

JOBS REFORM

A Sermon Preached by
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Text: Exodus 3:1-15

I remember when I got my first desk in my room at home in Independence, Missouri, so I could do my homework someplace more private and personal than the kitchen table. It was a lovely little old-fashioned roll top model. I hung on to it over the years, and eventually both my sons used it in their rooms. Now it is stored in my garage, perhaps one day to be employed by a grandchild. For me, one of the desk's more interesting features was a series of pigeon-holes, located back in under the top, where one could put all manner of different kinds of important things. I don't think I had ever heard the term "pigeon-hole" before I got that desk; and I learned that when you *pigeon-hole* something, you put that something into a special spot, apart from everything else. The idea of *pigeon-holing* has even earned a place in our language, appearing in our dictionaries. The Oxford Dictionary, for example, defines *pigeon-holing* as "assigning (a person or thing) to a preconceived category."

In this respect, we are a culture of pigeon-holers. Most of us have spots for most everything. Many of us had parents or grandparents who lived the old saying "A place for everything and everything in its place." And we pigeon-hole not only our things but also our activities. Few people don't carry some kind of calendar or other daily organizer around with them, or have one tacked up on the refrigerator at home, or can access one on the home computer or cell phone or Blackberry. Everything has its time and its place. That's the essence of pigeon-holing. And of course the functional nature of the pigeon-hole doesn't allow the contents of one pigeon-hole to transgress into the space of another pigeon-hole.

Our religious activity is especially a recipient, or a victim, of this penchant of ours for pigeon-holing. We know when the time for religion is: normally, on Sunday mornings from 9:30 to somewhere around noon. With some few exceptions, the rest of the week's pigeon-holes are dedicated to other activities and pursuits. Taking this notion just a step or two further, we have come, I think, to expect that God also acts within the parameters of our pigeon-holes: God comes to us in worship; God becomes especially present in the breaking of bread around the Lord's Table; God listens to us during our private times of prayer; God intervenes into our specific moments of need. But the rest of the time, during our occupation of the other pigeon-holes of our lives we neither expect or notice God's intrusion, nor welcome religion's interference.

A careful reading of Scripture, however; really, even a mere casual reading of Scripture, clearly shows that God doesn't give a hoot about our pigeon-holes. God appears at will, where and when God wants, and usually it's during a time or in a place where the people being visited didn't expect God and probably would have rather God waited until the appropriate time set aside for things divine. But there God is, nonetheless, time and time again, appearing to a variety of persons in a variety of places at a variety of times and, interestingly enough, hardly ever in the religious pigeon-holes that they had set up.

Moses was just such an individual. Though raised in the royal household of Egypt, he left there in a hurry to save his skin, and for many years since had plied the trade of a shepherd, a vocation he had every reason to believe would be his for the rest of his life. The story of God's appearance to Moses from out of a burning bush is one of the most well-known of the Old Testament. True to our pigeon-holing form, we have tended to look at this story and say "that's a miracle story", because the bush was burning but wasn't being consumed by the flames, and put it in the pigeon-hole labeled *biblical miracle stories*.

But it's more than a miracle story. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't even call it a miracle story. It's a *call* story, an account of God calling a human being to a special, God-ordained work in the world, to help achieve God's plan for the world. Truth be told, the burning bush only appears for a moment in the story, just long enough to capture Moses' attention, then no more is heard about it. It wasn't the point of the story, the writer didn't want his readers to dwell on a desert bush aflame. The real point of the story is the dialogue between God and Moses, between Creator and creature, in a marvelous and revealing tale of divine choice and human potential.

I just want to lift up several interesting features of this well-known narrative as we worship here today on Labor Day weekend. And watch how the pigeon-holes disappear.

First, God does not appear to Moses during a holy festival, or a time of sacrifice, or during the daily prayers. Forget those pigeon holes. God appears to Moses while Moses is at work. God appears to a lot of biblical people in the workplace, so much so that you begin to get the idea that it's one of God's favorite places to visit. And if it is, it's probably because it's one of the places where we rarely or never expect God to appear. Our jobs are for work, for earning money, for plying our trades, for fulfilling our vocational drives. No need for God to be there. God is for the Sunday a.m. pigeon-hole. Indeed, there are many people who would find God an embarrassing nuisance on the job, getting in the way with ethical and moral concerns, monkeying around with the priorities and particular values of the workplace, which include making money, trying not to get fired, and attempting to climb the ladder of success, none of which are necessarily helped by the presence of the Sunday morning God.

But there God is, nonetheless, in the workplace, transgressing into the wrong pigeon-hole. And if we've learned one thing about the Bible at all, it is that the Bible is much more than history, the Bible is typology, that is, the Bible shows its readers experiences and behaviors which are relevant to their lives as well as to the lives of the biblical characters they describe. Therefore, we have every right to expect that God could just as well ignore our pigeon-holes, refuse to stay boxed up on Sunday morning, and come to us where we work, whether that is in the office, the board room, the assembly line, out on the road, or in the home. We have every right to expect that God will somehow try to get our attention; the burning bush trick was only for Moses, it probably would be something very different for each of us, but it would grab us so that we would similarly want to investigate further.

The next feature I want to point out about this story is that, once God has appeared in the workplace, that workplace is transformed. It's no longer the same. Once Moses turns aside, that is, intentionally chooses not to ignore but to investigate the phenomenon which caught his attention, and once Moses discovers that the phenomenon is God, the workplace becomes holy ground. Moses hides his face and removes his shoes to acknowledge that he is in the presence of the Almighty, and that this place is now sacred space. Any place, any time, any circumstance

where we acknowledge the presence of God becomes transformed into more than what it was before. Now this fact could well be a pain in the neck for those of us who just want to work and get home to the easy chair, but it is a fact.

Thirdly, God doesn't just appear in the workplace and cast around looking for anyone who'll bother to volunteer. God calls people by their names. "Moses! Moses!" Not, "I'm looking for volunteers out there for anyone willing to go to Egypt, confront the mightiest power in the world, to stare down the most brutal ruler on earth, to escape with all the Hebrew slaves, then wander around the desert looking for food and water for the next forty years." If he had heard that announcement, I think Moses and every other life form within earshot would still be running as fast as they could in the opposite direction. No, it was "Moses! Moses!" When God wants us to work, God calls us personally, perhaps not with the sound that is picked up by our ears, but by the peculiar interpretation of circumstances in life mysteriously recognized by our souls, the particular and unique opportunities put into our path, held up for our attention, as individuals, as specific persons chosen by God to do precise things in God's behalf. When it comes to calling us to work, God gets up close and personal. As Charles J. Little, a premier preacher of the last century wrote, "We imagine that we must be always finding God; salvation comes with the discovery that God is seeking us."

Fourthly, God calls us to work; not just to any work, not some amorphous servitude that, once again, is easily identified by the pigeon-hole where we place, say, volunteering for the church. No, God calls us to singular tasks which may have nothing to do with Sunday morning, but which have everything to do with what God wants done in the world out there, addressing the magnitude of human need, providing positive models for peace and compassion, engaging the wounds that need to be healed, the brokenness that needs mending, responding to the necessity for living and sharing the Good News. Specific, identifiable, clearly-presented undertakings. Will we be asked to free the slaves? No, that was Moses' work. And there we go, pigeon-holing again. If God is going to call us, we reason, it's undoubtedly going to be some super, world-shaking task of cosmic significance. If I don't hear a call like that, I'm not even going to bother listening, because it's obviously not God speaking. There was an elderly man walking along an ocean beach. Occasionally, he would bend over, pick something up and throw it into the sea. A passer-by noticed this activity and as he approached, noticed that the old man was picking up starfish which had been washed up on the beach and stranded, then throwing them back to live another day. The passer-by was somewhat incredulous, noticing that there were hundreds and hundreds of beached starfish lying on the sand. "What an impossible task," said the passer-by to the old man, "what difference can your efforts possibly make?" The old man then picked up another starfish and cast it into the water. "It made a big difference to that one," he said. Even if we only make a difference to the one, rather than to the many, it is God's specific work to which God may call us, specifically.

Fifthly, God does not call persons to do what they cannot do. God often calls us to difficult work, but it is never impossible and God always provides those who are called with the necessary tools, gifts, resources, and equipment to get the task done. Throughout biblical history, no one is ever called to do something that person is not capable of doing, or hasn't the appropriate resources to complete. Moses receives a supernatural staff, and other swell tricks to convince the doubting Pharaoh, which were precisely the tools he needed for the task. Further, no one is ever asked to be something that they are not already. Moses had already shown signs that he had what it took to be a deliverer, rescuing a Hebrew slave from an Egyptian overseer,

defending the daughters of the priest of Midian from the Amalekites at the well. Though Moses moaned and groaned and complained to God about his fitness for the task, we all know that Moses was the right person for the right job, as is each of us, when our time comes to be called.

Lastly, God almost always expects God's people to do the Lord's work. I don't begin to understand this. I don't comprehend why God just didn't descend on Egypt, kick a little Egyptian backside and whisk the Chosen People off to the land flowing with milk and honey, rather than giving the task to Moses. I don't know why God calls weak and sinful and reluctant human servants to do things we all know God could do better. But though I don't understand it, I sense there is something wonderful about it, something to do with growth and maturity and coming closer to God as we journey in faith towards eternal life in God's presence. In Strasbourg, Germany, an Allied bombing raid destroyed a church building. As the pastor and parishioners sifted through the rubble, they discovered that a statue of Christ carved centuries earlier had escaped virtually unharmed; except that a falling beam had sheared off the outstretched hands of the statue. As word got around that the beloved statue had survived, a local sculptor offered to replace the hands at no charge to the church. The officials of the congregation met and discussed the offer--and decided to turn it down. They believed that a Christ without hands was an appropriate symbol to those disciples who understood the true nature of discipleship in this world: they themselves must be the working hands of the Savior.

It's true that Labor Day is set aside to honor those who labor in the secular workplace. But it is also appropriate for us to remember that all of us have been called, and continue to be called by the God of our faith, into service. "Jobs reform" is a political phrase that takes on a whole new meaning when we understand how God comes to us, not in the pigeon-holed places reserved for religious activity, but in the workplace, where we do our jobs, as well as in the home, during our recreational times, and in the mellow, down-times we reserve for quiet contemplation. God reforms, God transforms all these places and all these moments, making them holy ground, calling us by name from within them to do specific, significant God-work, using the tools and resources God has already given us.

So remember today the God who refuses to be pigeon-holed, who comes to us, calls us by name, and gives us good work to do. Remember, on this Labor Day, a proverb from an anonymous author: "There are a lot of Christians who are doing nothing. But there are no Christians who have nothing to do."

AMEN.