

## IMAGINE SECOND *Stop, Look, Listen*

Exodus 3:1-6

November 10, 2024

This ancient story of divine calling centers on sacred vision. This Sunday, the scripture invites *us* to stop, to look, to listen. This holy word offers blessed assurance that God sees us and hears our cries.

You probably remember: the story began under the threat of a terrified tyrant. Moses barely escapes Pharaoh's blueprint of brutality for baby boys thanks to the quick and courageous action of his mother and sister. We meet him this morning a fugitive far from home in Midian. Moses is living below the radar and beyond the demands of justice. It may be a dull life for one raised in Pharaoh's court, but at least he is secure. Moses is not on some soul-seeking expedition, no quest to find himself or encounter God. He comes to Horeb, God's own mountain, entirely by accident, following the flocks of his father-in-law. As far as Moses is concerned, when we meet him today, the ground on which he stands is no more holy than any other field meant for grazing.

But something makes the man stop. A brush fire. A bush burning but not burned up. At that moment, Moses makes a decision that changes his life. He stops. It was not inevitable that it would be so. He could have kept walking. He could have ignored the sign. But Moses turns aside, and only then does God speak. Remember the text:

*When the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to see, God called to him.*

And what does God say? "I have seen my people's misery...I have heard their cries for help...I have come down to deliver them." The initiative is entirely God's. The plan is clear. God has seen and heard. God shows up. And Moses is sent to speak God's message to the King of Egypt. *Let my people go.*

Now, you biblical scholars in the sanctuary may recall that the encounter does not end there with Moses gladly accepting his charge and marching off to fulfill his God-given calling. No, Moses is skeptical. He has questions. Objections. Excuses. Five of them to be exact. My favorite is the final one when Moses simply says to God, "Oh, Lord, please send somebody else." It's not hard to understand why. The call placed on the life of Moses is not an easy call. The words he must speak are not easy words. The journey he is about to begin will not be an easy journey.

You likely know that *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy was deeply influenced by the Christian faith of its author. At the beginning of the first book, J.R.R. Tolkien describes a dialogue between Frodo, the young Hobbit, and Gandalf, the wise wizard. To my reading, the encounter echoes the stories of divine call and response scattered throughout the pages of scripture. I've been thinking about it this week. Frodo has just received his calling in the form of a ring of power, a sign of his vocation and his immense responsibility. And he does not respond with enthusiasm. Rather, he responds with lament. "I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened." Gandalf responds, "So do I, and so do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

In the time of Moses, the people of God were suffering. God saw their misery. God heard their cries. God showed up. And Moses did too, eventually. God's persistence pays off. Divine initiative compels human response.

Divine initiative. Human response. It is a good day, I think, to consider the call of people and communities of faith. This people. This community of faith. To ask again

the ancient question of the prophets: what does the Lord require of us? There are many good and faithful answers to that question. But for me, the answer, like this morning's scripture, centers on sacred vision. It must begin by looking for the presence of God in the ordinary, noticing the needs of our neighbors with our own eyes, seeing the divine image reflected in every human face, attending to the places of pain in our own hearts and the struggles of those around us, setting our sight on the promise of God as yet unfulfilled and always still ahead of us. Never in jeopardy. If there is anything of which I am certain this Sunday morning, it is that God has work for us to do. Yes, work that is uniquely and unavoidably assigned to people of faith. That's you. For the sake of the gospel and the people we are called to love, we must not ignore, abandon, or abdicate this responsibility. We must not rush past this moment of divine encounter. The bush is on fire! Stop. Look. Listen. God is still speaking.

It is commitment season at Second Presbyterian Church. By that we typically mean that we're beginning to build a budget based on financial pledges received from members and friends of the church. And that's true. And so, I should probably remind you that everything we do in this place depends on your generous response to God's grace and our invitation. And, perhaps more importantly, to remind you that here at Second, literally everything we do has grown and expanded in the last four years. I wish I had time to recount the stories and share the statistics that prove that statement true, the outreach to the city, our membership, our ministries of music and fine arts, our care for each other, our commitment to children and youth, our presence in the public square, our faithful voices in places of influence. Growth, growth, growth. And that growth is God's gift, but it is your responsibility. This year's commitment theme, *Imagine Second*, invites us, with the prophets and the disciples at Pentecost, to keep dreaming about the time that God has given us and our call to use it well. Through this lens of imagination, we see a bright and promising future, and we pursue it with our gifts, our time, our talent, our commitment. We listen for God's

voice calling each of us to be a part of the movement of the spirit in this place. Yes, we rely on your pledges and your giving. I trust you know that, and I know you will respond faithfully.

But your commitment to God is about more than your money. It is about answering the call, accepting the responsibility, and living in ways that honor Jesus Christ. Our focus this program year is on the work of repairing the breach. Friends, that breach is now laid bare. There is no denying the chasm between us. You can feel it in daily encounters, even in this space, the tensions of our divisions that threaten to choke off our call to repair. And so, this season, we must commit and recommit to that responsibility.

Friends, it is time to double down on our God-given mission, so that we might demonstrate to a watching world that faith can make one more loving. That faith can make one more compassionate, more gracious.

This week, a dear friend sent me an essay written by the author and editor Sara Sherbill. The title of the piece is, "You Might Consider Praying," and the first line sets the stage. She writes, "This year keeps breaking my heart." After sharing a partial list—anger, anxiety, resentment, personal loss, the violence of war, the suffering caused by natural disaster—the author asks, "What can we do when our hearts are breaking?" Her suggestion? "We can pray." Now, Sherbill is the daughter of a rabbi, raised in an Orthodox Jewish family. And while she confesses that she has departed from much of that tradition, she writes, "Prayer was the one thing I grabbed on my way out." She shares this witness, "For me, sometimes prayer looks like this: I am driving and it is raining and the windshield wipers are going back and forth and I am crying and I am asking God for help. Help me...I whisper over and over. *Just please help me.*"

If you have ever been with her, if you have ever been driving and it is raining and the windshield wipers are going back and forth and you are crying and you are asking God for help, then you know the power of her

witness. I read her words with tears in my own eyes, and then I thought of the verse that precedes this morning's passage. "After a long time, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning. God remembered his covenant..."

The story that is our faith would remind us again and again that God hears. That God remembers. That God speaks.

Burning bushes. Holy ground.

The man turns aside. He looks. He listens.

As those called by God, gifted with the burden of responsibility, let each of us answer with courage and with faith, "Here I am. Send me." Amen.