

PLEASE SEND SOMEONE ELSE!

Exodus 3:1-14; 4:10-17, OT p. 50
 Matthew 16:13-25, NT p. 18

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 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Moses and Peter, two great leaders of the people of God. Moses led the Israelites from slavery to freedom. Peter was the leader of that small band of Jesus' disciples, who would go out to change their world. What did they have in common? They both argued with God. Please send someone else! God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!

Have you ever argued with God? I have. Sometimes it's about what is happening in the world, the earthquake in Haiti, the tsunami in Indonesia (do we even think about that one?) and the one after the earthquake in Japan. I know logically why these disasters happen, a combination of natural causes and poor planning by individuals and governments, but I still want to complain. This shouldn't happen to those people!

Sometimes I argue with God because I want someone to get well, and yet there are complications. Or maybe I want God to knock some sense into someone who is making poor choices. Do something, God! But Moses and Peter weren't protesting to God about things like that.

Moses was living a quiet life in Midian, east of the Sinai Peninsula, in what is now Saudi Arabia. He had a family. He spent his days and nights traveling with his father-in-law's flocks and herds. Egypt and his early life, his birth in the Hebrew community, his life in Pharaoh's palace, his defense of one of his fellow Hebrews, everything from Egypt, except his name, was in the distant past. Or so he thought. But here he stands, at a burning bush that is talking to him, confronted by the God of his ancestors who has no business being so far out here in the wilderness. And Moses knows his life will never be the same. Still, he argues with the Lord. Who are you? What if people don't believe me? I can't speak well. And the final protest, Please send someone else! As we know, the Lord doesn't want "someone else." The Lord wants Moses, even if he has to use his brother as spokesman.

Peter had already made his commitment to Jesus. He had left his fishing business and family to travel with the itinerant preacher and spread the word of God's new rule, coming soon in Jesus of Nazareth. He answers the question, "Who do you say that I am?" with God-inspired understanding: "You are the Messiah, the Christ." But Peter can't get his mind around what Jesus says next. Peter thinks he knows how all this will work out, and it looks something like this: Jesus going into Jerusalem at the head of an enthusiastic crowd, being welcomed in the temple, and probably getting rid of the Romans. The future, as Peter sees it, doesn't include an early death for Jesus. He tells Jesus bluntly, "You're wrong." Jesus puts him in his place, "Get behind me, Satan." Then comes the call to even greater commitment. "Be willing to lose your life for the kingdom of God."

Moses did what the Lord asked, at great risk to himself, but we know how it turned out. The people of Israel were led to freedom and finally to the land of promise. Peter and the other disciples kept spreading the story of Jesus and his message about God's rule, which is why we're here this morning. We're grateful that these heroes of the faith did what the Lord required. We're glad they didn't win their arguments. After all, how else would we know about the grace and love of God, and the freedom we have in Christ? Well, I'm here to tell you, the job isn't finished. After 3500 years, the Lord still calls us to do new things when we think we've settled down. After 2000 years, Christ still seeks followers to risk the end of life, in order to serve those in need of true life. And the job isn't just for the pastor, or the elders and deacons. The job is for each one of us, and for all of us together.

On September 18, we'll celebrate the 115th anniversary of the original chartering of Plymouth Church. You can be sure that in those 115 years, there were plenty of people who liked things just the way they were. And there were others who sensed a call for Plymouth Church to be and do more in the community. Some people were sure the church would fold, especially during the years of the Great Depression, but others wanted to hold on and become a better place for worship and study, for fellowship and service.

There are two kinds of churches, according to some church growth experts. The maintenance church is concerned about survival. Members want the church to stay the way it is, because it's comfortable. They want more members who also like it the way it is, though if those new members have younger bodies, that's a plus. The maintenance church is not likely to grow or to serve its community very well. When I hear something like, "We'll never do (fill in the blank) in worship," I wonder if we're a maintenance church. When I hear, "We can't afford (fill in the blank again), I wonder if we're just into survival.

Then there is the missional church, characterized by members who are willing to make changes in order to welcome new people, try new ideas, and to question "the way we've always done it." The missional church is ready to find new ways to reach out into the community, and to work with others who are trying to do the same, the way we've partnered with First Lutheran Church to do Community Meals. The missional church is aware of the community's concerns and tries to do something about them. Members are willing to try new things in worship, study and fellowship, to help other people feel welcome. Sometimes that involves technology. Maybe the pastor needs to learn how to text the young adults, because a church that is really trying to reach out will enter into the life of those it is trying to serve. The missional church is willing to fail and even to let the old ways die, in order to follow the call of God.

Scary? Maybe. But if we say, "Send someone else," God just might do that, but we'd miss out on a lot of opportunities and blessings, and some of our neighbors might not hear the Good News of God's welcoming love in quite the way that we might be able to offer it. We can argue with God about our call and what our next step might be. We can make excuses. "We're too small. We're too old. We're not up-to-date. Our pastor isn't a handsome young man with a beautiful wife and two exceptionally well-behaved children. Our pastor can't even be in the office forty hours a week while making twenty home visits." (I must confess, I haven't heard anyone make that last complaint; your math skills are better than that.)

The pastor does have responsibility. Over the next nine or ten months, I'll be involved

in a continuing education group of Presbyterian pastors. We'll work with a coach, and I'm sure there will be homework. Scary? At least a little. The goal is to help us learn more about our leadership skills and our own communities. I hope we'll also find ways to communicate the message of God's grace and love in our own context. We've been told not to make any changes for a while, so don't expect miracles in October. Of course, if you've got a good idea and you're willing to help do it now, let us know.

For now, let's give thanks for our heritage of strong people who have been willing to take risks for Plymouth Church, and look ahead with confidence that God isn't done with us yet. We'll do what we've been doing, joyfully and as well as we can. We'll invite people to Sunday morning worship and Monday night study, to Community Meals or a church potluck. But we'll keep our eyes open. Maybe there's a burning bush just around the corner, and the voice of the Lord will call us to something surprising. (And just as I wrote that sentence on Friday, the phone rang. Would we like to have a service called "Electronic Donations?" I said a quick "no," then thought about what I had just written. Would that phone call be a burning bush? Probably not. But I took down the web address of the company, just in case.) The quick "no" answer is not going to get us anywhere, and neither will suggestions that no one acts on.

Friends, Christ is always calling us forward into the future. Are we ready to hear the call? Do we trust that the Spirit will guide and strengthen us as we go?

Let us pray. Continue to call us, O God. Give us courage to say, "Here am I. Send me." Amen.