

## *Winning at Work*

4<sup>th</sup> Weekend after the Epiphany – January 28/29, 2006

### Sermon Background Study

*Exodus 3:1-14 (NRSV)*

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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." <sup>4</sup>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." <sup>5</sup>Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." <sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>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, <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup>So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." <sup>11</sup>But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" <sup>12</sup>He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

<sup>13</sup>But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" <sup>14</sup>God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

*God calls Moses to a new career, a new vocation.  
When it comes to our own careers, to what vocation  
does God call us?*

#### *Why does God harden Pharaoh's heart?*

Before Moses ever goes to Pharaoh to demand the liberation of the Israelites, God says, ". . . I will harden his [Pharaoh's] heart, so that he will not let the people go" (4:21). Time and again, as the confrontation unfolds, we are told that God hardens Pharaoh's heart and we move on to the next plague.

What sense does this make? What do we fear that it tells us about God? If the point is to get freedom for the Israelites, why wouldn't God soften Pharaoh's heart, as he has softened the hearts of so many? Is God toying with Pharaoh? Are we seeing here a god at work who is simply a different god than the God of the New Testament?

No. God is God, Old and New Testaments alike (more on this next week). The key to understanding the confrontation between God and Pharaoh is to realize that there is more at work here than the liberation of the Israelites. God explains it himself in 9:14-16, when he tells Pharaoh, ". . . I will send my plagues . . . so that you may know there is no one like me in all the earth . . . to show you my power, and to make my name resound through all the earth."

God's confrontation with Pharaoh is not only about freedom for God's people, but also God's sovereignty. The knowledge of God is the expressed aim of the plagues. God is not going to let Pharaoh leave the contest until Pharaoh acknowledges who the one true God really is. This direct contest makes all the more sense when we remember that Pharaoh was seen to be divine by the ancient Egyptians.

This is a bit like the story in Genesis where Jacob wrestles with God all night long (Gen. 32:22-32). Jacob won't let go until he gets the blessing he seeks. In Egypt, God won't let go of Pharaoh. God hardens Pharaoh's heart until not only Pharaoh, but all the people as well, acknowledge that YHWH alone is God. Sadly, the only unequivocal acknowledgement of God comes as the waters pour over Pharaoh's army.

When the book of Exodus opens, the Israelites are enslaved. Seeking refuge from famine, they had come to Egypt a few centuries before and had never gone home. God might have promised Abraham a great nation and some land but the only promise that seems to have been fulfilled is the one about lots of descendants. There are now so many Israelites that Pharaoh fears them. We are told of an Israelite baby, Moses, who is saved from Pharaoh's massacre. We are told how he grows up in Pharaoh's household only to flee into the wilderness after murdering an Egyptian slave master.

But God is strangely absent from all this. We aren't told why the Israelites have ended up slaves. There is no claim that they have sinned and are being punished. There is no claim that God has anything to

do with Moses' birth or rescue. There are no angels or visions. The first two chapters of Exodus are the sort of secular writing that we could find anywhere in the ancient Near East.<sup>1</sup> But finally, we are told, the cries of the slaves "rose up to God." God remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The cavalry has arrived and Moses is about to get a new employer.

#### *A new employer*

When God calls Moses over to the burning bush, God wastes no time telling Moses that he is changing careers. Moses may have been a shepherd in the wilds of Midian, but God is going to rescue his people and Moses is just the man to lead the effort.

Moses reacts as most of us probably would. He wants to know exactly who it is that is sending him on this mission. So God reveals his name.<sup>2</sup> What if the people don't believe me?, Moses asks. God gives

**"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."**

We read through Mark's Gospel in just a few days. It is both brief and action-oriented. Weren't you struck by the nearly breathless pace at which Mark pushes forward the action. Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that Mark gives us Jesus' brief mission statement of sorts. These are the first words Jesus speaks in Mark's gospel.

The time is fulfilled For centuries, the Jews had labored under foreign rule that was often brutal. They waited with great hope and anticipation for the day when God would again rule, when God's kingdom would come, when all the world would see that YHWH is God. Jesus' announces that their waiting is over – the time has come, the moment has arrived!

The kingdom of God has come near Jesus announces that, yes, God's rule is about to burst upon them; the story is coming to a climax. God will again be king. There will be no room for Caesar or any other pretenders to lordship. There can be only one Lord in God's kingdom (and it will turn out to be Jesus!).

Repent Jesus is not inviting his fellow Jews to join some sort of social club. Rather, he invites them to recognize and to regret that they have been wrong-headed in their approach to being God's people. Jesus invites them to abandon their own agendas and follow his. This is not about simply being sorry for what they did; Jesus calls them to turn 180° and follow Jesus down a new path, God's true path.

Believe in the good news The word "believe" can throw us off here; it makes it all seem too intellectual. Instead, Jesus speaks here of trust, of embracing Jesus and his proclamation with our whole being. The good news is that Jesus is Lord, not anyone or anything else. Our loyalty and devotion must lie with Jesus.

Moses the power to do miraculous signs. But I don't speak well, Moses reminds God. God assures Moses that God will be his mouth. Finally, Moses admits he just doesn't want to do this, "O my Lord, please send someone else." Understandably frustrated with Moses, God gives him Aaron, his brother, to speak for him. This is to be Moses' vocation and there is just no getting out of it.

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we too get a new employer. God may not insist that we change careers, but God does insist that we find God's purposes in our work every bit as much as in our family and the rest of our life. Many of us are too used to separating our "church life" from the "real world," when in truth, there is only one real world and that world is God's world.

#### *Making a living or making a dying?*

How many of us begin our week shouting "Thank God it's Monday?" How many of us would count ourselves among the "working wounded?" How many of us identify with Dilbert? . . . How are we ever to reconcile what God calls us to be with what too many workplaces demand of us?

It is a little hard for us to be God's light to the world if most of our week is given to mind-numbing work or to cut-throat business combat. How are we to practice sacrificial, self-giving love in the workplace? What could those words possibly mean in the modern American corporation? What would it look like?

Having spent much of my adult life in the "real world" of American business, I am not naïve. I've experienced the pressures of winning at work, the costs demanded of me and my family. I've come to believe that a disciple of Jesus Christ can be employed in almost any work, any profession. We are to work hard and to work well. But it begins with finding a calling, a God-given calling, in our work. And . . . here comes the hard part . . . if we cannot find that calling, if we cannot find God's purposes in our work, then we are to find work that we can do for the glory of God. Only then will we find the winning we seek.

<sup>1</sup>Donald Gowan, in his book, *The Theology of Exodus*, helped me to see the absence of God in Exodus chapters 1 and 2 for what it is.

<sup>2</sup>YHWH is the common English transliteration of the Hebrew name God reveals to Moses at the burning bush. This name was so sacred to the Jews that it came to be spoken only by the high priest, only in the temple, and only on one day each year, Yom Kippur. When Jews read their Scripture and came upon the name of God they would say *adonai* instead, the Hebrew word for "Lord." In keeping with the Hebrew tradition, our English translations substitute LORD (all small caps) in the Old Testament at each place YHWH appears. Thus, "the LORD God" in our Old Testaments is actually "YHWH God" in the Hebrew.

## *Thru the Bible* Daily Bible Readings

January 29 – Feb 5

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1 A day for reflection and catching up</b> What has surprised you the most in your reading so far?</p>	<p><b>Day 2 A day for reflection and catching up</b> Based on what you've read so far, if you could ask God one question, what would it be?</p>
<p><b>Day 3 A day for reflection and catching up</b> What in your Old Testament reading has pointed you toward Jesus?</p>	<p><b>Day 4 Exodus 15-17; Proverbs 1</b> Manna from heaven and water from a rock</p>
<p><b>Day 5 Exodus 18-20; Proverbs 2</b> The Israelites arrive at the mountain of God. The people cannot touch it, must Moses must ascend the mountain. God gives Moses the Ten Commandments.</p>	<p><b>Day 6 Exodus 21-24; Proverbs 3</b> More of God's instructions for his people. Note esp. 23:1-12. Doesn't sound much like some people's caricature of the Old Testament, does it.</p>
<p><b>Day 7 – Exodus 25-27; Proverbs 4</b> The ark and the tabernacle</p>	

## Sermon Notes

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### **Reading *Thru the Bible* with us? Got Questions? Want to go deeper? Wondering what God's Word is for *your* life?**

When we begin to read the Bible regularly, questions pile up. A good study Bible can help. Our library has some excellent commentaries. There are lots of good resources available on the web. But it is very helpful, even essential, to explore these questions with other Christians. We read Scripture as a believing community.

In Scott Engle's Sunday morning class we'll be talking each week about the Bible readings from the week before. We'll seek to get a better understanding of the readings. We'll put them in context and we'll look for connections to other portions of Scripture. And we will consider what they mean for us.

More than 200 adults are part of this class. It is a great opportunity to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. We have small groups in the class. We have a breakfast on occasion. In 2006, we'll be creating more opportunities for people to connect with one another.

We invite you to join us as we journey through the entire Bible this year.

**Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.**

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

We all work at something. We might work in a large corporation or a small business or a not-for-profit. Our work might be raising a family. We might volunteer. We might keep the books, or teach, or work in a lab. The question is this: Do we feel a calling to do the work we do? Do we believe that we can fulfill God's purpose for us in the work we do and where we do it? It is very helpful to remember that work was part of the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve made their tragic choice.

How would you know if God has called you to your work? Have you ever felt called? What was it like? Why would a sense of calling in our work be important to disciples of Jesus? You might share some stories about work to which you felt called and work to which you did not feel called. If you don't feel called to the work you do, to what *do* you feel called? What are some steps you could take to be able to do such work?

We are blessed in that God has given us diverse talents, gifts, and callings. What should all work done to the glory of God share in common? To put it another way, how can our work, all our work, glorify God? Can we glorify God in work to which we do not feel called? How? Could such work become a calling in itself?