

“Have You Ever Seen a Burning Bush?”

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Exodus 3:1-15

Westminster, Greenville

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Yesterday, the cross country season began for high schools near and far with the Eye Opener meet in Spartanburg. Every time I attend a cross country meet, my memories drift back to when I ran cross country in high school.

I enjoyed it.

I mean—I sort of enjoyed it.

I liked the comradery of my teammates, I liked it when I ran a race, and beat my best time...but the thing about running was that it felt like every race was OVERSHADOWED by a very particular question:

For the next 15-20 minutes, how uncomfortable are you willing to be? That was the question on my mind whenever I stood at the starting line.

This is going to sound like a non-sequitur, but a number of years ago, the author Malcolm Gladwell wrote a book in which he told the story of a doctor named Jay Freireich.

Freireich grew up in Chicago.

He suffered the death of his father at an early age.

His mother was a Hungarian immigrant.

She had to work in a sweatshop, 18 hours a day,

7 days a week, just to pay the rent.

He didn't have a very comfortable childhood.

They lived on shoestrings—he remembers “being sent from store to store looking for a bottle of milk for four cents, because the normal price of five cents was more than the family could afford.”

In other words, Freireich knew what it was to be vulnerable as a child, to suffer as a child.

Gladwell tells this story not because Freireich’s childhood was unique, but because little Jay grew up to be one of the pioneers in his profession.

See, Freireich became a pediatric oncologist.

He was one of the first doctors to pave the way toward successful treatment of childhood leukemia. Back in the 1950s and 60s, when Freireich was first starting out—there was, of course, no cure.

And what Freireich did that no one else had dared to do was try something NEW. At that time, when chemotherapy was given to a child, it would only be given one drug at a time.

Why?

Well, the drugs are extremely toxic.

Give too much, come on too strong, and a child could die from the treatment instead of from the cancer. A cautious approach was the conventional approach...but that meant it was only a matter of time before the leukemia returned.

Freireich suggested a different model: use FOUR drugs at a time. And don’t just do it for a few days or a week. Administer those drugs for months. Or for years.

What do you think the response of the medical community was?

OUTRAGE.
HORROR.

As one colleague recalls:

“The clinical associates thought that what he was doing was completely nuts....They used to stand in the back of the room and heckle.”

Now we have a number of doctors in our congregation.
How many doctors here today really appreciate being HECKLED by your own colleagues?

Right.

But Dr. Freireich didn't have a problem trying a new approach, because the status quo was a death sentence. He cared deeply about those children, he sat for hours with the children that he treated, and in the end, Dr. Freireich helped change childhood leukemia from a disease with no cure to a disease with a cure rate of over 90%.¹

Now...I'm noticing a perplexed look on a few of your faces.

An anecdote about running cross country, ok.

A story about a doctor who helped save the lives of thousands upon thousands of children by taking a risk. I can see some of you asking yourselves, that's nice and everything, but where is this sermon going?

Stay with me.

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*, New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2013.

I don't mean to perplex you.
I don't mean to cause confusion or discomfort for you.
Discomfort is not my goal when you come to church.

I just wanted you to be ready to revisit today's text.
The call of Moses.
You know this story, right?

One day, when Moses is watching the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, he notices a burning bush. But the bush is not consumed.

God speaks to Moses out of the bush.
"Moses, Moses!"
Moses replies, "Here I am."

And God says to Moses:

"I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt..."

And Moses is thinking, Good!

"Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them..."

And Moses is thinking, that's good!

"So...I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

And Moses thinks, "That's NOT good!"
And Moses replies, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?"

Let's pause right there.
Do you recognize that question?
Who among us has never asked that question?

Maybe some of you have asked that question recently.
Who am I?

Who am I...that I should do this thing that I think God wants me to do, but it's going to be a difficult thing to do...I don't think I'm going to do it just yet...who am I?

Who am I...that I should forgive this person who wounded me last week? They were in the wrong, I was in the right. I don't feel like forgiving them yet. Who am I?

Who am I...that I should take on a foster child and rearrange my life? Kids are out of the house, empty nest, we can go on vacation whenever we want to go...surely, God, you're not asking me to give all that up for a vulnerable child in my community...are you? Who am I?

Who am I...that I should change careers, even though it means a loss of security?

Who am I...that I should be patient and kind with this member of my family who sees the world so differently than I do?

Can you hear the conversation going on in Moses' mind?
Who am I to go to Pharaoh?

I've never made bricks for Pharaoh.
I've never suffered with my people under Pharaoh.
If I show up and say to my people:

"Hey y'all, listen up. I saw this bush that was on fire but it wasn't burned up, and then God spoke to me out of the bush, and God told me that Pharaoh is going to set all of us free, and God wants me to lead the way!"

Who's going to believe me?

I'm not doing that!
 I've got a good thing going on here in Midian.
 I've got a comfortable life here in Midian.

“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?”

I've shared with you before the late writer Fred Buechner's definition of call. It's one of my favorites. He said it's the CONVERGANCE of two things:

- a) The deep hunger of God's world, and...
- b) Our own deep GLADNESS in what we're doing—
 to meet that hunger.²

He said when those two things come together in life, that's a call.
 Now I like that definition.

But I don't think Buechner had his eye on Moses when he wrote that. Because sometimes, you and I are called to do things we have NO IMMEDIATE DESIRE to do.

Things that make us uncomfortable.
 Things we would rather avoid.

Do you remember the question I said was hanging over my head in every cross country race...Ben, during the next 3.1 miles, just how uncomfortable are you willing to be?

That's not only a question for runners.
 It's a question for everyone called and claimed by the living God.

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

How uncomfortable—in your life of faith—are you willing to be? What kind of chances, risks—are you willing to take, for the sake of the love of God?

When the late John Lewis was going to Alabama to participate in the Freedom Rides of the mid-1960s, Lewis received calls from friends telling him not to go. The Kennedy White House dispatched someone to meet with Lewis to implore him not to go.

“Don’t go,” those Freedom Riders were told.

“It’s a bloodbath. Be assured, someone will be killed if you [go]...”

In Jon Meacham’s biography of Lewis, he describes it this way: “But they couldn’t stay away. Lewis said, ‘Mob violence ... must not stop [our] striving toward right.’”

Meacham interpreted Lewis’s decision in this way:

“They weren’t thinking pragmatically or even rationally, for their thought was shaped not by the fears of the world they knew but by the hopes of the [world] they were seeking...”³

You know, I told you, at the beginning of this sermon that discomfort is not my goal when any of us come to church.

But you know what?

I lied!

That’s not entirely true.

³ Jon Meacham, *His Truth Is Marching On*, New York: Random House, 2020. I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Tom Are, “There Is No Stopping This,” preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, on April 13, 2025, for this reference in Meacham’s book.

Do you remember the time I challenged you to find a new seat in the sanctuary, so that you might see new people and make new friends? How many of you took me up on that?

Some of you came through the line and told me you did it, and it was great, and some came through the line and told me, Ben, there's no way I'm changing my seat.

And that's fine. I get it.

When I'm very comfortable doing things a certain way, I am the first person who resists change. Just ask my family.

The person most inclined to STEP OUT of a comfort zone?
The person most likely to try something new?
Not the person standing in this pulpit today.

Which is why I need each of you.
You see, I have never in my life, seen a burning bush.
Have you ever seen a burning bush?
I've never seen one—at least, not one that was not consumed and out of which God spoke to me.

But I have heard God speak to me—sometimes, during the past 7 years—through some of you. In a committee meeting, in the privacy of my office, over the phone or in the parking lot...I've had a few conversations through the years in which I left that conversation thinking—you know, that may have been the Holy Spirit, putting words on the lips of that member of this church.

That's why I need you to be the voice that pushes me out of Midian. That's why we need to listen to one another in here, and to our neighbors out there. Because you never know when God is going to show up, and who God is going to speak through...

Derek Thompson wrote an article for *The Atlantic* earlier this year entitled, “The Anti-Social Century.”

He writes about how “Americans are now spending more time alone than ever.

He cites statistics:

Eating dinner, sharing a drink with a friend—
DECLINED by more than 30% in the past 20 years.

Men who watch television—how many men in this room watch television? Men who watch tv now spend 7 HOURS in front of the tv for every hour we spend hanging out with someone outside our own home.

It’s changing our personalities, it’s changing our politics, and even our relationships to reality.”

So...Thompson goes on to cite an experiment conducted by Nick Epley, a psychologist at the University of Chicago’s Booth School of Business. Epley once asked commuter-train passengers to make a prediction:

How would they feel if asked to spend the ride talking with a stranger? Most participants predicted that quiet solitude would make for a better commute than having a long chat with someone they didn’t know.

Then Epley’s team created an experiment in which some people were asked to keep to themselves, while others were instructed to talk with a stranger (“The longer the conversation, the better,” participants were told).

Afterward, people filled out a questionnaire. How did they feel?

Despite the broad assumption that the best commute is a silent one, the people instructed to talk with strangers...reported feeling significantly more positive than those who'd kept to themselves.

"A fundamental paradox at the core of human life," says Epley, "is that we are highly social and made better in every way by being around people. And yet over and over, we have opportunities to connect that we don't take...and it is a terrible mistake."⁴

I wonder if this is where God's call to Westminster comes into play.

In the coming years, I would love to see Westminster grow in its ability to turn strangers into friends. I would love to see our church grow in its awareness of the socio-economic barriers that keep us from being friends with some of our neighbors. I would love to see each of us follow God's call, step out of our own echo chambers, and then figure out new ways to do and be God's church—to help break those echo chambers down.

We've already got good history with this kind of thing, right?

Whether it's by working with formerly incarcerated women and men in Soteria, or whether it's by tutoring students in Pleasant Valley, or whether it's by going on a Witness & Service trip to Cuba I'm convinced that there are opportunities here at Westminster to reach out to neighbors near and far.

⁴ Derek Thompson, "The Anti-Social Century," in *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2025.

I'm just not convinced that God is calling a church as healthy and vibrant, growing like Westminster is growing, to stay put.

To stay comfortable.

To stay in Midian.

Which doesn't mean we're given a privileged view of God's future for us. No...part of the call of God, I think, is trusting God to show us what we need to see, when we need to see it. Trusting God to tell us what we need to hear, when we need to hear it.

Philip Yancey, who has been a Heritage Lecture speaker here numerous times...Yancey tells of a friend of his who once went swimming in a large lake at dusk. While this friend was swimming at a leisurely pace, an unexpected evening fog rolled in across the water.

Suddenly, he could see nothing – no horizon, no landmarks, no objects or lights on the shore. The way the fog diffused the light, he couldn't even tell which direction the sun was setting.

"My friend splashed about in absolute panic," Yancey writes. "He would start off in one direction, lose confidence, and turn 90 degrees to the right, or left. It made no difference which way he turned. He could feel his heart racing uncontrollably. He would stop and float, trying to conserve energy. Then he would blindly strike out again."⁵

At last, he heard—through the fog—a faint voice calling from shore. He pointed his body in the direction of the voice in the fog...

It was the sound of that voice that got Yancey's friend where he needed to go.

⁵ This story from Yancey can be found in multiple places on the Internet, although I am uncertain of the original source. I am indebted to the Rev. Dennis Tedder for making me aware of the story in a sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, Anderson, SC, on June 8, 2025.

It's a wonderful story.

A story about having the courage to trust that voice, that call, when you cannot see what's in front of you.

Of course, it's also a story about getting into the water in the first place. When God has given you the gift of knowing how to swim, it seems to me it's also a story about refusing to stay on the shore, or in Midian, where you know it's nice and comfortable...

(Amen.)