

“People Like Us”

I.

“*Who am I?*” asks Moses. “*Who am I, that I should go?*” And that’s a pretty good question. On this day in the desert when he bumps into a burning bush, Moses is a little past his prime. There’s no polite way to say it, really: Moses is just too...take your pick: too old, too washed up, too much of a failure, too far from the center of power. Moses is a nobody. Who is he, that he should go?

Once upon a time, Moses showed great promise. We heard last week how he cheated death in the first tender months of his life -plucked out of the River Nile, rescued from the genocide of his people, raised in the household of Pharaoh. Moses was a prince of Egypt. He had it all: money, prestige, power, personal servants and private jets, the world at his feet. But at the age of 40, Moses blew it. In a moment—one of those single, solitary moments that haunts you for the rest of your life—Moses threw it all away.

It happened like this: One day he came upon an Egyptian beating a Hebrew—one of his adopted people abusing one of his birth-parents’ people. And Moses freaked out. Maybe for the first time in his life, he identified with his own people. Before he even knew what had happened, Moses murdered that abusive Egyptian and buried his body in the sand.

Well, Pharaoh learns of this little incident, and Pharaoh is not amused. The hammer comes down hard. Outlawed, exiled, forced to flee for his life, Moses ends up in the desert of Midian—approximately five miles due west of the absolute middle of nowhere, an empty wilderness inhabited only by migrant workers. Not knowing what else to do, Moses marries into a local family and takes a job as a shepherd—hardly a high prestige position for this one-time prince of Egypt.¹

And then...well, nothing much happens for a very long time. When we pick up the story, Moses has been keeping those sheep for the last forty years. He’s old. He’s tired. And he has come a long way from the palace of the Pharaoh. So now, with the burning bush before him and his best years long behind, Moses raises a perfectly reasonable question: “*Who am I, that I should go?*”

II

That’s always the question, isn’t it? Who am I, that I should preach this sermon? Who are you, that you should listen? Who are we that we should gather in this place, week in and week out, to hear these old stories and sing these strange songs? Who are we to think that any of this has much of anything to do with us?

Let’s face it: we are an unusual bunch of people. Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, is sometimes called “the church of last resort.”² I like that. It sure sounds like Plymouth to me. You should hear the stories in our Discover Plymouth new member classes. A lot of people seem to stumble into this church on their way out of organized religion, or after a very long absence. The faith of *our* mothers and fathers is something we’re not so sure about, something we still struggle with.

You see, some of us were not treated very well by our religious tradition of origin. We have the stories, and the scars, to prove it. Some of us still suffer post-traumatic stress disorder from our time in confirmation. Some of us have always had these nagging

doubts, these persistent little questions, and one day, when we finally found the courage to voice them, it did not go very well. Some of us are gay or lesbian, and when we finally got fed up with life in the closet, our churches told us that we were no longer welcome.

You should hear the stories. We have wandered in here for all sorts of different reasons. And some of us still aren't entirely sure what we are doing here. This is the church of last resort.

In a church like this, to people like us, Moses' question makes a whole lot of sense. God may have heard the cries of the suffering, but who are we, that we should get involved? God may dream of deliverance for the captives, but who are we, that we should share in God's dreams? God may be in the midst of making all things new, but who are we, that we should have any part to play? I mean, look at us: Few of us run the risk of being mistaken for saints. We're just too...take your pick: too busy, too cynical, too comfortable, too tired, too old or too young. For Moses back at the burning bush, for the people of Plymouth today, it remains a perfectly reasonable question: *Who are we, that we should go?*

III

But maybe we are missing the point. I'm pretty sure Moses is missing the point. *Who am I*, he asks, *that I should go?* As if this were all about him. As if he is the most important person in this conversation. To some people, I suppose it sounds like humility: Moses protesting and objecting and insisting that he is not up to job. But to me he sounds kind of self-involved. He is so eager to steer the conversation back to himself, so focused on his own crippling sense of inadequacy, that he misses something important. *God already knows that Moses is not up to the job.* And God does not care. God never has.

Remember how the story begins? When Moses first notices the burning bush, and turns aside to see what he can see, a voice calls him by name, and tells him to take off his sandals. This is holy ground. Then that voice from the bush says this: *"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."*

Right there, in that moment, Moses should have seen that this is a set-up.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel. Sound familiar? We know these people. We know them from the Book of Genesis. All summer long we have followed the many twists and turns of this deeply dysfunctional family, heard all the bizarre ins and outs of their massive, multi-generational soap opera. We have seen them backstab, betray, manipulate and mess up. We know these people. These people are a train wreck.

But they are also and at the same time God's people. So much so that, when God shows up in the burning bush—when God gets ready at long last to redeem God's people from their bondage in Egypt—these are the names by which God wants to be known: *Abraham, Isaac, Jacob.* Call them God's collaborators, God's character references, God's hand-picked cast of characters in the drama of redemption. *Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel.* The kind of people God calls. The kind of company God keeps.

Moses should have seen that this is a set-up.

IV

But Moses does not get it. Not yet, anyway. He's still looking for an out, still trying to talk his way out of this, still hoping and praying that God has made some sort of mistake. *Who am I*, he asks, *that I should go*?

But God never does answer that question. God does *not* say, "Moses, I've reviewed your resume and checked out your references and clearly you are the best qualified candidate for the job." God does *not* say, "Moses, you may feel like a failure now, but you just need my 7-part sermon series on Discovering The Champion Within. It's available on CD or DVD for a gift of \$50 dollars or more. Just go to www.burningbush.org." God does *not* say, "Moses, you are the most gifted, the most pious, the holiest human being of your generation and so I am sending you."

No. "*Who am I?*" Who cares? "*I will go with you.*" That is God's only reply. That is all that Moses gets. And, really, that is all that Moses needs.³ Of course he is not up to the job. He has been out in the wilderness for forty years. He's old and tired and smelly and maybe just a wee bit mentally unstable because he spends most of his time talking to sheep. If he waits around in the desert until *he* feels ready to go, well, he will never go. He will die out there in Midian and his people will remain in their chains.

But this is not about Moses. It's not about his virtues or talents or qualifications. It's not about Moses at all; it is about the God who will go with him. God will stand him up to speak to the Pharaoh; God will guide his steps as he guides his people; God will go with him and give to him everything he needs for the work he has to do.

Is Moses the perfect person for the job? Hardly. But God will go with him. And that will be more than enough.

V

So, I guess you know where this is going. Who are we, that we should go? Doesn't matter. Never has. It turns out the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, of Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel—and Moses—well, this God is not too terribly picky. God knows that we are the church of last resort. God knows that a lot of us are still not sure what we are doing here. God knows how far we fall short. But that does not let us off the hook. If anything, it makes matters worse. It means we had better be on the lookout for burning bushes. God is almost certainly out to get us. God has always had a soft spot for people like us.

And there is plenty for us to do. The suffering still cry out. Captives still dream of deliverance. God still longs—God still intends—to finish what God has started; to redeem the entire creation; to fully and finally make all things well. But the work is urgent and the time is short and God simply does not have the luxury of high standards. God can not afford to wait around for people who are good enough, and smart enough, and pure enough and perfect enough. God will just have to get by with people like us.⁴

We may not think we are up to the job, and that is ok. We're not. But what if God will go with *us*? What if God *wants* to do this...through us? What if God always intended to make the world new by working with flawed, fallible, ordinary people...like us?

Wouldn't that be something?

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Notes

¹ “All shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians.” Genesis 46:34. Assuming the Egyptians hate *all* shepherds (and not just foreign ones), it could be that the shepherding of the Egyptian-born and bred Moses represents rock bottom.

² At least according to Kathryn Matthews Huey and Susan Blain. See their reflection on congregational vitality: “*We Have Come A Long Way: The Bridging Group*.” Available:
http://www.uccvitality.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=85&Itemid=146

³ “It is remarkable that God sets [God’s] ready help alone against all to overcome every fear and to take away every scruple; as much as to say, it matters not who Moses is, or what may be his strength, so that God be his leader. . . . although our own weakness may alarm us, think it enough that [God] is on our side.” John Calvin. *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*. Trans: Rev. Charles William Bingham. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), pp.70-71.

⁴ One of the most profound insights of Exodus found expression in the famous line from President Kennedy’s Inaugural Address: “Here on earth, God’s work must truly be our own.” Or, in the words of Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann: “...the grand intention of God has become a specific human responsibility, human obligation and human vocation.” “The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander Keck et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), p.73.