

Sermon

LCA Bishop John Henderson

Opening Worship, Tuesday 2 October 2018

Text: Exodus 3:8a

'I have come down to rescue them...'

Moses, the great leader of the Hebrews, was born in Egypt during a time of great oppression. Pharaoh's personal decree condemned him to death from birth, along with all newborn Hebrew boys. Only a scheming family and a tender-hearted Egyptian princess saved him from that fate. The princess adopted him, named him, and let his mother raise him. Moses grew up in an elite life of luxury, privilege and power.

At first, as a privileged Egyptian, Moses had little to do with his own people. Later, as a grown up, he began to make some clumsy attempts to involve himself in their affairs. He thought he was helping, but they naturally rejected the arrogant efforts of a spoiled young man who thought he knew better. In his attempts Moses didn't stop short of murder. So when Pharaoh sentenced Moses to death once more for the crime of killing an Egyptian, he fled the country, moving down to Midian.

The locals in Midian also saw Moses as an Egyptian. It seemed he had lost his birth identity for good. He married a local woman, daughter of a priest, produced a family, and worked in his father-in-law's business. Moses was an outcast from Egypt and from the Hebrews. He had to settle for life as a stranger in a strange land.

But one day, while out minding the business, something strange distracted him. Like any other inquisitive person, Moses dropped what he was doing and went over to see what it was. We know this as Moses and the Burning Bush, which wasn't actually burning at all. This evening's reading is a small part of that story. God had chosen his man. It changed Moses' life.

Moses had been on a journey away from his people, away from his dubious, criminal past, and away from his God. There, in a foreign land, going about the family business, he had thought he was safe. Yet the God he had left behind now takes him aside to call him into service. The rest, as they say, is history.

Exodus 3 is a pivot point of the Bible. It teaches us so much about God, about the earth, and about humanity. It contains a deep and enduring message. The God of Moses' ancestors is holy. That God has a purpose for Moses, and it begins with his return to Egypt. Naturally, Moses is afraid, but the more he objects, the more God meets his objections.

We learn that the God of the Hebrews, soon to be revealed in the mystery 'I AM WHO I AM,' is not just some local deity, as other gods were in those days. Time and space do not restrict this God. Wherever Moses goes, this God is already there before him, beside him and behind him. This sets the Biblical witness apart from other ancient narratives of people and their gods.

We also learn why God is showing himself and doing these things. That's our theme verse for this evening, Exodus 3:8a. God knows the suffering of the Israelites, and has '*come down to rescue them.*' This is not the God of vengeance and retribution. This is the God of compassion and love – the God of promise, the God of grace.

Also, notice how God arrives. The LORD doesn't chase Moses around the landscape, but simply comes 'down' at the right time. The LORD was already there in the not-so-burning bush before Moses' got there with his father-in-law's flock.

So there's Moses, on a working day, distracted from his business by the LORD. His life is irrevocably changed.

And here we are, momentarily turned aside from our daily business. We have given these few days over to God's affairs among his people. How will we be distracted during our time at Rosehill? Will God come down to send us on a rescue mission, as he sent Moses? It might sound presumptuous, but how will our history, and the history of the world, be different because of this Convention? Like Moses, who are we to speak to the powers of this world?

These thoughts have been on my heart, and maybe yours as well. Our Saviour Jesus has rescued us from a death sentence, yet we still need to go about our regular business. How should we respond if God interrupts all that to send us on a completely different mission? Will the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand allow God to distract it from standard business? How will we know it is God, and not the enemy? These are risky thoughts for the chairperson of a meeting that is about to begin with an over-crowded agenda. My natural impulse is to want to keep order. That's what you expect me to do. But what if God distracts us? Will we, will you, will I allow it? Are we prepared to be surprised?

At the not-so-burning bush God surprised Moses so much that maybe he wished he'd never turned aside to see what was going on. He did everything he could to argue his way out of the situation. He was so stubborn that God eventually became annoyed with him. Had Moses, and later on the people of Israel, been less objectionable, then God might well have got the whole rescue done much more easily and quickly than the 40+ years it ended up taking. But that, I guess, is human nature. God comes down to rescue us, but we still manage to find something to make us unhappy. Hallelujah! With what great patience God loves us!

The messages we will hear from Exodus this week will advise us not to conduct our meeting with a set of predetermined outcomes. Yes, we have carefully and responsibly prepared our business, as we should. Yes, we will treat each other respectfully and listen more than we speak. We will listen, not just to each other, but also to the Spirit. We will listen to the Word. As Lutherans we will be perceptive to the right use of law and gospel, the two kingdoms, the means of grace, and the pastoral ministry through which God serves us. This week, God willing, we will go to sessions well-prepared, listen carefully, speak occasionally, and vote when necessary. As we do those things God will be active, and when God is active, prepare to be surprised. Things might not work out the way you expect.

So this week, let us be ready to listen for God, and maybe to be surprised. God comes down to rescue his people. We know that's true because we have salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord. What remains for us to do now is to listen for his Word, to live the faith, and to follow in his ways.

Amen.