



WESTMINSTER
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I Will Be with You

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But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt you shall serve God on this mountain (Exodus 3:11-12).

Dr. Steven Tuell, professor of Hebrew and Old Testament at the Pittsburgh Seminary, tells of having sat through lots of rather predictable commencement speeches exhorting graduates to pursue their dreams and follow their own goals, no matter what. But he has an interesting take on all of that. He asks, “but what if they are the wrong goals? What if they find themselves, having accomplished their ends at last, wondering whether those ends really matter at all?”¹ It’s a great question. It reminds me of Joseph Campbell’s comment about how so many people spend their entire lives climbing some sort of ladder, only to discover that the ladder was leaning against the wrong wall.

Our culture today seems to celebrate individual desires above all else. People talk as though whatever a person wants is good simply because he or she wants it, as long as it doesn’t break any laws or hurt anyone else in some conspicuous way. But that’s a pretty impoverished notion of the good, isn’t it, at least by biblical standards? What I want may be good or not so good, but the mere fact that I want it tells me nothing at all about how God sees it.

Steve Tuell goes on to talk about how God’s

¹ Steven S. Tuell, “Along the Way,” in *Panorama*, Summer 2015, 2f.

purposes for our lives are often so much greater than we imagine, and therefore greater than we could ever plan to achieve. He reminds us how Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin in 1927 quite by accident, when he noticed that some bacterial cultures he was growing were killed by mold that contaminated his Petri dishes. Fleming discovered penicillin not because he was looking for it, but because he was open to discovery, and was in the right place at the right time, and paid attention to what he saw. Christians call this “providence” when some good thing comes out of it.

Steve says there is another story about Fleming that might not be true, but deserves to be. Late in his life, according to the story, Fleming was given a tour of a spotlessly clean, state-of-the-art medical lab, and someone said to him, “Imagine what you could have discovered if you had had all of this at your disposal!” Fleming replied, “Not penicillin.”

God has a plan for each of our lives, and since God is so much greater and wiser than we are, God’s plan is always grander and better and ultimately more satisfying than our own. If that’s true, then we’re most likely to find the real purpose of our lives, and our deepest satisfaction, when we pay attention to the signs of providence all around us.

Dr. Ron Peters mentioned an African proverb in his seminar last week to the effect that if you want to find something you have to know what it looks like. Otherwise you won’t recognize it when you see it. At one level that’s obvious enough, but at another level it points to a deep

and important truth. The truth is, signs of God presence and providence are everywhere, and people who know what to look for see them all the time. But to those of us with untrained eyes, God sometimes has to show up in more dramatic ways in order to get our attention. So once in a while there is a burning bush.

Moses had no idea at first who it was that showed up one day when he was minding his own business, tending his father-in-law's sheep. I imagine that tending sheep is a pretty dull business, so almost anything out of the ordinary would be a welcome diversion. But what really caught Moses's eye was this bush that seemed to be on fire, and yet it was not consumed. "That's strange," he thought. "Better see what's going on there."

It turns out, an angel of the Lord was lighting up that bush Moses saw, and the voice of God called him by name. "Moses. Moses!" Now I can never remember the names of most bushes or plants, but I'm pretty sure that if a bush knew *my* name I would be fascinated and terrified by the mystery all at once – which, by the way, is the very definition of the "holy" that Rudolf Otto gave us a hundred years ago: the mystery that fascinates and terrifies all at once.

"Take your shoes off, Moses," the voice says. "This is holy ground you're standing on." I suppose if we stopped to remember that God is everywhere we might realize that, in a sense, all ground is holy ground, and we might treat our whole planet with greater love and care and respect than we do. But for the moment, in this particular story, God is mostly interested in getting

Moses's attention.

It's a striking thing that God has to introduce himself. Moses does not really know God yet, though of course, like the rest of us, Moses has heard of God and knows a little something about God. But now God has to make a deeper introduction. "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." God does all the talking at first, while Moses is afraid even to look in God's direction, and he turns his face away. In the long run, Moses will come to know God better. There will even be times when he challenges God, but Moses will never take God for granted the way some people do today. God will always be holy to him. Moses will always remember that God is God and he is not, and there will never be any question about who owes obedience and reverence to whom.

A conversation ensues and Moses learns that God is not just paying a social visit. God wants Moses to do something. God wants Moses to go down to Egypt and tell the ruler of one of the world's great superpowers to free the very slaves on whom Pharaoh's power rests. Moses is not happy about this, and he asks, sensibly enough, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt? I'm just a shepherd now, working for my father-in-law. Who am I to take on Pharaoh?"

But God says, "I will be with you." That's it. I will be with you. If Moses really understood who it was that was calling him, he might not have been quite so terrified. Pharaoh may be impressive by the world's standards, and his own people may bow down to him, and other nations

may fear Pharaoh's army, but the nations and their rulers are like drops in a bucket to God, like dust on the scales, as Isaiah will put it some centuries later. "I will be with you." That's all Moses needs to know, if he truly believes it. God has a plan, and God has called Moses to be part of it, and the purposes of God will not be defeated.

"All right," Moses say. "Suppose I go to the people of Israel and tell them you sent me to deliver them. What if they want to know your name? What do I tell them?" Moses knows that these people are not about to start a slave revolt against the most powerful man in the world just because some stranger comes along and urges them to do it. But God says, "I AM WHO I AM. Say to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.' ... This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered through all generations."

Do you see what happens? Moses asks, "Who am I, that I should do this thing?" and God's answer essentially is, "I will make you who you need to be. I am the ground of your being. The reason you are here, Moses, is that I AM. The reason the Israelites are there is that I AM." In fact, they are called "Israel" because their ancestor Jacob strove with God. That's what the name "Israel" means.

In short, Moses finds out who *he* is by learning who *God* is, and by obeying God's call for his life. And that's the way it is with all of us in the end, isn't it? We find out who we are, who we were really meant to be, by listening to God. We may start out with our own plans. We may want to pursue some career, raise a family, achieve some

level of success, but we don't know who we really are, what our ultimate purpose is in this world, until we come to know God.

Like Moses, many of us have no idea of the presence and power of God until God shows up in some more or less dramatic way. We have our burning bush experience, and at first we don't even know what it is or what to make of it. God calls out to us and then, like Moses, our first impulse is to hide our face and turn away. And when the voice from that bush begins to tell us what God would have us do, we don't think we're up for the task. Who am I to do that? Who am I to face this challenge?

Most of us had plans once upon a time, the ones we talked about at commencement when people asked us what we wanted to do. We had our own agendas, and we thought they would tell us who we are. But then we discovered that God meant for us to become someone else, and the person God meant for us to be turned out to be bigger than we ever intended. Not more famous, necessarily. Not more successful, as the world measures success. But bigger. Better. More gracious and generous and compassionate. Closer to the image of God in which we were created.

You see that theme all throughout the Bible. Paul had an agenda when he was a young man. He was convinced that he could please God by keeping all the commandments, and impress God even more by stamping out that new sect that call themselves Christians. Then he met Jesus on the way to Damascus,

and before long he was using all his gifts and passion and energy to build up the very church he had been committed to tearing down. Now he says he's learned to be content in all things—when he has everything and when he has nothing, when he's lifted up and when he's brought low. He says, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me," and by "all things" he means not his own agenda but all the things God has called and chosen him to do.

At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells his followers to go and make disciples of all nations. We hear that sort of thing and we ask, "Who am I, that I should make anyone a disciple?" Of course, in the deepest sense, we can't really make disciples for Jesus. Jesus himself does that. But we can invite people to meet him, and follow him, and we can show by the way we live, imperfect as we are, how the grace and love of God can strengthen us, and begin to make us a new creation.

Most of us won't discover some new miracle drug, or lead an entire people out of captivity. Our calling is likely to be more modest, but it will be real and it will matter, whatever it is, because it will come from God, the great I AM in whom we live and move and have our being.

Maybe you'll be called to be a caregiver, in ways that you never expected, but as you grow into that role you'll discover a depth and breadth to what love is that you never would have known otherwise. Maybe you'll come to see your talents and abilities not just as tools for your own personal advancement and success but as gifts from God for the benefit of others. Maybe you'll feel a

calling to use some of the wealth and resources you've accumulated along the way, not just to pass it all on to your children who don't really need it but to make some of it available in helpful ways for other people who do.

We find out who we are, who we were meant to be, when we come to know who God is. Sometimes God has to show up in a burning bush to get our attention, and often it's the trials and challenges in life that turn our attention away from our narrow, preconceived agendas and point us in the direction of God's providence and God's will for our lives.

We cling to the familiar because it feels secure, and we want security above all else. But the great irony is, we find real security in the end not by holding on to what we wanted for ourselves but by going where God wants us to go and doing what God wants us to do. Along the way we discover that trusting God is the true source of all our peace, and we really can do all things through God who strengthens us.

We learn eventually, as Moses and Paul and people of faith throughout the centuries have learned, that God will be with us, no matter what. And that will be enough. It will be more than enough. It will turn out to be the foundation for all we ever really wanted.



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