

Sermon on Exodus 3:1-15 God calls Moses

Sisters and brothers, the life story of a person is often also the story of places and countries.

Just think of the place of your birth, your country of origin, the place where you went to school, maybe where you got married...

Remember where you grew up; remember the first flat of your own... the place where maybe a parent died...

...names of streets, bus stops, shops from childhood days... journeys, farewells and goodbyes.

Places often are both: the ground where we have our roots, and the land we are still longing for...

Remembering places often means too, remembering experiences, wishes, dreams, failures... Places can recall memories of tears, of guilt, of joy and peace... memories of love and passion, anger and pride, fear and pain...

This is not at all different in the Bible!

Biblical stories often are stories of places:

wells, mountains, seas and deserts, caves, bushes and rivers.

Today's Old Testament reading with its whole background in the book of Exodus is the story of many places, a long life journey and a clear call.

Raised on the Nile, grown up at the court in Egypt Moses certainly did not know hunger, thirst and hard labour. His childhood home was a paradise-like palace, where he was looked after, waited on and cared for. His early years were full of abundance, privileges and wishes and dreams constantly coming true.

And then there was the crisis: one moment beyond control, one second of pure affection, and the prince becomes a murderer.

From now on he is fleeing: *persona non grata*...

What once was home becomes the place of danger and persecution...

And he changes place... flees into the wilderness, finds an oasis and a well.

He even finds peace and quiet and a totally new way of life.

Moses recovers from pain and fear, finds friends, home, family and a job;

he has enough to live on in this place between desert and greenland.

That could be enough for him:

satisfying, fulfilling – after all he had gone through and run away from.

But one day, he leads the sheep further on... far beyond the wilderness where he is usually tending his father-in-law's flocks. He is out in the desert one day, near Mount Horeb, when he sees an amazing thing.

There, over on the side of the mountain is a bush on fire, but not being consumed.

So he goes over to investigate, and discovers that the reason it is burning is because God is present within it.

God speaks to Moses.

“Remove the sandals from your feet...”

Take your shoes off, for the place you’re standing on is holy ground.

That is the end of an ordinary work day for Moses.

Take your shoes off means also, remove the work and business of everyday life, be aware of the holy ground you’re on and listen to the voice of your God speaking.

Just for a moment, discover something. new, something more about your life.

Put the dusty shoes aside, the worries of a shepherd, and get into immediate touch with God’s earth...

God explains why he’s come to speak to Moses.

Again a new place in Moses’ life: a burning bush... fire in an orderly life, a miracle and a voice.

Moses hides his face in his hands.

And what is to follow now, eventually again causes a change of place, a move forward in Moses’ life. Here I am, says Moses, when God calls his name.

And then he learns of God’s plans for Moses’ life.

In the 40 years that Moses has been living in the Sinai desert, things had become worse and worse for the people of Israel.

The Israelites were groaning under the yoke of slavery, and God had heard them and remembered the agreement he’d made with their ancestors, with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob hundreds of years ago. God had seen their suffering and was concerned about them.

“And so,” he tells Moses, “I have come to rescue them.”

“Well,” Moses must have thought, “great! About time! I’ve been worried about them myself.”

He may even have been praying that God would come and rescue his people. And he listens to what God is going to do. He is going to bring them out of Egypt and take them to a good and spacious place, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Must have sounded so good to Moses.

But then comes the shock...

God says to Moses: “The cry of the Israelites has now come to me. I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send **you** to the Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt.”

I need you – in Egypt, the very place where you once ran away from.

I need you in Egypt...

God’s word in our ears: I need you in the places of crisis, of oppression, of injustice and inhumanity. I need you to stand up against these conditions and walk ahead for peace and freedom, for my kingdom, for the fullness of life.

I need you, so that all my people can finally achieve a life in a land where milk and honey flow. I need you...

How does that sound in our ears?

What are the Egypts in our lives?

God cares about his people, so he’s going to rescue them.

He is sending Moses to do it. Just as he'd used Shiphrah and Puah, the two Hebrew midwives when Moses was a baby, he is now about to continue the process of liberation with Moses' help.

But that isn't what Moses had in mind at all.

Moses was quite happy tending Jethro's sheep.

Like many before and after him – like many of us – when God's call came, he wasn't sure he wanted to hear it.

Moses had spent the last 40 years or so working as a shepherd, and shepherds weren't particularly high on the social ladder in the Middle East at that time.

Moses knew what life was like in the Pharaoh's palace, and he knew very well that his chosen trade wouldn't go down well when he was presented to the king.

So of course Moses asks "Who am I?" I am a nobody...

And do you remember what God answers?

"I will be with you!" That's all.

You may be a nobody, but you will have the creator of the world at your side.

This must be more than Moses can easily take in; he still doubts that that is enough.

He wants to know the name he should give to the God of Israel...

everybody else had gods with names...

Moses himself had grown up as an Egyptian. And they had numerous gods, all with names. Yet the God of Israel had never been referred to by name.

The Israelites knew their God existed. They prayed to him, they hoped because of him, they believed in him, but all they knew was that he was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Still, Moses wanted to know what to call him.

But God did not allow himself to be drawn in.

He wouldn't be tied down by a name.

All he'd tell Moses is that he is who he is.

And the only name he can give him, is "I am": a name that implies an eternal existence... yet always relevant to the present; one who has always been, and one who will always be at every instant of time, no matter what.

Moses is finally told to go and assemble the elders of Israel and tell them that their God has sent him to them. And he is assured of God's presence with them!

I wonder:

do you ever suffer from self doubt when it comes to doing the sort of thing that God calls us to do?

How is it with telling people of your being a Christian?

How is it with living and acting as Jesus would have done?

How is it with facing injustice and discrimination around us and stepping forth against it?

How is it with caring for people in need, allowing closeness to those who are unpopular?

Wherever we work for a better world of tomorrow, God's message to Moses is with us: I will be with you. I am who I am.

In Moses' case this did not immediately convince him.
He had a couple of objections...
One of Moses' problems, and no doubt often one of ours too, is that he was afraid.
Just awfully afraid.
Afraid of rejection. Afraid of failure.

What if they don't believe me?
What if they don't listen to me?
What if they don't accept what I say?
What if they don't believe that what I say is true?
How would I ever be able to prove it?
What... if...?

Reading a bit further on in the book of Exodus, we find that God answers with a demonstration of power. He gives Moses the ability to perform most amazing things... just think of the staff turning into a snake...
But Moses still wasn't convinced.
I wonder whether we would be?

Would it be enough for us to hear the simple 5 words "I will be with you", to set off, leave a place of peace and quiet and head towards something as dangerous and frightening as only Egypt could be?
Would we believe, when God added, "and once you've done the job, you will come back here and live in this great and fertile land, worship on this mountain, have a home again?"

Moses just couldn't believe it.
He had a great sense of personal inadequacy. He was a doer, not a talker.
How could he ever convince the Pharaoh to let his people go?
And God only seems to say:
Have you forgotten where the gift of speech comes from?
If you go – I will help you speak. I'll teach you what to say...
Moses didn't need to worry...
God would surely do his part. God would give him the words to say.

At a later point in the story we learn what else God does for Moses. God sees that Moses' fear is real. Moses isn't just giving excuses.
So God says: "How about it if I send your brother Aaron with you.
He speaks well. I'll bring him here – right now. Just be ready to go when he arrives..."

This is something God has always done for his people...
This is something that God does for us:
He gives us the help and encouragement of friends and of fellow believers. He shows us again and again people who can share the load, who can strengthen us when we need courage and care, who would even speak up for us when we do not know what to do or say.

If we read on in the book of Exodus, in the chapter to come an amazing transformation takes place.

The hesitant Moses becomes an assured leader. In the end he is – in spite of having Aaron – speaking up before the Pharaoh by himself.

His confidence grows as he sees God fulfilling his promise to be with him! He gets the power he needs to oppose the Pharaoh.

As Moses learns to do one thing, God pushes him to do another that is slightly harder, and so he becomes stronger and stronger, believe it or not.

Just imagine, what wonderful things we all, we all together even, could do, if we learned to really rely entirely on the power of God to be with us...

to give us the words we need...

to give us friends who help...

to give us the courage to stretch beyond all we might have ever imagined for ourselves...

The life story of a person is often also a story of places.

So let our life stories become stories of a holy ground where **we** can hear God' call.

Amen.

Prayer

Loving God,

may you give us

all the courage we need

to go the way you lead us

to places where you need us.

Help that when you call,

we may go unfrightened.

Help us to do the steps

and speak the words

you want us to,

and if we don't dare so on our own,

give us please sisters and brothers

to stand at our side

to make us bold and strong.

Amen.