Sunday, September 1, 2002
**MOSES**
Exodus 3:1-15

Most of you have seen the bumper sticker that states: “HONK IF YOU LOVE JESUS.” Perhaps you’ve also seen the Jewish version which proclaims: “HONK IF YOU LOVE MOSES.” I haven’t seen any yet, but I’m sure there are bumper stickers that read: “HONK IF YOU LOVE MOHAMMED” or “HONK IF YOU LOVE ALLAH.” I prefer the bumper sticker that says, “IF YOU LOVE JESUS, DON’T HONK, TITHE!”

Speaking of bumper stickers with a religious theme, a minister friend of mine received the following letter from his mother. She is 88 years old and still drives her own car. She wrote:

“Dear Son, The other day I went up to our local Christian bookstore and saw a ‘Honk if you love Jesus’ bumper sticker. I was feeling particularly sassy that day because I had just come from a thrilling choir performance, followed by a thunderous prayer meeting. So I bought the sticker and put it on my bumper.

Boy, I’m glad I did. What an uplifting experience that followed! I was stopped at a red light at a busy intersection, got lost in thought about the Lord and how good He is, and I didn’t notice the light had changed. It’s a good thing that someone else loves Jesus because if he hadn’t honked, I’d never have noticed. I found that lots of people love Jesus! Why, while I was sitting there, the guy behind me started honking like crazy, and then he leaned out the window and shouted, ‘For the love of God! Go! Go! Go! Jesus Christ, go!’ What an exuberant cheerleader he was for Jesus! Everyone started honking! I leaned out my car window and started waving and smiling at all those loving people. I even honked my horn a few times to share in the love.

There must have been a man from Florida back there because I heard him yelling something about a funny way ... with only his middle finger stuck up in the air. Then I asked my teenage grandson in the back seat what that meant. He said it was probably a Hawaiian good luck sign or something. Well, I’ve never met anyone from Hawaii, so I leaned out the window and gave him the good luck sign back. My grandson burst out laughing ... why, even he was enjoying the religious experience.

A couple of people were so caught up in the joy of the moment that they got out of their cars and started walking toward me. I bet they wanted to pray or ask what church I attended. But that’s when I noticed the light had changed. So I waved and drove off. I was the only car that got through the intersection before the light changed again and felt kind of sad that I had to leave them after all the love we had shared. So I slowed the car down, leaned out the window, and gave them all the Hawaiian good luck sign one last time as I drove away. Praise the Lord for such wonderful folks. Love, Mom.”

“Honk if you love Jesus.” “Honk if you love Moses.” I love both Jesus and Moses, but I’m not a fan of bumper stickers of any kind. However, there is a connection between this little story about the bumper sticker and how the 88-year-old mother interpreted what happened, and the story of Moses and the burning bush.

Unusual experiences occur in the life of each one of us, and we need to ask, as Moses did, “What is going on here? Why does this bush seem to be burning, yet is not consumed?” Like Moses, we need to keep asking the question because our first interpretation may not be

accurate, as was the case with the 88-year-old mother and grandmother. The reason we have both public and private schools, colleges, and universities is because we affirm the value of curiosity and asking questions. We also know that we need ways of methodical inquiry. Because you are created in God's image, you are born with a holy curiosity that needs to be cultivated and celebrated. Boredom is the opposite of curiosity.

It's also part of our precious religious tradition to affirm that there is always more light and truth to break forth from God's word. No one ever has all the truth. Imagine the vacuum in your religious experience if you tried to eliminate from your mind all questions and doubts. How impoverished your faith would be without the curiosity of Moses watching a burning bush and wondering what it meant. Or think of Job questioning God's justice.

In the New Testament, we find a lawyer asking Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And when Jesus asked him what the law said, the lawyer replied, "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus told him he had given the right answer, but the lawyer's curiosity continued with an excellent follow-up question, "Who is my neighbor?" And Jesus answered his question with the story of the Good Samaritan.

Every advance in our human condition has come about because of the holy curiosity that resides within us. It is a gift from God. All scientific research, medical research, and religious discovery depend on curiosity and follow-up questions.

When Moses encountered the burning bush, he first said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." Then, when he started to become convinced that it was somehow a sign from God, he continued his questioning. He wanted to be sure it was a call from God and not his imagination.

One reason I have never really liked the movie The Ten Commandments with Charlton Heston playing Moses, is that the Moses in that movie is too self-assured, too confident, and too "in charge." The Moses of the Bible stories is a man of doubt and faith, a person who tried to run away from God but couldn't. He tried all kinds of excuses to avoid what God wanted him to do.

Perhaps you remember Moses from the spiritual "Go Down, Moses." If you went to Sunday School, you might remember that he was hidden as a baby in the bulrushes. But did you know he was wanted for murder?

Before Moses became a shepherd working for his father-in-law, he had killed an Egyptian who had been beating a Hebrew slave. When Pharaoh heard about it, he sought to kill Moses. Moses escaped from Egypt and lived as an exile in the land of Midian, where he married, raised a family, had good work, and was content, except for the nagging fear of being found out. And, I believe, a kind of restlessness that God had something else in store for him.

He was living the good life, taking care of himself in Midian, and staying out of trouble. It is understandable that he wanted to hold on to what he had. But now, in the experience of the burning bush, he hears the call of God. Other shepherds in the wilderness might not have taken much notice. There are bushes all around that seem to be on fire. Moses has to be sure. Thus begins his dialogue, his questioning with God, and even though he is drawn toward the Holy, he tries all kinds of excuses to avoid what God wants him to do.

It's a scary thing that God wants Moses to do. He is to be the leader of his people and lead them out of Egypt. It's so scary that Moses comes up with five excuses why he can't do it. First, he tells God, "I'm not qualified for the job." "Who am I?" he asks. His second excuse is that he needs to know God's name. "Who are you, God?" When God assures Moses that he is qualified because God will be with him, Moses' third excuse is, "The people will not believe me or listen to me." His fourth excuse is that he is a poor public speaker. His fifth excuse is a desperate plea, "Please send someone else."

God is not impressed with the excuses of Moses. And God is not concerned with Moses' self-assessment. "Who" Moses thinks he is, is not what counts. What matters is who is beside him. God tells Moses, "I will be with you. I will be your mouth and teach you what you are to say. I am who I am."

If you're like me, you can relate to all of these excuses. You have your self-doubts. Don't you sometimes wonder if you're qualified for the job you have or the one you hope to get? Do you have the necessary skills? Is this God's will for your life? Are you being called?

Being a leader is not easy — ever. In fact, it is dangerous. Many of the prophets and leaders paid for their truth-telling with their lives. When Martin Luther King, Jr. was asked to be the leader of the bus boycott movement in Montgomery, Alabama, he used some of the same excuses that Moses used.

This leads to another question: Are only certain people, like Moses and other well-known leaders, "called?" Is it a private line that God uses to speak to them? Or is this merely part of the long history of people who have their own agenda and then call it God's agenda? It's so easy to confuse what you are certain is God's will with your own will. Someone once said that when you talk to God, that's prayer, but when God talks to you, that's schizophrenia.

Yet we stand in a tradition in which God is reported to have said, at the moment of the baptism of Jesus, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." The Bible speaks very candidly about the inner life. The God of the Biblical tradition is not remote, living on a distant mountain, but is present in the midst of us and among us. The way you might tell the difference between someone who is "called" and someone who is just deluded, is to ask what sort of message God gave them.

Many years ago, when I was in seminary, there was a feeling among some people that in order to be a minister, you needed to have a "call" story. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, or Martin Luther's call to the priesthood in the 16th century, some students talked about their "mountaintop" experience. Sometimes I felt inadequate because I had nothing so dramatic to contribute.

However, as I talked with some of the professors I most respected, I came to understand that some ministers think they have the market cornered on this "call" business, but frankly, that leaves too many people out.

There are many people who lead inspiring lives of service and commitment who cannot tell a dramatic story of being struck by God's lightning bolt. They cannot even point to a moment when they felt their hearts "strangely warmed" as did John Wesley. They only know that over time there was a growing awareness that a certain path was one they had to follow. That was my experience.

One time I was asked by someone if I could tell him the exact moment I felt God's call. I responded, "Can you tell me the exact moment in your childhood when you were fully aware that the adults in your home who were raising you were your father and mother and what that meant?" He replied that he could not. Then I said, "Some of us have come to know God and the love of God in that same gradual way. And some of us have come to know the 'call' of God in that way — a gradual awareness that is wrapped up in gratitude for blessings that far exceed what we deserve, and a joyous obligation to contribute and give back what doesn't really belong to us in the first place."

I don't agree with the notion that only some people receive a "call" from God. That leaves too many people out: physicians, nurses, merchants, carpenters, bankers, artists, social workers, teachers, moms, dads, firefighters, and police officers. To be "called" is to recognize that God wants you to surrender something of yourself to the greater good, to harness your abilities and, with them, contribute something positive to life in this world.

One reason that I am a minister in the United Church of Christ and not in some other denomination is that in our tradition, ministers do not have some divine energy that others do not possess. I am only set aside to teach and preach by virtue of special training and a conscious decision to assume the responsibilities of this kind of ministry.

If only ministers get "called," then we are in trouble. I am convinced that the power of God works in far more mysterious ways than that.

Everyone hearing this sermon should consider themselves "called." If you are a student in grade school, middle school, junior high, high school, or college, you are called to be the best that you can be. You are called, no matter what your age or vocation, to love God's creation and to live in it as one created in God's image. God is calling all of you to a life of gratitude, mercy, forgiveness, and generosity. That's what Moses rediscovered in his "burning bush" encounter.

A patient once asked a doctor, "Do you have a relationship with God, or do you work alone?" The same question could be asked of lawyers, teachers, janitors, shopkeepers, merchants, athletes, politicians, investment counselors, parents, and others. Are you acquainted with God, or do you work alone? If, like Moses, you come to the realization that you have been called by God, then you also will know that you are not working alone, and that is good news. Amen.