather our resolve and, carrying on the necessary baggage, step off that road into another direction. If the new choice is also unpalatable, without embarrassment, we must be ready to change that as well. (pp. 19-22)

Moses met God beyond the wilderness. Annie Johnson already knew God and found herself imprisoned in a time and culture where women and especially black women had little power. Her path had led her to that moment when she had to step off the old path and strike out in a new direction. While she doesn't seemed to have encountered God in a flaming bush, I suspect God called her as surely as God called Moses. Being willing to hear and to see the reality and recognize that whatever our place, whatever our circumstance, God has something for us to do. We, however, have to be willing to step off the road of the familiar.

Prayer – Notice who is on your right and who is on your left. During the coming week remember these two persons in your prayers. Continue to pray for your congregation and give thanks for the work God is already doing among you.

Blessing (Litany)

In the power of your presence, Lord, may we abide.

In your love, Lord, may we abide.

In the strength of your son, our Savior, Lord, may we abide.

In the compassion of Christ, Lord, may we abide.

In the joy of Jesus, Lord, may we abide.

In the indwelling of your presence, Lord, may we abide.

Grant that we may dwell in Christ and Christ in us.

Guide us on the path to which you call us. Amen.

Song: Lo, I Am With You -- #430 Chalice Hymnal