

## It's all you need to know

Exodus 3:1-15

September 25, 2005

So there you are, happily minding your own business ... or, to be precise, happily minding your father-in-law's business! Are you happy? Of course you are! Your life isn't perfect, but nobody's life is perfect.

What's not to like about your life? You have a wife and a son and a good job. You aren't out changing the world, but you don't want to be. You stay busy and work hard and provide well for your family, and when you come home, you have a home to come home to.

Sometimes painful memories and disturbing images cloud your mind and darken your mood, but you don't dwell on them. You will not let dark thoughts spoil the good life you enjoy. There is guilt over past mistakes, unwise decisions, failed expectations, but that is all in the past. Feeling bad won't change anything or do anybody any good, so why feel bad? And there are the disturbing images, images of unspeakable suffering -- men beaten, women abused, babies dying. The images find you in your dreams, but you push them out of your waking mind. You are powerless to do anything about them, so it is useless ... useless ... to brood over them. You stay busy, you work hard, you provide well for your family, your life is good, you are happy.

You are happily minding your own business ... and then you see the burning bush. Burning bush?

For you, it probably won't be a burning bush, but something else. Something else that grabs your attention, something else that disturbs the predictable scenery of your life, something else that makes you take a closer look. But it will be something.

For Moses, it was a burning bush. Maybe that's what it took to get Moses' attention. Maybe God had tried to speak to Moses before. Maybe God had tried many times to speak to Moses before. The people God calls *my people*, Moses' own people, have been suffering for a long, long time. It has been forty years since Moses fled Egypt fearing for his life. For the Hebrews, it has been forty years -- and more -- of continual oppression and unrelenting torment.

In any case, this time, God gets Moses' attention. And God says to Moses:

*I have heard the cry of my people, and I see how the Egyptians are oppressing them. Now I am sending you to the king of Egypt so that you can lead my people out of his country.*

You are happily minding your own business ... but God has a job for you! *Lead my people out of Egypt!* That was the job God gave Moses, this humble shepherd, this self-doubting refugee, this Hebrew surely glad to be far, far away from the suffering of his people.

God has a job for you ... and it is the same job!

*Set my oppressed people free! Proclaim liberty to captives! Bring good news to the poor! Announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people!*

Jesus used those words, quoting the prophet Isaiah, to identify the job God had given him. It is the job God gave Moses, the job God gave David, the job God gave Isaiah and all the prophets, the job God gave Jesus, the job God gave Peter, the job God gave Paul and Barnabas and Priscilla, the job God gives to every one of Jesus' followers, the job God gives the members of this church:

*Set free the oppressed! proclaim the message of the Lord's salvation!*

That's our job. That's our only job. Not to seek happiness, but to set people free. Not to strive to be nice people, but to see that justice is done. Not to find peace, but to make peace. Not to live quiet and non-disruptive lives, but to stand up and speak up and announce God's imminent salvation!

*But I am nobody ...*

You're right. We are all a bunch of nobodies! When I pass from this scene, when you pass from this scene, the church will go on, life will go on. Maybe some will remember us, but most will not. Neither you nor I are essential to the future of this world. All we can do is eat and drink and enjoy a little happiness as long as we do have life.

I am nobody. How can I go to the king and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? How can I be expected to challenge entrenched human institutions, to question age-old prejudices, to stand against the tide of public opinion? How can I presume to proclaim a message of salvation for all people?

*I will be with you ...*

God's answer to Moses' questions and God's answer to our questions is this:

*I will be with you ...*

It's all you need to know. It's all you need to know ... You don't need all your questions answered. You don't need to assess all the risks. You don't need any guarantees. You don't need to know there is a reasonable chance of success. You don't need to know you'll have plenty of help and support. You don't need to know that you will come out of it OK. All you need to know is: *I will be with you ...*

But I am hardly the best choice for the job ...

*I will be with you.*

But, what if something goes wrong, what if nobody listens, what if I fail ...

*I will be with you.*

But I'm not a very strong person. I'm not a very spiritual person. I'm not the leader type ...

*I will be with you.*

I don't even know what I believe or if I believe. How can I bring good news to people when I'm not even sure of it myself?

*I will be with you.*

But, why have you waited so long? Why do you let people suffer so much? Why haven't you already done something to help them?

*I have heard the cry of my people and I am sending you, ... and I will be with you.*

But, how do I know I can trust you? Who are you?

*I am who I am. I AM!*

It's all you need to know.

God had a job for Moses. He led God's people out of Egypt. God had a job for Peter. He laid the foundations of the Christian church. God had a job for John and Abram and Levi and Mary and Joseph and Cynthia. They laid the foundations of this church. And you?

Our 150th anniversary celebration is no burning bush, but it is a milestone that does make us take a closer look. It provides for us an important opportunity, not merely to remember where we have come from, but to affirm where we are going. It provides for us an important opportunity to remember what our job is, our only job.

Sixty-four years ago, when Charles Jacobs began his ministry here at First Congregational Church, he reminded us ...

*It is dangerous to look back. I don't mean we must not remember days past, but we must not live back there. This is as true in religious living as in social life, and the [one] who does live in the past is not fit for the kingdom of God.*

*Let us remember to love the past, to healthfully cherish it, but to keep our eyes on a far horizon and remember we are part of a great procession ...*

When we live in the past, we are not fit for the kingdom of God, because the kingdom of God is about the future, the far horizon. Our job is not to maintain a tradition or to preserve a venerable institution. Our only job is to pray and work and hope until God's kingdom comes! We have not yet come to the promised land. We are still on the way, and we must keep on keeping on!

We are part of a great procession. John Leavitt and the five others who made covenant with each other and with God one hundred forty-nine years and a day ago are part of that great procession. Charles Jacobs and Fern Murphy and Drexel Mollison are part of that great procession. You are part of that great procession.

It is a great procession. So much greater than the folks I have just named. So much greater than the people of this one church or of any church. Our job, our only job, is to be part of that procession, to be among those who point the way toward God's kingdom and go that way ourselves.

Our job is not to quietly tend the sheep, to go about our own business, enjoying the happily disengaged life we have made for ourselves. Our job is not to take care of our members, to go about the business of the church, to enjoy the comfortable life we have made for ourselves in Waterloo and Cedar Falls. Our job is to go to Egypt ... to go to the places where people are suffering, to set people free, to announce God's salvation. Our job is mission. The moment when we remember no longer that mission is our only job, is the moment that we are no longer a church.

But, we don't have the money. Our resources are already stretched too thin ...

*I will be with you.*

But, we are not the church we once were. We are fewer. We are older ...

*I will be with you.*

But, I'm no evangelist. I'm no activist ...

*I will be with you.*

I'll write a check, but you can't expect me to get involved myself ...

*I will be with you.*

But, that's not the way we have always done it ...

*I will be with you.*

But we don't have the kind of leadership we need. We don't have the depth of passion we need. We don't have the level of commitment we need ...

*I will be with you.*

But ...

*I will be with you.*

The Lord will be with us. It's all we need to know!