

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
June 23, 2019

Divine Purpose and Human Vocation

Exodus 3:1-10

This year's season of commencement speeches has largely wound down. But as usual there have been lots of memorable lines and moments. At the top of many people's list was the address given by investor and philanthropist Robert F. Smith at Morehouse College. He gave the graduates more than just wisdom and advice. He pledged to provide grants to pay off the student debt of the entire class of 2019. As Smith put it, "We're going to put a little fuel in your bus."¹

At the University of North Carolina Greensboro, actor Ken Jeong didn't promise to put any fuel in anybody's bus, but he did try to energize the graduates by equipping them for life's unpredictability. He asked them, "What is your act II? Everyone here has a different timeline. Everyone here has a unique story. Figure out what your act II is, and embrace the change, embrace the twists and the unexpected turns."²

By the time we see him in this morning's text from Exodus, Moses has probably lost track of what act he's now on. In the span of just two chapters, his story has taken several unexpected twists and turns. He was born into a slave family in Egypt, where his life was immediately threatened by Pharaoh's order that all male Hebrew infants be drowned in the Nile River. His mother hid him for three months, but was eventually forced to set him adrift in a basket. Moses was rescued when Pharaoh's daughter found him and adopted him into Egyptian royalty. Jump ahead about 40 years, when Moses reacted to an Egyptian taskmaster's violence toward a fellow Hebrew by killing the Egyptian and fleeing to the wilderness. That's where we meet him in today's Scripture passage. Moses has made a new life for himself and is out tending sheep for his Midianite father-in-law.

He stumbles upon a place called Horeb, where God appears to him in the form of a burning bush. It's an inextinguishable shrub, ablaze with God's holiness. Moses is both attracted to it and wary of it. But one thing is for sure, God has gotten Moses' attention. That sets the stage for phase two of God's revelation. We often get so captivated by the image of the burning bush that we forget that this divine disclosure is also aimed at the ears and not just the eyes. The God who comes down the mountain to meet with Moses is a God who speaks. And what God has to say to Moses goes way beyond a commencement address. This is less of a move your tassel moment and more of a remove your sandals moment. Rather than playing "Pomp and Circumstance," the band is playing, "Holy, Holy, Holy."

The first words out of God's mouth are a name, the name of the one being summoned. "Moses! Moses!" Before God discloses his own identity, he proves that he already has a handle on Moses' identity. Moses is already known by God, claimed by God, called by God. Called first into the presence of God, into the holiness of God. And then, as we'll soon see, sent out from the presence of God to show what the holiness of God will look like in action in the world. That will be the next act in Moses' life.

Notice that this next turn in his life isn't something that Moses discovers, on his own, by looking within himself. Instead, he's attentive to and responsive to a call that comes from beyond himself. Moses doesn't enter deeper into his vocation by searching inward but by looking outward. His "self" isn't something that's already there within him, just waiting to

be cultivated and called forth. Instead, who he is and what he'll be doing come to him from a source outside himself. Moses' identity and purpose flow from, and are created by, God's identity and purpose.

Several years ago, commentator and columnist David Brooks wrote a piece for the New York Times titled, "It's Not About You." He criticized the self-focused nature of many commencement addresses. Brooks wrote that when you listen to lots of these speeches, "you see that many graduates are told to: Follow *your* passion, chart *your* own course, march to the beat of *your* own drummer, follow *your* dreams and find *yourself*. This is the litany of expressive individualism, which is still the dominant note in American culture." Brooks closed his piece by saying:

Today's grads enter a cultural climate that preaches the self as the center of a life. But, of course, as they age, they'll discover that the tasks of a life are at the center. Fulfillment is a byproduct of how people engage their tasks, and can't be pursued directly. Most of us are egotistical and most are self-concerned most of the time, but it's nonetheless true that life comes to a point only in those moments when the self dissolves into some task. The purpose in life is not to find yourself. It's to lose yourself.³

Through his encounter with God, Moses loses himself. He loses himself into the larger purposes of God. This isn't primarily a story about Moses finding himself. It's about God finding Moses. And in that experience of being found by God, Moses starts to make the transition into the next act of his life.

As I said, Moses' identity is inseparable from God's identity. So in our text, God shifts from talking to and about Moses to talking about himself. "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" (v. 6a). We've already met this God in the book of Genesis. This is a God who speaks and acts, a God who creates and redeems, a God who makes promises and commitments. And now, as the second book of the Bible, Exodus, gets underway, we see this same God being attentive and responsive to the life of his people Israel. "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering" (v. 7).

This God who created the world, who spoke and called it into existence, relates to and is engaged with what he has made. He's involved with the condition and circumstances of his world, particularly the affliction and injustice that his people are going through. "So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (v. 8).

"I have come down," says God. The Lord isn't just moved. The Lord is also on the move. It begins as a move downward. True, in one sense, deliverance will come from on high. But the one who is on high, in all his holiness, has already shown his desire to be with and for his people, and to be present in the world that he has made. Salvation won't come by decree from a detached and distant deity. Salvation will come as the Lord himself comes, to do what only he can do.

From a Christian perspective, the saving mercy of God, revealed in his relationship with his people Israel, took decisive shape through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the way that God has "come down" in bodily form, in order to rescue his world from sin and death. In Christ, God has mobilized his mercy in order to reconcile us to himself and to one another. God has acted through Jesus' death and resurrection to bring us out of captivity to unrighteousness and into the freedom of his eternal reign.

But just because God has done that doesn't mean there's nothing for us to do. Imagine, as one commentator has suggested, that after God has told Moses that he's coming down to

rescue the Israelites and bring them to a new land, Moses is thinking, “That’s wonderful, God. I’m really happy you are going to do that.’ But God was not quite finished with the revelatory speech. He went on to say to Moses, ‘So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt’”⁴ It’s one thing to cheer God on in his plan of redemption. But it’s another thing to have God call your name and assign you a part in his unfolding agenda.

That’s especially true if the part you’re called to play seems so far from what you may have dreamed or planned, or so far beyond your capability to perform. Sculptor and artist Henry Moore once said, “The secret of life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for the rest of your life. And the most important thing is—it must be something you cannot possibly do!”⁵ In one respect, that sounds like the kind of advice you might hear in a commencement speech. When the future looks closed and everyone and everything seems to be saying you can’t, just look within yourself and you’ll find the resources to do the impossible. But in another respect, maybe Moore’s statement goes even deeper into the reality of human limitations and inability. These can actually become the occasion for God’s power to be displayed.

In the verses immediately following today’s text, Moses rattles off a list of reasons why he thinks his assignment is humanly impossible. Clearly, God must have picked the wrong person. So Moses resists God’s call with a litany of objections and excuses. I’m nobody important, and don’t have the authority to go up against the might of Egypt. Well, it’s not really clear who’s authorizing this mission of liberation. What if your people don’t believe me, and end up rejecting me? I’m not an effective speaker, and usually just end up stumbling over my words. Surely there are others more qualified for this assignment. Lord, can’t you just run down your list of alternates and pick one of them?

But God is undeterred in his plans. Granted, he eventually adjusts his strategy and agrees to send Aaron along to help Moses. Yet Moses remains the point person for God’s rescue operation. So today, as we reflect on Moses’ experience of God’s call, remember that the God of Israel still has the redemption of the world through our Lord Jesus Christ as his agenda. This mission of reconciliation and restoration is big enough and broad enough to include tasks for each of us. God is still redeeming sinners, creating his people, and calling forth people to join in his kingdom project.

So whatever your background, your experience, your level of education, or your occupation, God is showing up and speaking into your life about your participation in his saving purposes for the world. You may be a new graduate with your diploma or degree in hand. You may be someone whose educational opportunities and pursuits have been more limited. You may be someone whose primary training has been through the institution of learning called life itself. What matters most is that you stay open to the presence of God and attentive to the voice of God, that you major in God’s agenda for humankind, and that you lose yourself in God’s loving, saving purposes for the places and the people where you live out your vocation to represent the holiness and power of God.

¹ Mahita Gajanan, “Here Are the Best Commencement Speeches of 2019.” Time Magazine website. May 21, 2019. Accessed June 19, 2019 < <https://time.com/5589307/best-commencement-speeches-2019/>>.

² Gajanan, “Here Are the Best Commencement Speeches of 2019.”

³ David Brooks, “It’s Not About You.” The New York Times website. May 30, 2011. Accessed June 20, 2019 <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/opinion/31brooks.html?_r=0>.

⁴ Richard Hays, “Learning Leadership from Moses: A Biblical Model for the Church Today.” *Divinty* magazine, published by Duke Divinity School (Fall 2012) 6.

⁵ Quoted in Michael P. Knowles, *Of Seeds and the People of God: Preaching as Parable, Crucifixion, and Testimony* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015) Kindle edition.