



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

July 21, 2013

"What Is That In Your Hand?" - Genesis 3:16-18; 4:1-5

The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw

I moved from California about seven weeks ago and am starting to get settled here in Hawaii. One of the things I want to begin to do is understand, as best I can, the culture, history and people of Hawaii. To do that, I've asked people for book recommendations. One of the books I was given is a book called, "Eddie Would Go: The Story of Eddie Aikau, Hawaiian Hero and Pioneer of Big Wave Surfing".

Eddie Aikau was an amazing person. He's not just a legend on the North Shore of Oahu but all across the state of Hawaii. He was a guy who loved to surf big waves. He was also a lifeguard on the North Shore. He rescued numerous surfers and swimmers who got themselves in trouble when the waves got really big. People said that if someone was in trouble, "Eddie would go."

As I thought about the story we're going to look at this morning from the life of Moses, I thought about the book I could write based on this chapter from Moses' life. I thought about calling it "Moses Won't Go: The Story of Moses, Israelite Hero and Pioneer of Big Time Excuses."

In today's text Moses will have a life-changing encounter with the living God. When we pick up his story in Exodus chapter 3, Moses seems to be at a dead end in his life. But it's right there, when it looks like his life is essentially over, that he has an encounter with God that will change his life. God calls him to do something Moses does not WANT to do and does not think he CAN do. In Exodus chapters 3 and 4 he gives God

every possible reason why God needs to find someone else.

Let's back up the story to Exodus chapter 3 verse 1.

Exodus 3:1 - *Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."*

⁵Then (God) said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."

Moses was out in the middle of nowhere watching his father-in-law's sheep. The best job Moses could get at this stage of his life was to be in charge of a flock of sheep that didn't even belong to him. This was NOT how Moses thought his life would turn out. Moses' life was at a dead end.

When Moses was a young man, his life seemed full of promise. He

was a rising star. He was an Israelite, who through an amazing series of events, ended up being raised by Pharaoh's daughter. Moses grew up in the corridors of power. He received a fantastic education. He was well connected to the social hierarchy of one of the most powerful empires of his day. But all that changed with one stupid, impetuous decision.

As a young man Moses began to really look at what was going on around him and he did not like what he saw. The Egyptians were mistreating his people. The Israelites had lived in Egypt as slaves for over 400 years. One day, Moses saw an Egyptian beating one of his fellow Israelites and Moses, filled with rage, got in between the Egyptian and the Israelite and Moses ended up killing that Egyptian. Moses tried to cover his tracks by burying the man's body in the sand, but some of his fellow Israelites saw the whole thing. So he ran for his life. That was 40 years ago and Moses is now an 80-year-old man. His life is slipping through his hands. His wealth, his power, his connections are all gone.

Many people feel like their lives are slipping through their hands. You don't have to be 80 years old to have that experience. You can feel like your life is slipping through your hands when you're 80 or 60 or 40 or 20. It's easy for any of us to wake up one day and wonder, "What in the world have I been doing with my life?"

I wonder whether Moses felt that way.

Moses was working at a job that was far below his pay grade. This was not the life he thought he was going to have. Here he was, a once powerful man, taking care of someone else's stinky livestock out in the middle of the Winnemucca, Nevada. He was an 80-year old shepherd.

In the first few verses of Exodus chapter 3, we watch Moses drive his father-in-law's sheep out of the area where he normally led them. Moses is now out of his geographical comfort zone when God barges into his life.

The text that says that he led his sheep to the highlands to "Horeb"—the mountain of God. Later in the book of Exodus, Moses will come back to this mountain and it will be here that he will have another encounter with God.

Mount Horeb is an alternative name for Mount Sinai. Calling it Horeb is like calling New York City, "The Big Apple". It's the same place. It's here on Mount Horeb that God will give Moses the Ten Commandments after he leads his people out of their slavery in Egypt.

God shows up unannounced in Moses' life. God does that a lot. That's what he did to Jacob. Jacob thought that he might run into his brother Esau but instead he runs into God, or maybe better yet, God literally runs into Jacob and they end up in an all-night wrestling match. God shows up unannounced in the lives of people.

That's what happened to Saul on the Road to Damascus. Cocky Saul WAS NOT expecting to be knocked off his horse in Acts chapter 9. Saul WAS NOT planning to do his theological reflection on his backside but that's where he ends up...on his behind! That's the way God is sometimes. He just barges into our lives. God breaks into Moses' life and He does so for a reason. God has a plan for Moses.

It looks like Moses is at a dead end. But the truth is, he's not at a dead end. He's at a crossroads. God is

trying to get his attention and Moses will need to decide if he will invest the time and energy and go and see a bush that is on fire, but is not burned up. The God of a universe that is filled with trillions and trillions of burning stars has limited Himself once again and has set a bush on fire in the middle of the wilderness.

In the middle of his boring job, Moses now has to make a decision. Will he go over and check out that bush? Will he walk away from the sheep long enough to go and have a life-changing encounter with God?

Maybe that's where you are today. God's trying to get your attention, but your life is busy with work or family or the pursuit of all sorts of goals. And the decision before you today is, will you spend some time paying attention to what God is trying to say to you?

Moses' interest is piqued. He does go over to the bush and quite surprisingly, God speaks to him. Who would have expected that? God speaks and Moses learns some very important things both about God and about himself. First, he learns that God has been paying attention to what's been happening to the people of Israel.

God has seen their misery and He tells Moses that He's going to do something about it. Exodus chapter 3 verse 7:

Exodus 3:7 - Then the LORD said, "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,⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey..."

Now if I were Moses, here's what I'd be thinking at this point. I'd be thinking to myself, "That's awesome! God sees what's been going on down here. He's been watching. He's seen the pain; He's seen every act of

injustice his people have suffered at the hands of the Egyptians. AND He's not just observed it, He's coming down to fix this mess. Cool!"

That's what I'd be thinking. If I were Moses, I'd probably just fix myself a little refreshing beverage, find a good spot to set up my lawn chair and umbrella, plop myself down, and get ready to watch God do his thing!

But then God says something to Moses that will rock Moses' world. Stand by friends. I'm pretty sure God is saying the very same thing to you and me.

God says to Moses, ¹⁰ "I've seen the misery of my people. So come with me, I will send YOU to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." ("Wait! What?") "Yep, you heard me correctly, Moses. I'm sending you to lead the people I love out of their misery. I've got a job for you to do." ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹² (God) said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: WHEN you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

That last statement is very interesting to me. Moses won't have full confirmation that he is doing God's will *until* he completes what God tells him to do. God says to Moses, "When you do what I'm telling you to do, you will come back to this mountain and worship Me and it will be then that you will really understand that I am the One who is actually telling you to do this."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his amazing book, "The Cost of Discipleship", tells the story of a pastor who sat down with a member of his congregation. The man came to his pastor to confess that he had lost the faith he once had. The pastor tells the man that he just needs to listen to the sermon more carefully each Sunday.

That sounds like good advice to me. But the man tells his pastor that he does listen to the sermons but it doesn't make any difference.

I love what Bonhoeffer says next. He says that it is at this point in the conversation that the pastor is usually at a loss for what to say next. The principle the pastor has been operating on is a principle most of us operate on. We'll obey God once we believe it is God who is speaking to us.

But Bonhoeffer says that is only one half of the equation of Christian discipleship. Yes, obedience to God is the fruit that grows out of real faith in God. But Bonhoeffer also says that the pastor needs to tell the man the other half of the equation. Those who obey God, end up believing in God.

That's what God is saying to Moses. When you do what I'm telling you to do, and when you come back to this mountain after you have led your people out of slavery and into freedom, you will know that it was I who was commanding you to do this. It's true that those who believe, obey. But it is also true that those who obey end up believing.

One of the most shocking things Moses hears from God is that God wants to use him, this old man, whose life did not turn out the way he had planned. Moses is the person God wants to use to rescue His people from the hands of the Egyptians.

But the most important thing Moses learns is God's Name. God didn't tell Jacob His name when he was wrestling with God in Genesis 32. But God does tell Moses His name.

Exodus 3:13 - *But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"* ¹⁴ *God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*

As we'll see in this text, Moses is filled with questions and he's filled with reasons why he's the wrong person for the job God is calling him to do. When Moses asks God's name, God says, "Here it is, here's my Name: "I Am Who I Am." I am the one who is. I am dependent on nothing and no one other than myself and all things are dependent on me. That's my Name. I Am who I Am."

It's super important for Moses and it's super important for us to know God's Name. God did NOT say that His Name is, "I am whom YOU want me to be". That's not God's name. If we're going to live the lives God wants us to live we need to know that God's name is, "I Am who I Am".

The true and living God of the Bible is not a God we get to define. He is the God who is. That is a statement that runs at cross purposes to a belief that increasingly stands at the core of our culture. We don't like that.

We think we want a God who fits who we are. We think we want a God we can be comfortable with. We think we want a God who agrees with our opinions and affirms our decisions...at least most of the time. We think we want a God who doesn't contradict us. That's the last thing we need. If we have a God who agrees with us all the time, there's a pretty good chance that we're not dealing with the God of the Bible.

What Moses is going to discover is that our God is not a God who is going to satisfy all our hopes and dreams. He's a God who wants to do something far better than that. We have a God who has a vision for our lives. And that vision flows out God's vision for the world.

In the middle of a box canyon in his life, Moses has a life-changing encounter with the living God. In the middle of his dead end job, God calls him to the work of his life. One thing that is most surprising in this

story is what God thinks of Moses. Moses thinks his best days are behind him—way behind him.

God doesn't share that opinion of his life. God thinks Moses is now finally ready to do the great work of his life. Now that Moses has lost nearly everything, God looks at him and says, "Now, you're ready to do what I'm calling you to do." And Moses thinks God is crazy.

Watch what God does. God tells Moses that He has seen what has happened to the Israelites in Egypt and He intends to rescue them from their oppression. He will bring them out of their misery and deliver them to a good land, one flowing with milk and honey. And He wants to use Moses to accomplish all of that, but Moses is filled with doubts.

Moses' next question for God is in verse one of chapter four.

Exodus 4:1 - *Then Moses answered, "But suppose they (the people of Israel) do not believe me or listen to me, but say, 'The LORD did not appear to you.'" And God's response to Moses is this: ²The LORD said to him (and here it comes, God's gracious question to Moses and to us), "What is that in your hand?"*

Moses says, "Yeah, yeah. You say they're going to believe me and listen to what I have to say but you don't know these people, God. They're not going to believe me. And who am I any way? Look at me. I take care of sheep for my father-in-law. Yeah, I grew up in Pharaoh's household. Yes, I'm one of the most highly educated persons in my nation, but all the Israelites know what I did to that Egyptian. That's why I'm out here in the wilderness, tending sheep. They're not going to follow my lead."

Here's what Moses doesn't yet realize. Even during all the years he spent working that dead end job and during everything else that preceded that job, God was shaping him into the person God needed him to be.

It was as Moses faithfully did this dead end job that he probably learned some important lessons that he would draw upon as he shepherded a group of stubborn people through the Red Sea, across the wilderness to the edge of the Promised Land. God was at work even in that dead end job.

So God says to Moses, "What is that in your hand?" That is the unexpected question of the God of grace. "What is that in your hand?" God can take what we already have in our hands and do remarkable things. In Moses' case it was a shepherd's staff. One person I was talking with this past week said that it was common practice for a shepherd to carve a record of the major events in their career as a shepherd into the wood of their staff.

"What is that in your hand, Moses?" God says throw it down and it will become something useful in My hands, to accomplish the great purposes I have for your life when I call you to pick it up again.

If you keep reading in chapter four, you'll see that Moses gives up on his questions for God. He starts making statements and will eventually start demanding that God come up with a different plan which does not involve him.

God finally says, "No more questions, Moses. No more excuses. This is my will for your life. This is your job to do. Yes, it's going to be really hard. It is going to demand a lot from you. And yes, there are going to be some moments that are going to look to you like disasters in the making. Your own people are going to lose confidence in you. Their oppression is going to get worse before they experience relief. And you are going to be in a full on battle with Pharaoh.

"But make no mistake about this, my people will be free and the Egyptians will be defeated. And yes, I am calling you to use what you have, your strengths and your weaknesses,

to do what I have called you to do. There is too much at stake, Moses. People are suffering. I will not look away from their suffering and you must not look away from their suffering either. Make your life count. What is that in your hand? Throw it down and I will do amazing things with your life."

God is calling Moses into the adventure of his life. He's calling him into a life of meaning and purpose. God is inviting Moses to do something difficult—even impossible. Moses is face to face with the true and living God...not the God of his small hopes and visions.

God says the same thing to us. "What is that in your hand?" What is God calling you and me to do to look beyond our small and self-focused visions and dreams and join Him in what He is doing in the world to love people and set them free?

In the middle of all his excuses for why he's not the right guy for the job, God calls Moses to take what's in his hand, as common and unremarkable as it seems to be, and throw it down. God want to use his abilities and skills, his failures and successes, to accomplish something good in the lives of other people.

Our God is a God who takes failures and uses them to do something significant in our world. That's who our God is.

God will go ahead of Moses. God will be with Moses. God will follow behind Moses and the people of Israel. God uses broken people to accomplish great things in the world. God uses weak and powerless people to accomplish His good will in the world. God uses people who are not trusting in themselves but are entrusting themselves to Jesus Christ who is able to do so much more than we could ask or even imagine.

God will take Moses, this broken and anxious man, and make him into a leader. What could He do with your life? What is that in your hand?

Note: The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw is an associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. Sunday sermon texts are also found at fpchawaii.org. An audio version can be downloaded on iTunes at fpc.posterous.com. It can also be sent by e-mail or you may request the free audio version at: fpchkoolau@gmail.com