

“Who, Me?”

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Exodus 3:1-15

Romans 12:9-21

In my last year of college, I took a study trip to the Holy Land. Our final 2 days there, we took winding roads through the Sinai Peninsula. Our bus traveled through these dark mountains that looked like God had held giant handfuls of very wet beach sand, and let it slip between fingers, plop plop plop, dribbling into the form of mountains.

We came to the base of what tradition says is Mount Sinai, which the bible also calls Mount Horeb. Most of us were college seniors, moving on to whatever would be next for our lives. Each of us, in our own way, was struggling to understand what God was calling us to do with our one, precious life.

We left our hotel to begin our journey to climb Mount Sinai at 2 in the morning. Stepping off our bus, we entered into a canopy of black darkness. The dry desert earth scraped beneath our feet. Out of the pitch dark we saw small glowing orange lights coming towards us, then smelled the cigarette smoke in the air. There was an even stronger smell, an animal smell, hovering in the air.. Shadows emerged from the darkness, lit by the ember of cigarette tips. Young men in white tunics and keffiyeh headdresses approached us. One grabbed me by the elbow and told me softly, “Come,” as he gently led me toward a camel.. After being hoisted into the seat, my foundation was shaken as the camel moved from a sitting position to its full, leggy height. We began our ascent of the mountain, where, tradition says, God spoke to Moses, and later shared with Moses the covenant God would make with God’s people. In our group of young adults, some believers, some skeptics, we began our journey to see if we too might find holy ground.

Two-thirds of the way up the mountain the trail became too steep and rocky for the camels, so we were told to dismount and to climb the rest of the way to the top of the mountain. Once we reached the top, out of breath, we sat, watched, and waited... and waited... until the sky turned colors and that first ray of sunlight beamed from between the mountain peaks surrounding us. We watched in silence and wonder as we tried to feel whether this indeed was the holy ground on which Moses encountered God.

We also looked out on this land that the bible says that God promised Moses, which was once the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. We know that this is contested land today, just as it was not an empty land when the bible records it was promised to the Hebrews— it already belonged to many other tribes. How many times in history have God's people claimed that a land was chosen for them by God, when it was already home to another people, another tribe? Part of our college study trip through Jordan, Israel, and Palestine was to hear from the varying groups that hold a religious, historical, and/or political claim to the land that is holy to so many stories.

On our way back down the mountain, we stopped at a monastery called St. Catherine's Monastery. There, within the walls of the Monastery, sits a humble bush. A sign there proclaims that this is *the* burning bush, where God spoke to Moses so many years ago. I saw it for myself— it looked kind of like a sage green version of my hair on a particularly humid day. After the splendor of sunrise on Mount Sinai, I have to say I was a bit underwhelmed by the bush that God used to speak a fiery message to Moses. I am pretty doubtful that it is the actual burning bush, although I suppose that if God was able to make a bush burn without being consumed, God could also preserve a humble bush for thousands of years, reminding us to take notice that God can show up in humble things and humble people.

Moses was a humble person, after all. On this same mountain, Moses probably thought that he would live a quiet life, tending sheep, and keep on going, not being noticed. Remember— Moses had fled there after he had lost control of his anger. Moses had seen an Egyptian beating one of his own Hebrew people, and in a fit of rage Moses murdered that man. Terrified of what he did, and fearful of the consequences, Moses fled to the wilderness, tending sheep and trying not to be noticed. But God had noticed him, and God had noticed the cries of God's people, groaning under the oppression of enslavement. God needed Moses to notice with God, and to be God's instrument in bringing forth freedom. "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, The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

It is hard being noticed when you have been trying not to be noticed. "Who, me?!" Surely you can't mean me! So Moses throws up a bunch of excuses. For each one, God had a good response.

- 1) Let's say I tell them the God of their ancestors sent me, and they ask me who, what is this God's name? *I don't even know your name.* What shall I tell them?

- “I AM WHO I AM” Tell them I AM has sent you.” God’s name in this revelation is a verb, not a noun. This is because God cannot be contained within the limits that a name offers. Still today, many Jews will not say God’s name. This does not seem to make Moses’ task any easier.
- 2) They will not believe me or listen to me. They will tell me, “the Lord did not appear to you.”
 - God gave Moses a couple of tricks to wow any doubters: he can now turn his staff into a serpent. He can also pull his hand out of his cloak, diseased with whiteness, and then put it back into his cloak and bring it out, looking brown and normal.
 - 3) Moses believed he wouldn’t be doing God any favors by speaking on behalf of God. “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.”
 - Here God promises Moses, “I will be your mouth, and I will teach you what to speak.”
 - 4) “O Lord, please send someone else,” Moses begged.
 - God finally relented and offered to give Moses’ brother Aaron, who was known to be a good speaker, the role of communicating with the Hebrew people. Not only that, we see that Moses’ sister Miriam– the one who conspired to rescue Moses as a baby from the Nile– leads the Hebrews by inspiring them with music and dance.

On that point about worrying about speech, I really do feel for Moses. Although it may seem to you that I can speak with you with some amount of ease, I want you to know it took me a long time to get to this point. I remember when I was in the seventh grade, I had changed school systems at the most self-conscious age of 12. And while I had once been a bubbly child, that transition when I was twelve years old swept me away from being a confident child to being afraid of my own voice. I began stuttering, when I had never done this before. I remember noticing interesting people, and wanting so badly to connect with them. I would plan out conversations in my mind, so that when I would have encounters with people I would know what to say. But when those encounters happened in real time, I would completely freeze and couldn’t say anything. I felt like my whole personality was trapped inside myself, and I did not know how to let it out.

I feel so much empathy when I meet other kids and teenagers who freeze up in front of adults, because I remember how hard it was to find the power to speak. It’s kind of ironic that a kid like that would grow up to become a preacher, but God works in mysterious ways when God notices you. For me, there were a couple of key teachers

who took notice of me— not because I was exceptionally talented, or intellectually profound. Maybe they saw that I was struggling and wanted to make the path easier for me. Maybe they simply saw the implicit value in me being a child of God. But they were a safe place for me, and they encouraged me, and through them I found a little corner of school where I not only survived; I thrived. At the same time, there were a couple of kids in my new school who noticed and befriended me, not because I was super cool or had any kind of social capital, but they let me be myself. With them the words seemed to come easily, and my personality started to emerge.

In the coming year, God will call each one of us to do something important. It may be big. It may be small. Many of us will get that call, and look behind us— “Who, me?” thinking God is surely talking to someone else. We will come up with all sorts of excuses: I am not smart enough. People will laugh at me. It won’t make any difference. I’m not a leader. *I can’t even talk.*” But do not let those doubts get in the way of what God might do through you. It may be a hard thing, like trying out a new instrument that ends up giving joy to others, once you get past the squeaks, squawks, and honks. It may seem like a simple thing— such as learning the names of the cafeteria workers who serve you lunch. But even what may seem like a small thing to you may make a world of difference to someone who is not regularly noticed and appreciated.

You don’t need to go to the land of our spiritual ancestors in order to stand on holy ground or to be noticed and called by God. At any moment, God might call you to take off your shoes. Some say the real miracle of Mount Sinai was not that a bush burned without being consumed. Maybe the real miracle was that Moses noticed, and he stopped, he took off his shoes, and he listened. May we all take the chance to notice what God is doing, saying, and calling this coming year.