

## **Journeying to Adulthood**

Sermon preached at Church of the Servant

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I was browsing recently in a gift shop, looking at those magnets with funny pictures and pithy sayings. One of them had a black-and-white picture of a woman, I guess from the Victorian period, dressed in a filmy dress, ready to dance. She had several tall feathers as a ridiculous-looking headdress and drippy strings of beads going from her wrists to her very hippy hips. The saying on the magnet was: “Be yourself. Everyone else is already taken.”

God wants each of us to be ourselves. Each of us is different; each of us has a special call. We honor that knowledge today in a Rite 13 ceremony during which we recognize our young teenagers whom we support on their journey to adulthood. We know they are growing into special people, finding identities they can claim for their own. We also have a scripture reading today about this process—the story, the very famous and important story from the Old Testament, of Moses at the burning bush.

In last week’s reading we saw Moses as a baby, being drawn out of the water by an Egyptian princess. In this week’s reading he’s an adult, being called by God. He’s going to be a hero, his people’s liberator. But a lot had to happen between these two readings, on Moses’ journey to adulthood.

Moses grew up alongside Egyptian royalty. He probably wasn’t treated as a prince but was more like a pet or mascot. (We know from ancient documents that the Egyptian royal family liked this practice.) He was probably well-educated and certainly well-cared for. He saw the inner workings of noble Egyptian society. On the other hand, he knew he was an Israelite. His mother, who was his nurse, may have told him. Or he may have heard it later. But he had an identity problem: he may have loved and appreciated certain people and practices in his Egyptian upper-class life, but he knew he would never be a leader in it. He knew he’d always be an outsider. Yet the people from whom he’d come were slaves. No doubt he’d heard the stories that most oppressors tell about their slaves—that they weren’t as smart as Egyptians, that their culture was crude, and so on. So he couldn’t identify with them either. Perhaps it didn’t bother him too much, this identity problem, until he became a teenager. But then, one day, he saw an Egyptian overseer beat a Hebrew slave and anger welled up in him. He murdered the overseer. (I know the movie ‘Prince of Egypt’ presents it as an accident, but the Bible is clear. Moses killed the man on purpose.) He buried the body in the sand.

The next day, he was walking in the same area, probably a building site. He saw two slaves arguing with each other. Perhaps he thought he might help them find solidarity with one another, or perhaps he just wanted to offer some advice, but at any rate he told them to stop arguing. He must have hoped he could do some good with his advice, but instead they sneered at him. “Who do you think you are, giving us advice? You—who grew up in a palace! What, are you going to kill us too?” At this point, Moses did what

many of us must do in order to grow up—he left. He ran away from Egypt, leaving family and upbringing, leaving all the issues of who he was. He went out into the wilderness alone.

After some time alone, he came upon a well in the desert. There he saw some rough men preventing some young women from getting water for their animals. For the first time, Moses was in a situation where he could choose for himself, all alone. No family or friends were watching. No religion shadowed him. He could avoid the situation. He could side with the stronger group—the men. Or he could stand up for the women. And that is what he chose to do. That was a declaration of who he was—one who would stand up for those in need.

That decision led him to be taken in by the women's family. Their father became his guide—his mentor. We all need someone outside our own family to take us under their wing. (In fact, Harvard University has recently completed a long term study of what makes a college experience successful. Of course many factors are involved, but their study showed that only one common factor showed up for *every* student who considered his or her experience a success. It was that the student had formed a close relationship with some adult on campus. An older adult as teacher, friend, counselor, coach, or advisor made all the difference.) And Moses had Jethro. He learned how to live in a family, how to survive in the desert, how to tend a flock of animals.

In today's reading he is tending his flock when he sees, out of the corner of his eye, what looks like a burning bush. He could've walked on, writing the image off as a mirage, a trick of the sun. But he didn't. He paused. He turned aside. He made a decision to go see the bush. This is important. The Bible says that it was when God saw that Moses had stopped and turned aside, that God decided to speak to him. God didn't shout after his back as he walked away. God saw that Moses was paying attention—and *then* spoke.

And so Moses received his call. We know that there was still more discussion and a lot more struggle, but Moses had moved from the shifting identities of his childhood to become an adult who had confidence and skills, who cared about those who were weaker than he, and who chose to listen to God.

To our young people here today, we commend the process of learning about the many strands of your identity—each of you is unique. And we hope that you will find ways to pause on your path, to choose to listen to God. And in order to show you that we are serious about offering our help, I now invite the congregation to join in this sermon by sharing ways that you have found to listen to God. How do you step aside from your daily routine and try to hear God's messages?

[Members of the congregation volunteered responses at this point. Among them were art and creativity, listening to nature, just stopping, writing poetry, witnessing the hatching of baby sea turtles, keeping a journal of quotes, and paying attention to dreams.]

We pray that you will use these and also find your own ways to listen to God, and we pray that God will guide us all on our continuing journey to hear and follow our call.