

**THE NARRATIVES OF OUR FAITH:
A STORY OF CALLING**

Sermon preached by The Reverend Sarah Segal McCaslin

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Exodus 3:1-15

He fled the only home he'd ever known. Barely had time to grab a toothbrush and a change of socks before he was out the door, heading East to 'who knows where', anywhere but there. It had happened so quickly. One moment, he was taking a walk through the construction site; the next instant, he's digging a hole in the sand to hide the corpse. He still couldn't grasp what had come over him in that moment- was he defending the life of another or just acting out some fantasy of vigilante justice? In either case, he thought the matter would stay a crisis of his conscience alone, until he realized that others had witnessed the deed.

Word got back to his adoptive father, a man with his own quick temper and limited capacity for empathy, and now he was fleeing for his life, convinced that he was drawing his last breaths.

Somehow, by chance or fate, he escapes with his life. His wanderings lead him to a bucolic land of rolling hills and bleating sheep. The simple life, he thinks, with a sigh of relief, as he sits down by a well and draws a long drink of cool water. And then, struck again by a bolt of good fortune, he meets his future wife, the daughter of a holy man. They marry and have a son. He is content; he feels safe; he even begins to forget that troubled past.

He actually enjoys taking care of his father-in-law's flock of sheep. He likes the solitude of the wilderness, the mountain breezes, the steady rhythm of his feet and his heartbeat as he strolls toward the next grazing spot. One day, a day he never forgets, he feels adventurous and takes the flock a bit farther than usual, up the side of a mountain. He's looking for a breathtaking vista, one of those big views that puts the wideness of the earth in perspective. But before he has a chance to settle down to enjoy the view and a nice long nap, he spots something out of the corner of his eye.

A brush fire, or so he thinks. Surprising, since there had been such good rain that year. He looks closer, and he rubs his eyes in disbelief. Flames are leaping off a bush, but the leaves sparkle green and dewy, as cool and fresh as the dawn. Nothing burns, no smoke rises in the sky, no ashes fall to the ground. The flames dance, red and orange and blue, and the green leaves flutter in the movement of the dance.

That's when he hears his name. It comes from outside himself, clearly distinguishable and yet not human. The voice repeats his name again. His heart pounds, and he wonders if he is suffering from food poisoning or some kind of delirium. Yet before he knows what he is doing, he responds to the voice, 'Here I am.' It comes out like a squeak, squeezed out through his constricted throat, muffled by his hands as he rubs his face to clear his sight and wake himself up from this weird dream.

And then the voice continues. There is no denying now that the source of this voice is not in his head. The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the voice says. The God of the Hebrews, the voice says. The God of his birth family, the voice says. The same God his sister and mother claimed was present at his own birth, saving him from certain death at the hands of the one who would become his adoptive father. The God that watched over and sustained the Hebrew people through years of enslavement.

This God knows what he has done. Knows about the one he killed; knows about his efforts to cover it up; knows that he fled the scene of the crime. He can run no further. His past has caught up with him. What he did was wrong, and he prepares to receive whatever justice this God will mete out. He crumples to the ground. He buries his head in his hands and sobs. For the child who would not know his father; for his wife who would struggle to support their family as a widow; and for the one whose life he stole those many years ago. He tears at his tunic, ripping the fabric; he grabs big fistfuls of dust and covers his head and neck. His tears mingle with the dust, creating great streaks of mud down his face. And in front of him, the flames continue to dance and the leaves flutter. And the voice continues to speak...

He is confused. He wipes his nose on the back of his hand, tries to clear away the fog of grief that surrounds him. God has come for another reason. God is sending him back to the place of his transgression, not to receive punishment, but to liberate the community of his birth from their oppressor. God is calling him to confront the power of his adopted family and demand freedom for those held captive.

Was it possible that this voice, this God, has mistaken him for someone else? Who is he to be some kind of hero or liberator for a people who know him only as a murderer and an impostor, raised as he was in royal courts with the privileges of the ruling class? He is a shepherd now, a husband and a father, a simple man. But the voice called his name, called it twice, even, and he responded, 'Here I am.' There is no mistake.

He realizes he is in the presence of God- that alone has become clear to him by now. Yet before he can stop the words, he finds himself questioning God out loud: 'Who am I that I should be the one you choose to do this thing?' 'Who am I?' he repeats again to himself. 'Who am I?' And for the second time that day, he crumples to the ground in tears, knowing somewhere deep in his gut that there can be only one answer to the question.

'I will be with you' answers the voice. And that was that. It did not matter who he was, or what he had done in the past, or how he felt about the task he had just been given. What mattered was that the voice, God, was choosing him. There would be no rational explanation, no relief from the guilt of his crime, no comforting words of his worth; there would be only a promise, a promise that the one who had chosen him would not leave him.

And for the second time that day, he finds that he can not swallow his words in the face of the divine, and he asks, 'If I do what you say, and I tell the people that you are the one who sent me to do this thing, and they ask me your name, what will I answer them?' He asks this not for clarification, but for his own protection, for he fears that he will not be believed, and that the people will laugh, or worse, will throw him in the very same river which had served as his

salvation in infancy. He wants proof to offer the skeptics, proof that he is not some lunatic who suffers hallucinations of burning bushes and the voice of God.

And the voice answers him in what sounds like a riddle, 'I AM WHO I AM.' He doesn't understand, but he finally knows better than to ask for an explanation.

Then the voice disappears, and the flames stop dancing and the green leaves stop fluttering. There he sits, in a dusty mess on the ground, with the sheep contentedly bleating on the hillside, and the wind blowing gently around him; and the peace is startling to him.

He could not have known then the magnitude of the journey he was embarking upon. He knew only that he had met God, and that God, for reasons that would never be explained to him, had taken the initiative and called him to a task of mythic proportions. Upon reflection, he found surprising comfort in knowing that God had not answered his question, 'Who am I?' because it was irrelevant. All that was relevant was the promise, 'the one called I AM will be with you.'

Years later, what would seem like many lifetimes later, he would have an opportunity to reflect back upon God's initial calling. Sitting on another hillside, not unlike the one he sat upon that day, in a far away land after a long journey, he stared out over a breathtaking vista, the kind that puts the wideness of the earth in perspective. He laughed a little when he thought of his younger self- sniveling in the dirt and dumbstruck by the miracle of that burning bush. He had seen so much since then. And he knew God with such a greater confidence and deeper intimacy, that he smiled when he remembered those first moments, hearing that voice- a voice that had since become as familiar as his own. And he thought again about the questions he asked and about the responses God gave.

'Who am I that you call me into service, God?' He had asked the wrong question the first time, and God, in God's mercy, had not answered it. But then God presented him with another chance, and without knowing it then, he had asked the right question, 'Who are you that you call me into service, God?' And God's answer was the key that unlocked the door to his future and cleared away the past, equipping him for what God would ask of him. God took the initiative and called him into service. God promised to abide with him through all that would take place. God was and would always be the great I AM, in whom all things became possible.

And what about him? What had been his role? He had, in time, responded to God's initiative, allowing the promises of God to live in and through him. It didn't happen right away, and from time to time he required proof, to allay his fears and liberate him from his own doubts. Over time, he learned to trust that what God promised, God delivered. He stopped questioning whether God had made a grave mistake in choosing him. He stopped rationalizing God's choice to call him in the first place. He stopped trying to achieve the unachievable worthiness he thought was required to be in God's service. By simply accepting the call, he accomplished the most difficult thing he had ever done, which was saying a lot in his case.

As he closed his eyes on that farther hillside, having reached the end of his journey and the end of his life, he knew that the same God who had called him was still beside him, showing him a land flowing with milk and honey, where generations of his beloved people would live and

prosper. They would face the same challenges he had- receiving God's call and then turning away from it in fear and doubt. They would question their worthiness to be called the people of God, and they would seek the easier comfort of idol worship where less was expected. But God's initiative would not fade; God's commitment to them would never grow less fervent. And inevitably, the people would return, promising again to accept the call and believe not in their own capacity, but in God's capacity to fill them up and make them wholly new. It would be a cycle that would repeat itself from generation to generation.

God would even take a new initiative with the people, joining the earthly community in human form, altering the call to one of discipleship. God's initiative would widen, encompassing all who declared faith in the great I AM, and all who declared faith in the new initiative of the one called Christ.

Of course, he couldn't have known any of that on that first day, as he stared at the red and orange and blue flames, dancing over the fluttering green leaves. And he couldn't have known how his story would be transmitted, across millennia, across the far reaches of the globe, landing in the lives of others like him- people with a past they regretted and a future they couldn't discern; people with their own doubts of worthiness; people who could not fathom that God would and did take the initiative in their lives; ordinary people being called into service by the great I AM, to accomplish God's work on earth. He couldn't have known, and yet it was so.