

3rd Sunday in Lent

March 24, 2019

Church of the Advent

### **Everything Will Be OK**

This morning we heard one of the iconic stories in the Old Testament, the story of Moses and his encounter with God in the burning bush. Moses was born a Hebrew slave, yet his story is a powerful example of the way God works--choosing ordinary people who may struggle with obedience and wander in the wilderness, yet are led to do extraordinary things to serve God's purposes in the world.

First Moses was spared from death in his infancy when his Hebrew midwives who feared God, did not follow Pharaoh's orders to kill all male Hebrew infants at birth as a method of population control of his Hebrew slaves. He was then later saved and hidden by his Mother in a basket in the reeds of the river, and with perfect poetic irony, found by Pharaoh's daughter and taken home to be kept and raised in Pharaoh's household. Moses' own mother was then brought into the mix as a wet nurse to care for him. Living as an adopted child of the Pharaoh, Moses grew up with immense privilege, and yet had a place in his heart for his people the Hebrews. When he was still a young man, he stepped in to save a Hebrew slave from a beating, killing the Egyptian guard. And then to avoid the fatal consequences of his interference, he had to run, as far away from the life he knew as he could. In land of Midian, Moses found work as a shepherd, married his boss's daughter, and became a father. Though a refugee, he found a relatively peaceful life.

Our story today begins as Moses is out in the wilderness near the mountain of God with his sheep, doing what shepherds do. Then just beyond his clear vision he sees a bush on fire that curiously does not burn out. Moses approaches and hears a voice calling him, telling him, of all

things, to take off his shoes, and though he is afraid, Moses stands bare footed on this holy ground for a conversation with the God of his ancestors, struggling with what is being asked of him. Would we not have liked to see the bubble over Moses' head during this particular conversation? Maybe something like: "Are you serious?" or "This cannot be happening!" or "He *so* has the wrong guy!" I imagine Moses might have heard some of what God had been saying about the suffering of the Hebrews, and God offering them a way home to a Promised Land, but surely this had to be crowded out by images of being thrown into Pharaoh's prison to face death for his killing that Egyptian. Moses argued with God, even after seeing signs and wonders before his eyes delivered by God just for him: a staff turning into a snake, his hand withered with leprosy and then restored. He complained that he is not eloquent of speech—that he wouldn't know what to say to the Pharaoh; he was sure no one would listen to him. Even after a promise that God's own hand would stretch out to strike Egypt with wonders, and even after God promised to put the right words in his mouth, Moses pleaded for God to *send someone else!*

Poor Moses. I feel his pain. I know where he is coming from—that place of hard earned safety, from a place in his life where things were relatively stable and the agenda was simple—tend the sheep, love his wife Zipporah, play with his son, Gershom, and honor his father-in-law Jethro who took him in. Moses was a good man at heart, and in spite of a strange upbringing and a traumatic incident which burdened him with guilt, he had found a good life. He was not restless, not looking for greener pastures. And yet there was God, calling this ordinary man to do something extraordinary.

I will bet that many of us have at least one story of seeing that burning bush in the distance. I know I do. I saw my burning bush in early 2009, on Wilmington Island in Savannah, GA. I was living out a great disappointment in my professional life, having recently been told

that the full-time job as a Palliative Care physician that I had been working toward for the past year in a large hospital system had vaporized in the financial uncertainty of the time. I had been consulting in both hospitals, swimming upstream to do something new; at the same time I had been serving St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Rincon, GA, since before my ordination to the priesthood a year earlier. I was living on savings, doing work that I loved, working with good teams of people, both at the hospital and at the church, and saw myself living and working in Savannah for the rest of my days. And then the recession hit and the financial support for my dream job disappeared. St. Luke's was a small mission at the time, without resources to pay me; I could not stay with them without making a living elsewhere, and there was no more living to be made in Savannah in this new field of Palliative Medicine into which I had been recently intensively trained and to which I felt surely called. So I was preparing to uproot the family, sell our home, leave St. Luke's and my home diocese, move to suburban Washington DC (of all God-forsaken places) to take a job in the field that I felt I belonged in. And though I had been packing, I was not happy, not excited, not looking forward to this move. I was already homesick and had not even left yet.

So very early at sunrise one morning I was taking a kind of goodbye walk with the dog around Wilmington Island, searching out the few places of access to the river that had not been bought and built up by the very wealthy during the boom that had preceded the recession. There was one accessible vacant lot left, where construction on 4 high-end condo units had halted (probably when the contractor ran out of money). The underbrush had been cleared, a dock had been built on the river, but the only thing left on this lot was a few very old live oak trees, a once hopeful "coming soon" sign, and a large brown construction dumpster up against the wall that separated the lot from a marina of distressed sailboats. The dog and I walked out to the dock, taking in the early morning light on the water; then we turned around to make our way back to

the road. And there it was. The sun was breaking through the trees and shining directly onto what had been stenciled neatly in 3 inch letters on the side of the dumpster: *EVERYTHING WILL BE OK*. I first did the comic double-take, then walked up closer, then touched it because I did not believe what I was seeing. Then I got out my ancient tiny flip-phone and took a picture of it, fully expecting the writing not to be there when I got home. But it *was* there, in the picture, too. Total science-brain skeptic me was full of questions: Who in the world did that? When and why? And why so carefully and neatly? Had they done it on other dumpsters? Was it a new trendy meme I would begin to see like graffiti on railroad cars and overpasses?

We moved not long after, away from Georgia, away from our children, our church family, Mark's tenured job at Georgia Southern and our friends. Though I never went back to that vacant lot again, I sensed that the message, that I have never seen anywhere else, was from God to me at the very time I needed to see it. It burned into me and was not consumed. It sustained me through what felt like a long Diaspora in Northern Virginia. Those years away were challenging *and* surprising, difficult *and* wonderful. And as I struggled with obedience in this period in my life, God was with me, putting words in my mouth and teaching me what I should do, just as God was with Moses. I am an ordinary person; I did not do extraordinary things there, unless it was to tend to a thousand households where someone was dying. There was definitely wilderness involved.

No life is too ordinary, no wilderness too deep, for God to step in and declare holy ground. Sometimes this involves being gob smacked; sometimes it is just a nudge to take off our shoes and walk on holy ground in faithfulness to the next task ahead that could make an extraordinary difference in someone else's life and liberation, or our own. Amen.

