

Called by Name

It was sixteen Januarys ago. It had been a Sunday much like any other. I had gone to church. Listened to my pastor's sermon. Received Holy Communion. Had come home. Watched some of an NFL playoff game. Talked with a friend. Cooked dinner. And prepared to return to the office the next day and start a new week that would probably be much like any other in that corporate workplace.

Later, I made my way over to my mother's house in Surfside Beach. After spending some time with her, I was driving home. It was dark. I was alone in the car. Free—at least for the moment—from the ordinary, everyday responsibilities of family and job. No correspondence, no phone, no emails to distract. In a space, in a time, where my mind could be open. Where it could be receptive.

I made the turn off the main highway. Turned toward Socastee. Turned aside. That's when it happened. The call came so suddenly. Unpredictably. Unmistakably. Undeniably. I could

make no more objections or excuses. In that moment, my life changed. And there was no turning back.

Up until then, that Sunday had been much like any other. We get so caught up in the *dailiness* of life, don't we? We make our plans. We do our own thing. We go about our business. We labor under the delusion that we belong to ourselves; that our lives belong to us. Until we are brought into a space and time that makes us receptive. Gets our attention. Causes us to turn aside.

In the Exodus narrative, Moses has been making his own plans and doing his own thing. His life seems finally to be on a fairly even keel. But it hasn't always been that way for Moses. You remember his story. Moses is born at a time when Pharaoh has ordered all Hebrew baby boys to be drowned in the Nile. But Moses' mother hides him in a basket on the river, where he's found and taken out of the water by Pharaoh's daughter. Through a series of twists and turns, Moses is returned to and nursed by his own mother and then, later, adopted by Pharaoh's daughter and taken into Pharaoh's household. Grown to manhood, Moses comes across an Egyptian beating a Hebrew man. And Moses kills the Egyptian. As a murderer and a

fugitive, Moses flees from Egypt to Midian, where he meets and marries a woman whose father owns sheep.

In this Sunday's reading, we find Moses tending the family flocks. Now shepherding isn't the most prestigious job. But on this day that's been much like any other, he's going about his business. Until he sees something that gets his attention. Something out of the ordinary. Something that makes him turn aside.

This account from Exodus is one of the Bible's best-known stories. It's about Moses. But it's not *only* about Moses.

It's about God. Before the events described here, God has been actively at work—and not only in the life of Moses. God has seen the misery of God's people Israel. God has heard their cries. God knows their sufferings. And now this seeing, hearing, knowing, caring God has come down. Meeting Moses where he is. Offering presence. Offering relationship.

And speaking. The divine voice emanates from a bush on fire. A bush brightly blazing away, but not burning up.

In York Chapel at Duke Divinity School hangs a stunning tapestry of this flaming bush. If I shut my eyes, I can still see it. In the foreground—on holy ground—lies a pair of sandals,

removed and abandoned. For their owner has been called by name. Called by God.

When God calls your name, responding to that call means radical change. But it's human nature to *resist* change. That's what Moses does. After hearing that call, he resists it. Questions it. In today's reading, Moses asks God two questions. And both of them are about identity.

What's the first thing Moses asks? *Who am I, God? Who am I to go and confront the king of imperial Egypt and deliver Israel from slavery? Who am I? What talents and abilities do I have that could possibly be of any use to you? O Lord, do you not see that I am small and weak and not too bright? And clearly not up to the job?*

But God *knows* Moses. God knows Moses' name. In biblical times, names are believed to offer clues about who a person is, about a person's nature. We usually give our children names we like, or name them after family members. But in the ancient world, and even today in some cultures, parents take some time with their babies—to learn something about who they are—before naming them. Moses' own name tells something about him. It means *drawn out*. Drawn out of the water.

Moses has been called by name. So maybe, when Moses asks God *who am I?*, he understands deep down that God knows *exactly* who Moses is. This God who knows Moses also knows his fears and his feelings of inadequacy. The words are no sooner out of Moses' mouth than God is quick to reassure. *I will be with you. Don't worry. I will be with you always.*

But Moses has another question that has to do with identity. The first question, *who am I?* is followed by a second question: *Who are you? Who are you, God? What is your name? You're sending me. When I'm asked who sent me, what do I tell them?* That's Moses' question. And it's our question, too.

Out of a burning bush on Mount Horeb, the answer comes. God reveals God's name. Moses hears the words. *I Am who I Am. This is what you are to say... "I Am has sent me to you."* *I Am*: a name of mystery, a name signified by the letters of the Hebrew verb *to be*. Letters that, in our English-language Bibles, appear as *Yahweh* or sometimes as *Jehovah*. So holy is God's name that many Jews never speak it aloud. *I Am* has always been and always will be the name of our God, who was and who is and who ever more will *be*. God is all about being.

Yet this God is also all about *doing*, all about continuing activity with God's people. So God's name is linked with human names. This is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of Moses. This is the God of Sarah, the God of Rachel, the God of Ruth, the God of Mary. And this is the God of you and me. This is the God who calls ordinary, flawed, fragile human beings to do what God has created us to do.

This is the God who comes down to be in loving relationship with God's people. God comes down to deliver, to send Moses to Pharaoh, to tell him: *Let my people go!* And again, God comes down in Jesus Christ to deliver God's people once for all. Jesus—whose name means *deliverer*—does the saving work he's come to do.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus speaks of the suffering and death that saving work will mean for him. He tells the twelve. And he tells all of us who belong to him.

You are his. For you were bought with a price. You are not your own. Each one of us is charged with relinquishing ownership of ourselves and surrendering our need to be in control. Today we hear Jesus telling us precisely what that means—to deny self. To stop being so preoccupied with our own

business. To be more concerned with God's business. To take up a cross. To let our lives be cruciform, to let our lives be shaped by the cross of Jesus Christ. And to follow wherever he leads.

In other words, to do whatever God is calling *you* to do. This God who has seen your struggles and heard your cries. This God who knows all about you, who knows you intimately. This God who is calling you by name. Calling you to do something specific. Something special. Something unique. God discloses what this is only to you. And nobody else can do it. Only you can do it.

Only you! You know, my sisters and brothers, that every baptized Christian, lay or clergy, is a minister. Of course, not every call is to ordained ministry. With each call comes the gift of discernment. And hearing God call your name is not a once-in-a-lifetime event. Through the seasons of your life, God keeps calling you, calling you to the new things God is doing. Through you.

But maybe you have doubts. Maybe you wrestle with *self-doubt*. Maybe, with Moses, you ask: *Who am I, that I should be able to go and do what you call me to do?* Maybe your first

response is *Oh God, I can't*. I'm not smart enough, not strong enough, not skilled enough.

But the thing is, God who made you knows you even better than you know yourself. God knows you *can* do it! God knows you can, because God is giving every gift you need to do what God calls you to do.

God doesn't call the equipped. If God did, God would not have called Moses. Or called your pastor, who is no Moses! No, God doesn't call the equipped. God equips the called. God has chosen you—and no other—for exactly what God is calling you to do.

And so, beloved, trust that in some particular space and time, you will be turned aside. That your mind and your eyes and your ears will be opened. Maybe what you'll see won't be as spectacular as a burning bush. Maybe what you'll hear won't be as dramatic as rolling, booming thunder. Maybe what you'll hear is a still, small voice.

But the experience will be no less powerful. No less life-changing. To hear this Holy One, this fiery, glorious One, this transcendent One, this One whose name is *I Am*, speaking

directly and personally to you. It humbles. It transforms. It amazes!

This is the One who knows your name. Who calls you by name. Who offers words of assurance: *I claim you as my own. I place my claim on your life. You will find your life in me. And I will be in you. Come to my table. When you are filled with me, I will use you as a vessel to pour out my love. I will use you as my instrument of compassion. And I will send you as my witness to the good news and the redeeming power and grace of Jesus Christ.*

And yours is the high and holy privilege of answering that call. Of saying: *Yes, Lord, Here am I. Here's my life. Send me.*

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.