

So...What Are You Doing In A Place Like This?

^{NRS} Exo 3:1 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.³ Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."⁴ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."⁵ Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."⁶ He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.⁷ 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,⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

In the East they say when the student is ready the teacher will appear. When the student is ready, the teacher will appear. We say the same thing in the West- we just say it backwards. We say you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. Really, we're saying the same thing. We're saying if we're not ready to listen, it doesn't matter how well someone says something, we're just not going to hear it. That if we're not paying attention, it doesn't matter how beautiful something is- we just won't see it. We're saying that in the end, what's really important is you and me and our attitude.

And I think it's obvious that there's truth to this. The attitude you have, it makes an enormous difference in how you experience the world. Soren Kierkegaard, that cranky Dane I've talked about a few times, he told a parable about an old man who was sitting by the side of the main road coming into town. After a while a man comes walking along. "I'm a traveler," he said. "What kind of people live around here," the

guy asks with this sour look on his face. “Well,” answered the old man, “what were the people like where you come from?” “Terrible people. Lazy people. Those people were no good. That’s why I left.” “Oh,” said the old man. “I’m afraid you won’t find these people all that different.” With a scowl the man continued into the city. The old man waited a while longer. Along came another guy- this one with a smile on his face. “What kind of people live around here,” he asked. “I had to leave my home and I’m looking for a place to stay.” “Well,” said the old man. “What were the people like where you come from?” The man’s face lights up. “Oh, they were wonderful. I miss them. I was really sorry to go.” “Well,” said the old man smiling. “I think you’ll find these people aren’t all that different.”

Kierkegaard’s point? So many times we find what we’re looking for. If we expect people to be jerks- we’re going to run into a lot of bad actors out there. On the other hand if we see people as God’s good, spirit-filled creation- we’re going to find traces of God’s handiwork in them along with their rough edges. So we know it’s true that our attitude can make a big difference.

And sometimes when you’re just a little bit down- when you’re just dragging a little bit. Sometimes we can remember how important attitude is, and we can kind of pick ourselves up a little bit- we can go for a walk, or put on some good music or read something inspiring. But attitude can be a tricky thing. Sometimes it’s easier said than done to turn things around. Nobody I know really has a button they can push that can just magically fix their attitude when they’re down- if they did, they’d push it. So what then? If life all comes down to attitude- are we just out of luck?

This question, this question about attitude and intention- this is really the question that marks the life of Moses.

Moses has to have one of the hardest stories in all of scripture. Last week we heard about Pharaoh and his program to deal with the Hebrew population explosion. Namely, he orders the midwives, midwives like Shiprah and Puah, to kill off some of the babies. And really, in his eyes I'm sure, he's being generous. He only orders half of the them killed- the male half, and allows the girls to live. Of course our heroes, Shiprah and Puah- they defy Pharaoh, lying to him about how the Hebrew women just pop those babies out before anyone can get to them. But, they probably knew this would only work for so long. And indeed, the text ended last week with Pharaoh ordering the whole people that if anyone found a male Hebrew baby, they were not to let it see the light of tomorrow.

This is the world into which Moses was born. Talk about your hard times. But he was lucky. When he was born, his mother slipped him into a wooden basket and casts him out upon the waters- knowing he'd be safer on a river, than he would be with her. And you might know the story- Pharaoh's daughter is walking along the river banks and her friends pick the basket up. And she ends up raising Moses as her own.

And it sounds like he probably has it made- I mean moving from being a Hebrew slave up to living in Pharaoh's own house? But not so much. Because somewhere along the way, whether the princess told him, or whether he just figured it out on his own, he realizes he isn't an Egyptian- he isn't really the son of a princess. He's a Hebrew. Except that he isn't a Hebrew- I mean not really.

Scholars tell us that the term Hebrew comes from the Egyptian word 'Habiru'. And the Habiru weren't really a single ethnic tribe, as much as they were a social class. The Egyptians considered all of their slaves, whether they came from North, South, East, or West as Habiru. So while we think of the Hebrew people as a kind of single family all coming from Abraham- the reality is they were probably much more diverse as they came out of Egypt. See what makes you part of the Habiru, at least in the eyes of Egypt, is not whether you came from father Abraham, but whether you are a slave.

So was Moses an Egyptian? Absolutely not. He was the son of Hebrew slaves. But was he a really Hebrew? Well, no. He didn't live as a slave; he lived in the very lap of luxury- enjoying grapes in the palace, while his people were living out the grapes of wrath in the cruel desert. So he wasn't really Egyptian; he wasn't really a Hebrew either.

But then he makes that fateful choice. Do you know the story? It's a hot day. For some reason he's walking around in the heat of the day, when he sees a terrible sight. He sees a big, strong, well fed Egyptian man beating the life out of a Hebrew slave. He's just beating him and kicking him right there in the street. And nobody lifts a finger to help. Nobody dares interfere. Everyone just turns a blind eye. But Moses- something comes over him. Maybe it was the shame of turning his back on his people? Maybe it was just a sense of moral outrage. I don't know. But he steps in. He not only steps in, but he actually kills this Egyptian. And, realizing what he's done, he takes the body and goes and hides it in the sand.

Now, maybe he felt like this one act made up for all the time he was living it up in 90210. Maybe he expect his Hebrew brothers and sisters to just embrace him now as one of their own. Because the next day he goes out and overhears to Hebrew men arguing

with one another. And Moses, now the righter of all wrongs, he steps in on this fight, too. And one of the men, sneering at him says, “What Moses? Are you going to kill me like you killed that Egyptian?” The Hebrews wanted no part of him. They didn’t trust him. They didn’t even know him.

And, we find out that when the news of what Moses did reached Pharaoh- Pharaoh wants him dead. So, the Hebrews want nothing to do with him. The Egyptians want him dead. There’s nothing for Moses to do but to run.

Now what do you suppose his attitude was like? Torn away from his real mother and father, Moses not had to flee from his adoptive family, too. So, he ends up running off to Midian and trying to rebuild his life. He ends up getting on with a shepherd and his family- even marrying into the family after a while. But was this really what his life was supposed to be like? Was this why his life was spared and he was drawn out of that water? For this? To take care of sheep in the deserts of the Sinai?

See, if everything comes down to attitude- then I don’t know what to do with Moses. Because he had pretty much given up. He had a tough upbringing. Then he was run out of town. And it’s not like he’s just keeping the faith here- believing and trusting that God is somehow going to deliver him from all this. He’s not like Elijah was- all holed up in that cave telling God that while all of the other prophets may have been killed, he was hanging in there and he expected God to take care of him.

No, Moses never even mouths the word God. Moses has forgotten how to even pray. Listen to how our text for this morning starts out- he led the flocks beyond the wilderness. Beyond the wilderness. What a phrase. Ever know what that feels like? To

be so exhausted you don't even remember what it feels like to be merely tired. You'd love to just feel tired. To be so out of faith you can barely even remember a time when you believed in God- much less could pray.

Moses starts out this morning taking his flocks beyond the wilderness. And he winds up taking them to a place called Horeb- Horeb literally means "wasteland". He goes beyond the wilderness, to a place they call the wasteland. Does this sound like a guy with a positive attitude? Does this sound like a guy who is turning that frown upside down? Does this sound like a guy who, even if he had the idea like, "Hey, maybe it would help if I went to church", that he'd even have the strength or the courage to wake up some Sunday morning and brave all of us church people not knowing how people would treat him?

But did you notice what happens? Did you notice what happens? Even though he's out of faith, out of hope, and a million miles from church. Even though he doesn't have the get up and go to seek after God- God seeks after him. Even in the place beyond the wilderness, beyond exhaustion, beyond hope, in a place that seems truly Godforsaken- God shows up.

And it's the most interesting thing. God doesn't come in any kind of religious, churchy way- the way we might expect. There isn't an angel chorus. There's no preacher out there sweating it out in a black robe. No, there's just that weird bush on fire. And maybe that's not even all that strange- things that dry catch on fire in the desert. But this fire doesn't seem to be going out. At first Moses is just noticing this as he's following the sheep, but then he really is puzzled over it. And can you imagine? A spark that isn't dying, a fire that isn't going out- if Moses needed anything at that moment it

was to know that even though the fire in his own belly was failing, here was one that didn't seem to die. And that's when he does it. That's when he does it. He pauses, and he turns aside.

It doesn't seem like much, does it. To turn aside. To just be curious. It doesn't seem like that much. But it's everything.

As soon as Moses shows the least bit of interest, the least bit of life- his ears are opened and he hears God's call- God's call telling him he has a purpose, telling him he matters, and telling him that others need his help. The minute Moses shows even the teensiest sign of life, suddenly his eyes are opened to the fact that in spite of how alone he has felt, in spite of how hopeless he has been that anything could really change, that he hasn't been alone that whole time.

Moses was not looking for God out there in that desert. I'm not sure he even believed in God at that point. I'm not sure he even knew what he was doing out there. But even though Moses wasn't able to pull himself out of his funk, even though Moses wasn't able to change his attitude, even though Moses was looking for God- the good news of his story is that God was seeking him, and God wasn't about to let Moses get in the way of that.

I have to say this is a very personal story for me this week. As so many of you know our little girl, Ella Grace, went into the intensive care unit last Sunday and is still there this morning. She's got a severe case of viral pneumonia and for a week now hasn't been able to breathe on her own, requiring a breathing tube and a ventilating machine. As so many of you know, as wonderful as hospitals are, and Legacy Emanuel has truly

kept our daughter alive this week- as wonderful as they are, they are no place to go if you are looking for the peace of Christ and the presence of God.

There are five screens constantly flashing in Ella's room. There are three machines machines, each of them having different beeps and alarm noises for when things go wrong. Last week I talked about working at McDonald's with all those beeps- man, McDonald's has nothing on a hospital room. It's so bad that three times now Melis has called into the room. And every time the charge nurse has had to come in and tell me that Melissa was calling. Because of all the other beeping- I just assumed it was one of the 23 other alarms that are forever going off. On top of that she's been on this old school ventilating machine that kind of jiggles the air and out of her. It was designed by the guy who designed oxygen units for astronauts and airplane pilots and all the knobs and dials are like from the 50's. It works great, but it makes this constant noise like Darth Vader driving on a bumpy road. (Make noise.) And of course the nurses and the respiratory therapists have to come in to check and make sure everything's working well, to adjust her levels. It's probably the least peaceful place I can imagine.

And, I don't know if I'd call it beyond the wilderness, but by about Thursday this week, the day that I kind of thought we'd be released, it started to sink in how long this was going to take- and it did start to feel like the edge of the wilderness, if not beyond it.

But then do you know what would happen? As my attitude would slip from time to time, and I would begin to really absorb the sight of my little girl hooked up to all those hoses and tubes- something would happen that would call me to turn aside.

One of our nurses after learning that Ella had a pink bear she loved at home. After her shift, her 12 hour shift, she went and got a pink care bear and came back and

nestled it under Ella's arm. She didn't need to do that. It was a call for me to turn aside. Another day, I showed up with Will to switch off with Melis. I've been doing nights and she was going to take him home. But they had an emergency surgery going on in the unit, and the nurse over the phone said they were on lock down and there was no way I could get in. I explained I had Will with me and given our schedule we really needed to switch off. She said she was sorry but there was nothing to do, that it could be hours. And I understood, but it was a frustration on top of a frustration. Then, just a few minutes later as my brain was trying to figure out how to shuffle our schedule around, she came out and told us to follow her, that she'd stretch the rules just this once, and she led us around through the back entrance. It was another call for me to turn aside. And then probably my favorite moment? Emanuel has this amazing children's garden with a yellow brick road and all kinds of amazing statues and bushes shaped like animals. And they have a mail box with some paper next to it, and children will write prayers and place them in the mail box. When I explained this to Will, he looked very thoughtful. And I asked him if he wanted to tell me a prayer and I would write it down. He thought about this. Then he smiled at me, and he opened the mailbox, and talking into it like he was on speakerphone, he said: "Ella, I love you. I hope you feel better soon. Bye, bye." It was a call for me to turn aside- to turn aside and trust that God was with me, even there.

Now, I know there are children in much more serious situations. I do. And it's not I was questioning my belief in God this week. But I'll tell you the truth I definitely wasn't feeling God, wasn't looking for God in that place. But time and time again, God was finding me, even in that place, and calling me to turn aside.

Friends, if you have a great attitude today- fantastic. Bravo. Keep it up. If you feel more like Moses, though, or more like I've been feeling this week, and you hardly feel like getting out of bed much like looking for signs of God's grace in the world. Hear the good news- there are no godforsaken places. There are no godforsaken places or godforsaken lives. No matter what has happened to you in the past- God is calling to you today. The question is will you pause, will you turn aside, and listen for it? The ground we are walking on with one another is holier than we know. **Amen.**