

I suspect Moses didn't like it much either. The Hebrew verb the Bible uses to describe things is telling: Moses "was keeping" Jethro's flocks. It's passive! It's blah. It's an ordinary, boring, unexciting, bland, dull, and downright uninteresting life. Moses is subjected to the same ovine drudgery day in and day out. Moses is in Midian-hell. But then something shifts: Moses *led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God*. That subtle shift in the verbs, from passive to active, is the pivotal moment in Moses' life. He went from minding someone else's business, to guiding his own flock. He transitioned from middle manager to corporate leader. He went from being a follower of sheep to being the leader of God's people.

But notice where Moses led them: into the wilderness. Why? Because that's what leaders do: they move the flocks to greener pastures, beside still waters, and into paths of righteousness. And where do you find those things? Not in Midian, but out in the wilderness, which is where amazing things happen. When Moses left Midian and struck out into the wilderness, he *came to Horeb, the mountain of God*. When Moses left Midian, when he entered the wilderness, he encountered God. Where do we find God? In the wilderness, in the unsafe places, on the edges of the comfort zone. God is in the wilderness and we must go and find God.

In the wilderness, Moses found God in a burning bush. Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight." In the wilderness God spoke to Moses, and Moses responded, "Here I am." In the wilderness, God gave Moses his marching orders and set in motion a sequence of events that would liberate God's people. In the wilderness, Moses found God. When you find God in the wilderness that is holy ground! Midian is not holy ground. Midian is not our home and maintenance is not our work. Where God calls you to and where your work has meaning in the lives of others: that is Holy Ground.

Look around you this morning. We sit in a beautiful sanctuary, with cushions on our pews, with heat and light to provide comfort, with music to entertain and lift our spirits, and with friends for companionship. But I have some bad news for you this morning: this is Midian! Stewardship campaigns and budgets are Midian; music rehearsals and Bible studies and confirmation classes are Midian; and there's nothing more Midian than committee meetings. It's all Midian! It's all a necessary part of

ministry, but it's still Midian. Midian is the staging area that prepares us to go out into the wilderness, but it's still Midian. At some point we've got to get out of Midian and go into the wilderness where we can find God.

Jesus left Midian, too. After his baptism by John, Jesus left his hometown of Nazareth and went out into the wilderness to prepare himself for ministry. Then Jesus returned to Nazareth and he went to church *on the Sabbath day, as was his custom*. He stood and read from the prophet Isaiah, and when he was done he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and the people of Nazareth tried to lynch him. Jesus invited his friends and neighbors to join him in God's work out in the world, but they preferred to stay in Nazareth. The comfortable, stable, boring life of Nazareth held more appeal than the unknown, unpredictable, frightening life of the wilderness. So, Jesus left Nazareth and went about his ministry elsewhere. Jesus calls us to follow him out of Midian, and Nazareth, and out of the Federated Church building to do God's work in the world.

What Jesus read from Isaiah is nothing less the mandate for the Church: bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recover sight for the blind, let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. These things don't happen in Midian: they happen in the wilderness, where God is, among those for whom God has a particular concern. Good news is preached in the wilderness of the Salvation Army lunch line and the weekend meals placed in school lockers. Release is proclaimed in the wilderness of jail cells and rehabilitation facilities. Sight is recovered and the oppressed are set free from the wilderness of dark depression and homelessness and domestic violence. The year of the Lord's favor is proclaimed in the wilderness of our homes, our neighborhoods, our schools, our jobs, our markets, and our social gatherings.

The work Jesus calls us to do is not here, in the sanctuary, in Midian; it is out there, in the wilderness, with God, among God's people. Encountering God in that wilderness should force us to ask the Pharaohs of this world some pretty hard questions. Why are some kids going to bed hungry tonight? Why are some women abused by their loved ones? Why are some men working two and three jobs to provide for their families? Why are some seniors forced to choose between medicine or food or safe

housing? Why are some students encumbered with crushing debt in order to succeed? Why are there 65 million refugees in the world today? Where is God? Out in the wilderness with the people who need God, and it's time for us to go out into the wilderness too.

When is the last time you left Midian? When is the last time this church left Midian? We like Midian because it's safe, it's predictable, and it's filled with people "like us." But life in Midian leads to drudgery, despair, and a slow death. There's nothing inspiring about Midian. Luke 4 shows us what life outside of Midian will be like: it will be difficult and demanding and divine. Life outside Midian is life lived in the very presence of God, among God's beloved people, in the power of God's Healing and Holy Spirit. Luke 4 envisions a church out in the wilderness, tackling Big Hairy Audacious Goals (BHAG) for the world: it is in this wilderness that the Church finds God and partners with God to bring God's Kingdom to fruition.

Like any other church, The Federated Church can find itself stuck in Midian; but the good news is that you don't have to stay in Midian! Reformation Sunday is the perfect day for this congregation to decide to leave the safety of Midian and to strike out for the dangers and the opportunities of the wilderness in the confidence that God is already there, waiting and willing to support our efforts for God's people. As a church "reformed and always reforming," it's right for us to recognize that the Exodus text demands nothing less than our full engagement with God in the wilderness. As a priesthood of believers, it's good for us to remember that the Luke text requires us to seek out people in the wilderness of everyday life, and to lead them out of Midian and to the mountain of God. It's time for this church to get out of Midian!

Prayer: O Lord, Open my eyes to see where you would lead me. Awaken my ears that I would hear your voice guiding me. Inspire my mind that I may comprehend your love for me. Soften my heart that I would offer grace to those I meet. Watch my feet that I would tread upon your kingdom paths. Guard my heart from selfishness that I would give freely. Inspire my words that I may speak of hope and healing. O Lord, I follow you. Amen

## LEAVING MIDIAN

Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Exodus 3:1-12 and Luke 4:16-21

Last month I had the opportunity to hear The Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence preach during a seminar at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. Dr. Carter Florence is the Peter Marshall Professor of Preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, GA. I had the privilege of learning from Anna, then a Ph.D. Student, when I was at seminary. So it was a delight to hear her preach again, and she did not disappoint. This morning I am using some of her ideas as we talk about leaving Midian.<sup>1</sup>

In Exodus 3, verse 1, we hear that *Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian*. Now, Midian is just what it sounds like. Midian is somewhere out there, in the middle, someplace between where you start and where you finish. Midian is the land in-between, the land of status quo, the land of maintenance. And this is where we find Moses. Moses had once been a prince of Egypt, living in a palace, his every desire made real. Now Moses finds himself on Pharaoh's "Most Wanted" list, hiding in Midian, with a wife and kids depending on him, and working in his father-in-law's livestock business. He doesn't even own his own sheep. Moses is mid-life, mid-career, middle management, and stuck in the middle of nowhere.

Maybe that resonates with you some days. Maybe you have a schedule to mind or a job to do. Maybe you have appointments to keep or a social life to uphold. Maybe you're sandwiched between the family you support and the parents you honor. Maybe you have obligations at work, at church, with the service club, or at the charity event. Maybe you have a house to fix, leaves to rake, docks to pull in, boats to winterize, and a snow blower to test. Maybe you have house payments, car payments, student loan payments, credit card payments, or health care payments. Maybe you have childcare issues, kid activities to chaperone, or teens to tolerate. Some days it can all feel like maintenance living! That's called Midian. Midian isn't a fun place to be.

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<sup>1</sup> Notes from a sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence at "The Craft of Preaching" seminar. Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. October 5, 2016.