

Sunday, July 21, 2019  
Hillsboro United Church of Christ  
A sermon by the Rev. Frank Baldwin

*Exodus 3:7, 10; 4:1-5, 17 NRSV*

***WHAT'S THAT IN YOUR HAND?***

*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, so come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.'*

*Then Moses answered, 'But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, "The LORD did not appear to you".' The LORD said to him, 'What is that in your hand?' He said, 'A staff.' And the LORD said, 'Throw it on the ground.' So, he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it. Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail'—so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand— 'so that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.' Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs.'*

I. Since our scripture text allows us to eavesdrop on only a small portion of a much larger conversation between Moses and God, allow me to quickly review the general situation which brings us to this preaching moment:

- The People of Israel flee to Egypt as refugees in the days of their patriarch Joseph, seeking food and asylum in a desperate time of drought. Although initially they prosper and increase their numbers in Egypt, by the beginning of the 13th century BC the Israelites have been reduced to the humiliations and hardships of slavery, being brutally employed under the lash in the labors of building a sprawling new northern capitol for the mighty Pharaoh Rameses.

- Strangely enough, one of these Israelites, unaware of his true identity, ascends to the highest level of the government, and is said to enjoy the favor and confidence of Pharaoh himself. This is Moses. Discovering by chance who he really is, Moses begins to secretly protest the oppression of the Israelites, and in an unguarded moment, kills a particularly brutal Egyptian slave-driver. Now fearing the wrath of Pharaoh, Moses flees the country and establishes himself in a remote region of the Sinai Peninsula known as Midian. There he marries, has children, lives quietly as a shepherd for his father-in-law, and tries to forget about Egypt.
- But the LORD is not impressed with the vanity, cruelty, wealth and violence of tyrants; not then and not now. So God never forgets the plight of the Israelites, and in a stunning theophany appears to Moses in the guise of a burning bush, reveals to him the never-before spoken divine name, and calls upon him to return to Egypt and demand justice and liberation for his people. Which more or less brings us to our sermon text, and to Moses' answer to God.

Now, Moses must have at least a hundred reasons why he doesn't want to go back to Egypt, beginning with the fact that he's a fugitive with a warrant out for his arrest and probably a price on his head. So, he tries every argument he can think of to talk God out of sending him. He complains that he'll get a bad reception: the Egyptians will disrespect him because they think he's an Israelite, and the Israelites will disrespect him because they think he's an Egyptian. He reminds God that you don't get to be Pharaoh unless you are one exceptionally mean and hardheaded character, and Rameses is not going to like being told by an Israelite traitor to let his

favorite slaves leave the country. And then there's his problem with public speaking: Moses stutters and stumbles when he has to talk under pressure. What's more, look at how currently busy he is there in Midian, what with watching the flocks and everything. There must be somebody else with a little more time on his hands, somebody more eloquent perhaps, better qualified, less controversial; hey, maybe my brother, Aaron would be ideal! And God listens patiently to all of this.

The dread of going to Egypt is a kind of biblical metaphor, I think, for the sort of self-doubt and hesitancy which many people experience when faced with doing something they need to do for God. Especially if that thing they need to do looks – at least from a distance – to be potentially difficult, lengthy, involved, costly, dangerous, embarrassing and probably even questionable of succeeding. Particularly if one may reasonably be uncertain of one's abilities or resources to do it; and if it's not clear where help will come from if the plan goes wrong. Just so, Moses, a good man of profound faith and amazing gifts, who longs in his heart for the liberation of his people, nonetheless totally chokes when God says, "Okay, the time has come, I'm liberating the Israelites and you, Moses, get to be the one to tell Pharaoh and lead the Exodus."

**II.** When all of Moses' self-doubts and arguments and excuses have finally been expressed, God asks just one question; a question Moses has not really been expecting:

God: *Look here, Moses, what's that you have in your hand?*

Moses: *You mean, this, LORD?*

God: *Yes, Moses. What is that, and what do you plan to do with it?*

Moses: *Of course, it's my shepherd's staff, LORD, just a big, tall stick really. I use it*

*to poke the sheep around, and sometimes to grab one with this hooked part up at the top.*

God: *I get it, Moses; I know what a staff is. Now throw it on the ground.*

Moses: *Okay then, here goes. Great God Almighty! (Oh, sorry, Lord.) But look, it's turned into a snake!*

God: *That's right, Moses. Pretty good snake, huh?*

Moses: *I wouldn't touch that thing with a ten-foot pole!*

God: *Well, actually, what I want you to do next is reach out and grab it by the tail.*

Moses: *Oh no! Grab it, really?*

God: *Really.*

Moses: *I have a bad feeling about this, LORD, but if you insist, here goes... Wait a minute, now it's turned back into a staff again!*

God: *Of course, it did. So, remember this little demonstration, Moses, the next time you doubt your ability, or question your call, or hear someone demand to know who sent you to Pharaoh.*

The sole purpose of this stunning verification of divine agency is to show Moses that he already has – right there on hand – everything that will be required to do what he needs to do – and actually longs to do – for God. Despite his fears and doubts, he will be able to confront the power and rage of Pharaoh, liberate the Israelites, cross the Red Sea, survive in the desert, receive the Ten Commandments, and bring his people at least to the edge of the Promised Land; just as long as he keeps God beside him. God will provide whatever else is needed – all the inspiration, all the guidance, all the skill, all the resources, all the knowledge and understanding,

all the patience - all the words that will have to be spoken, all the signs and wonders that will need to be performed, all the grace, all the blessings – Moses' entire job is just to trust God, and bring along his staff.

Let's not be distracted by the fact that what Moses happens to have in hand is a shepherd's staff. Moses could just as easily have had a toothbrush, a fly swatter, a monkey wrench, or an electric guitar in his hand, and it would still have been enough, more than enough. In Egypt, of course, given enough time, Pharaoh's own sorcerers and magicians will learn how to change sticks into serpents. But whereas for a magician this kind of thing is a huge deal, representing the very apex of the occult powers of fear and illusion; for God it is like a blink of the eye, a twitch of the little finger: a truly insignificant, almost antic device to help clear the mind and focus the will.

This is the power of God to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary: see how Jesus in his time turns the water of baptism into the spirit of new life; enables bread to become communion and wine to become the sign of an eternal covenant. Seeds entrusted to the ground, wildflowers glittering gloriously by the road, a field ripe for harvest, a net full of fish, a flock of sheep, the merciful loyalty of friends, a towel and a basin of water... in the hands of Jesus, all become examples and metaphors and parables and signs of God's grace, God's providence, God's sovereignty, God's glory, and God's redeeming love.

**III.** So, where is the court of Pharaoh for us these days? What scares us, offends us, troubles us, challenges and confronts us, threatens or intimidates or limits us, demeans or disrespects us, trips us up or holds us back, so that we hesitate to say yes when God whispers our name and says, "There's something I need done and you're just the one to do it."

Well then, what's that in *your* hand? It could be a shepherd's staff; but more likely it's something like a cell phone, a coffeepot, a computer keyboard, a lesson plan; it could be a petition to sign, an airplane ticket, a pair of pliers or scissors or knitting needles, a protest vigil to join; or it could even be a garden rake, a pen and paper, an important book, a meeting agenda, a musical instrument, a checkbook, a child's hand holding onto yours.

Whatever you or I have in us that might be offered to God will be welcomed, honored, empowered and used. God knows the gifts – as well as the calling – that we've each been given, and will provide whatever else may be needed to accomplish all that love and justice requires.

Let us go then, and see what God can do. Bring your joys, your concerns, your fears, your strength, your questions and doubts, your hopes, your heart. Whatever you have there in your hand will certainly be enough, more than enough, so help us God!