

What Is That in Your Hand?

Exodus 3:9-12; Romans 12:1-13

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Most of us have had some wonderful surprises in our lives, but I think that none of us has ever experienced a surprise of the magnitude that confronted Moses as he tended the sheep in the land of Midian. Moses had long ago fled Egypt. He became a fugitive because he chose to identify with his heritage, the Hebrew people. Day after day Moses saw the Hebrews enslaved and brutalized by the Egyptians, and on a day he was so overcome with anger that he killed the Egyptian overseer whom he saw beating one of the Hebrews. Now, as a fugitive, he lives in Midian. He is married. He has children. He tends the family's sheep. His experience as a shepherd will be useful in days to come as he shepherds God's people through the wilderness.

Then came the day when a most unusual sight caught his attention. A bush was burning but it was not consumed. And Moses turns aside out of curiosity to see what is happening. Out from the bush comes the audible voice of God calling Moses to rescue the Hebrews from slavery. God is calling Moses to use

- his heritage as a Hebrew,
- his knowledge of the court of Pharaoh, and
- his experience as a shepherd

to free a people and lead them into a land that God is preparing for them.

Paul has the heritage of one of those whom Moses helped to liberate. We heard read from the writings of the Apostle Paul about how God continuing call comes to each one of God's followers. Paul is famous for using long sentences, and after the first half of a long sentence, he often continues by saying "therefore." In the passage that was read this morning, he writes "I urge you therefore..." So what went before?

Let me read Paul's "reason" for urging every follower of Jesus to commit themselves to use all of their spiritual gifts and abilities that they have been given by the Holy Spirit in ministry for the Body of Christ, the Church, and for the care of the world in which they live. Paul writes, "O the depth of the riches and the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has understood the mind of the Lord? Or who has been God's counselor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay him? For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever!"

It is as though Paul is at a loss for enough words to describe his praise for God and the worthiness of God to be served by those who follow God.

In Paul's early life he would have participated in the worship at the Temple that included the offering of animal sacrifices for various reasons. But now, Paul is a follower of Christ, and he has accepted the final, ultimate, sacrifice of Christ on the cross. His praise sounds similar to the closing sentence of The Lord's Prayer that we pray every Sunday; those words that say "Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever."

Therefore, Paul writes, how could anyone who has accepted the sacrifice of Jesus not, at the same time, present themselves to God as

- a living sacrifice,
- a sacrifice of service,
- a sacrifice of ministry for our Lord?

We do not find anywhere in Scripture a complete list of the giftedness that has been given to followers of Christ. Instead there are examples. In the reading this morning there were listed some of the ministries for which followers of Christ have been gifted:

- service
- teaching
- encouragement
- giving
- leadership
- mercy
- hope
- perseverance in times of great difficulty
- diligence
- enthusiasm about the faith
- devotion to prayer
- caring for the needs of others
- hospitality.

The point that Paul is making is that each person who is a follower of Jesus Christ is called to some kind of ministry within the Body of Christ. No exceptions. Paul describes the Church by saying that when all of the people within the Church are working together with the gifts and the abilities that they have been given it is like a healthy human body when all of the organs are functioning properly.

It is important to understand that each of us is asked to

- do what we can do well (sometimes with training),
- do something that we will enjoy,
- do something that is helpful to others.

Too frequently we respond as Moses did at first. I think that I can sum up the response that Moses gave to God by saying, "O Lord, I would like to do what you have asked me to do, but I have several excellent excuses why that is not possible."

God,

- I have never done anything like this before.
- I have a good life, why should I mess it up by getting involved in other people's needs.
- I don't have any experience.
- I don't think I could make a difference.
- I'm busy doing what I'm doing; find somebody else.

And God will say to us what God said to Moses, "What is that in your hand? What is that with which I have gifted you?"

Moses replied, "A staff, a shepherd's staff, a piece of wood."

In the power of God the staff of Moses became the rod of God.

- a rod that would confound the court of Pharaoh;
- a rod that would part the Red Sea and cause the Hebrew children to cross on dry ground;
- a rod that Moses could lean upon as he led the Hebrews in the wilderness;
- a rod that would bring forth water from a rock;
- a rod that enabled Moses to lead the people to the foot of Mount Sinai to receive the Law of God;
- a rod that provided the strength to lead the people to construct the Tabernacle in the wilderness;
- a rod that at the end of his days steadied his journey to the top of Mount Nebo so that he could see the Land of Promise;
- a rod that became the visible reminder of the commitment of his life to the invitation of God.

God's call to the individual and to the Church is always a call

- to risk committing one's life to God;
- to let go of whatever it is that we cling to so tightly for security and be willing to risk some new things;
- to move out of our comfort bubble in which we insulate ourselves;
- to trust that God will never ask us to do anything that God will not help us to do.

When our grandchildren were young we took them to the circus. There were lots of things to enjoy, but the folks who commanded the center ring were the fliers, the trapeze artists. They looked wonderful in their costumes, always the most elaborate of all the performers. But we were not there just to see their costumes.

They climbed the ladders to the smallest of perches near the top of the tent. There were two of them, facing each other across the center ring. They began to swing on their bars, one holding by her hands, the other (the catcher) by his legs.

The two moved higher and higher until suddenly, accompanied by a gasp from the audience, the flier turned loose of her bar and was caught by the catcher. The audience screamed and applauded. We applauded the one who let go and the one who caught her.

Trusting God, in faith, for you and for me, is a lot like that trapeze act. We may look good in the costumes we wear, costumes of

- self assurance,
- independence,
- good reputation,
- positions of responsibility.

But God isn't looking at our costumes. God is looking at all of the ministry that needs to be done and whether we, like the trapeze flier, are willing to let go of that which we hold on to and trust that we will be "caught" by God to help us accomplish that to which we are called. God has never failed to hold on to anyone who is willing to "let go" of your hesitancy and fly.

There is ministry to be done. Everyone is called to be a participant. No one is simply an observer.

What is that in *your* hand?

Amen.