

Preached by Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
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Exodus 2: 1-10
Romans 12: 1-8

THE SECRET FOR OVERCOMING SELF

So Moses is in the bulrushes, we used to say in the old days—not in the reeds. Moses who would one day stand beside a bush that was on fire and yet not be consumed. Moses, who had lots of questions—and lots of weaknesses.

Remember that story that takes us from the river to the bush and then back to that river again, another river to see the Israelites delivered. Moses asked lots of questions, the same way we do.

“Deliver your people from the hand of Pharaoh? I’ve lived in Pharaoh’s house. I know what that’s like. And if I go”—I take great liberties now with the Exodus passages—“If I go, who do I say sent me?”

Can you imagine the audacity of one who had been saved from the killing of all his peers, his countrymen? I wonder why God didn’t say, “Tell them about the one who saved you from a paranoid Pharaoh. Tell them that one is sending you. Tell them the one that raised you like a prince and gave you everything you’d need for what I am sending you to accomplish for me. Tell them that one sent you.” I wonder why God didn’t say, “Tell them about the one that’s burning this bush and not letting it be consumed. How about that, Moses? Tell them that one sent you. Or tell them the one who has made the ground on which you stand holy—tell them that is the one who is sending you. Who do you think is sending you, Moses? God is. God is sending you.”

Now I’ve taken you through a lot of history very quickly, I know, in Exodus. But I want you to look at the affirmation that you will make today. Take your bulletins and look at them. For I’ve saved the good news for us to share as one. It’s Jesus answering the same kind of questions, but this time by asking a question himself. Who am I? I know you. Moses types love to ask that sort of question. Who is God, anyway?

Who is God to you? To us in the church? Is God just another expression of what we believe is beyond our ability to know? We don’t have to reinvent the wheel every Sunday, or even every era; for in 1643, they were a little coarser. They asked, “What is God?” at the Westminster assembly. And after weeks I so wished they had asked “Who is God?” But that was not my call. After weeks of argument, one stood among them and began to pray. This is how the prayer began:

“God who is a spirit and of himself infinite in being, gloried, blessedness and perfection, all sufficient, eternal, unchangeable, incomprehensible, everywhere present, almighty, knowing all things, most wise, most holy, most just, most merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abounding in goodness and truth.”

And they had their answer. Who is God? He is the prelude to that prayer. He is, in fact, the source of all that would be good and worthy in our midst.

The Westminster Assembly—151 scholars, 30 or so accessories, 121 real scholars, and just 3 from Scotland—just 3, and yet, from our mother church and for all antiquity, the Westminster Assembly and the larger and shorter catechisms, which drew out of it, are known as the Presbyterian confession. But just 3 Scots. If there had been 5, it would never have been written, I assure you.

Jesus asked Peter a question. He asked Peter question number seven of the larger catechism: “Who am I to you?” I took some liberty with the Lord’s response to Moses, but I think what Peter eventually came to understand is that Jesus Christ is that word of generosity that cannot be mustered up within a greedy human heart. Jesus became for Peter and is for us today a word of forgiveness is a world of vengeance.

You’ve heard the story of the first grader who, when questioned about his altercation with another member of the class, explained, “Well, it all started when he hit me back.” And that’s about how much responsibility I think we take sometime for our confession of Christ. That’s about how serious we take our falling short and being forgiven. “It all started when he hit me back.”

You see, Jesus is a word of compassion in a world of self-righteousness. It doesn’t seem like compassion and self-righteousness should be opposites, but have you ever experienced any compassion from someone who cannot muster the words “my bad,” “my fault,” “my mistake,” “I’m sorry”? Honestly, can you say that you have experienced compassion from that person who does not need compassion himself? Jesus is for us that word of encouragement. In the Presbyterian ethos of doubts and/or questionings, “Who again do I say is sending me? Who again is it that is my salvation?”

Or better yet, Jesus Christ becomes for Peter after this day in a unique way, I believe, not that Peter doesn’t make mistakes after this; but he must have remembered Jesus’ words to him. Words of praise in a world full of complainers. You see the secret to overcoming self is believing and living and trusting that there is a living God who still rules in sovereignty.

Now maybe you don’t have a problem overcoming self. Maybe you and yourself are on a love/love relationship and there’s not much room for anyone else. But if, at times, you do struggle; if people call you too sensitive, if people say to you, “Well I’m sure that’s not how they meant it when they stabbed you through your heart and soul” if there’s always an excuse; if there’s always a better reason than the conclusion which you have derived from the circumstances. When we say to one another, “I think you’re too sensitive,” why don’t we just say to one another, “I think you’re stupid. I don’t think you’ve got the sense God gave a billy goat. You can’t know how you feel, let me tell you how you experience. You can’t know how you feel; let me tell you how you should feel.” We would not dare

say that to someone, would we? We would never say,” You’re dead wrong. You haven’t got a clue what you are talking about,” when they are telling us about their own pain.

And I believe Jesus Christ becomes for Peter that voice of understanding that allowed Paul to say, “I will not be conformed to the easy route this world offers—the non-risk route. I will not conform, Paul says, to just going along so I can get along. And that’s what the church was always meant to defy—the culture indoctrination. The church was meant to be, if you will, that siren for the world saying, “There’s real danger out there. There’s a struggle between good and evil, between Satan and the living God.” God has already won that battle, but for some reason you spend so much time saying, “Now who is it that’s sending me? Who is it that’s asking me to do the impossible?”

Matthew 16, that you will share in just a moment, takes place in the shadow of some of the greatest temples of that day, notably a temple to Pan, the most popular and influential god. It takes place in a place not that dissimilar to little Springfield or Alexandria in the shadow of the greatest nation in the world’s capital. Sure nobody thinks Washington is a place of temples, but we sure do worship a lot of stuff there, don’t we? It takes place there for a reason. It is as if to say nothing is more important than my confession of Christ as a messiah.

Jesus says OK, Petros (= Peter), I’ll turn you into a petra (= rock) for the church—the living stone that will become the ecclesia. I have to admit I tried a little harder on this sermon; maybe you can tell. Do you know what ecclesia really means? You know it means church (or assembly of citizens called out by the legislature, people organized for a common purpose). Ecclesia means being called out—those who are called out.

When was the last time you felt called out for the cause of Christ or had to stand and say, “Will I deny him or will I serve him?” Will I take the culture’s path, or will I be a citizen of the kingdom of God where the son of man has given his life for me—a place and a very specific, particular confession. A confession is one that is spoken to one whom Jesus knows will in fact deny him, betray him, turn in fear at the first sign of trouble. That confession is saying to Peter, when you aren’t persistent, I will be for you. That confession is saying to Peter, don’t ever turn back from your dream. Don’t ever forget that I’m the one that called you out and you will call out others to be a particular, unique people.

In a world that likes to say that it doesn’t matter what you believe, I’m telling you it does. If you believe in something other than Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, or if you put Christ on par with anything—or if Christ becomes subservient to what you create yourself—your own set of rules—your own standard—your own morality, then the gates of hell will overtake you. The title Son of Man is a title for the only one who would redeem us from eternal punishment.

And so I'm going to let you finish the sermon. I want you to take your bulletins and I want to know if this can be you—if God can make you a living stone again. Stand with me, please. Let us affirm our faith using the word of the Lord:

Jesus went to the territory near the town of Caesarea Philippi, where He asked His disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" "Some say John the Baptist," they answered. "Others say Elijah, while others say Jeremiah or some other prophet." "What about you?" He asked them. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." "Good for you, Simon son of John!" answered Jesus. "For this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven. And so I tell you, Peter: you are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church, and not even death will ever be able to overcome it.

Wherever there is death in your life, wherever that place has come to you that makes you stand in fear; whatever challenge you are facing, allow this time to be an invitation for you to hear Jesus praise for the faith that you do have. I encourage you to hear Jesus praise for the faith that you do have and encourage you for that which you lack. Worship God now with an offering of yourself.