



First United Church of Oak Park

Just One Question
Selections from Exodus 2:23-3:12
The Rev. John Edgerton
September 29, 2019

What defines a person's life? Makes it about one thing rather than another? For Moses it was just one question.

The people of Israel, Moses' own people, they were withering and shriveling up in Egypt under cruel oppression and suffering. Their cries to God rose up like smoke, filling the heavens with cries for deliverance. But Moses didn't know it. Moses had run away from Egypt and all the troubles of his people. And he had built a perfectly fine life for himself—not the stuff that dreams are made of—but perfectly fine. Moses had married well, into a respectable family of priests and religious leaders. He worked for his in-laws too, tending a flock of sheep, a position of modest but real responsibility. He lived this life for years and years—long enough for one king to die and another to take his place, long enough for the cries of the people of Israel to rise to God, long enough for the world to be ready to turn and change forever.

But Moses didn't know it. Moses rose one day that seemed to him like any other day. He went to work caring for his flock of sheep. And merely because it was a place he thought would be good for grazing sheep, Moses went to the foothills of a mountain, a mountain the local people called Horeb, but which his people called Mt. Sinai. Mt. Sinai where the ten commandments would be handed down, where God's covenant with Israel was signed and sealed; Mt. Sinai where Moses would spend 40 days speaking directly with God surrounded by a miles wide wall of flame, living not by bread or water but by the Law of God, which is sweeter than honey. It was Mt Sinai, holy ground of holy grounds. But Moses didn't know it. The sun shone clear-eyed upon what looked to Moses like nothing more than a deserted place where sheep could spend all day grazing on the leaves of the bushes that grew on the mountainside.

But then Moses caught sight of something strange, something that must have made him wonder how he hadn't seen it before. One of the bushes was engulfed in flames, and yet it was not burning up. The hearty green leaves didn't curl up and shrivel under the flame. The supple brown branches didn't blacken and become brittle. The bush was engulfed in flame, but it wasn't being burned. Words even stumble over this—the bush was burning but it wasn't burned? Words fail. And Moses wondered at the sight.

Moses didn't know it, but he was standing at a great crossroads. Down one path was the life he had been leading—work and hearth and home, a respectable life lived quietly. Down the other path—a confrontation with the most powerful man in the world, The Red Sea and the Ark of the Covenant, law and defiance, promise and expectation, a story that will never stop being told as long as human life persists. Moses stood at a crossroads. How did he choose which way to turn? How did he choose to stop living his respectable life and begin to be Moses. How did he choose? He didn't.

Moses did not choose. Moses just asked a question. I must turn aside and look at this wondrous sight: why doesn't the bush burn up? Just one question. Moses scarcely knew what he was getting into. He just asked one question and turned aside and there he was on the holiest of holy ground, encountering the living God,

the God who is like fire: beautiful and enticing and powerful; God who is like a fire who burns inside but who does not destroy. And Moses meets God and embarks on a great and unknowable journey, just from one question.

Questions. This is how it is with God. I often think that what I want from God is answers. But God has always done her best work with questions. God put something inside of human kind, something like a handle, something like a hook, there waiting for the right question to grab hold and pull from the very center of us.

The right question is irresistible. The right question can change a life. The right question can change the world.

A prophet looks out on an unjust society, why is there a fire shut up in my bones when I look at the suffering of my people?

A crowd of fishermen gathers around an itinerant rabbi—what is this new teaching, it has authority?

Women in mourning come to a tomb in the early dawn—how are we going to roll the stone away?

A shepherd stands on the holiest of holy mountains—why doesn't the bush burn up?

This is how it is with God, how it has always been. Questions. God has always done her best work with questions. The right question can change a life. The right question can change the world.

Questions will do it to you every time. Questions did it to us, to this church. What would it take to tutor a few kids in the church? Volunteers, some tables, why not make a start of it? What would it take to open a shelter in the church, a food pantry? Questions will do it every time.

What, I wonder, is the question inside of you? You're thinking of it right now. It might not be words, but more like a deep knot in your stomach, a wordless notion that wakes you up in the middle of the night, a fire shut up in your bones. Let the question pull you; turn aside and see what it is.

What would it be like to become a foster parent—there's paperwork probably, sure, and home visits, but how would life change to become a foster parent?

How hard is it to apply to seminary—there's tests and essays and things, but how hard could it really be?

What would it take to put my name on the ballot—signatures and becoming one of those sidewalk people at the farmers market sure—but why not run for office?

Why do I wake up feeling this way, every day?

Why is my house a war zone? Is this how it has to be?

Why can't I stop, no matter how many times I try?

God put something inside of us, something like a handle, something like a hook ready for the right question to grab hold and pull from the very center of us. What, I wonder, is the question inside of you? Turn aside, let the question lead you. If you do, you'll scarcely know what you're getting in to.