

“Unboxed and Unbound”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
September 3, 2023 - Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 17

[Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:21-28](#)

We've been traveling together over the past few months through the book of Genesis, following the story of the beginnings of the people of Israel. We've learned about Abraham and Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael, Rebekah and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers. Their family story has been full of twists and turns, and we've read how these ancestors of the Hebrew people behaved, at times faithfully, and also, quite often, despicably. And we've seen that throughout their winding journey as a family, which began in Mesopotamia and ended with living in the land of Egypt, that God has been with them every step of the way, even when they have not acted in faith or respectfully towards others. Throughout their journey, always, God shows up, God blesses them, and God promises them that they would in turn bless the world.

Today and over the next few two months, we'll be seeing how the story of the Israelites and their ever-faithful God continued on after they found themselves living and flourishing at first in Egypt, having migrated there from the land of Canaan during a time of famine. Over time, their flourishing in Egypt turned to suffering there as they became enslaved by the Pharaoh and were forced to spend their lives laboring to support him and his empire, and so they cried out to God for help.

In today's scripture lesson from Exodus, we read about God responding by showing up to an Israelite named Moses, who grew up in Egypt in Pharaoh's own household after being adopted as a child by Pharaoh's daughter but was then living as a shepherd in the land of Midian, having fled from Egypt after killing an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. Moses was tending to his father-in-law's sheep, alone in the wilderness, when God appeared to him in the form of a bush that was ablaze but did not burn up.

God showed up to Moses, appearing in the flaming shrub, just as God had shown up at various other times to Moses' ancestors, appearing sometimes as a human stranger, as God did when blessing an aged and laughing Sarah with the ability to

give birth to a child and as God did when encountering Sarah's grandson Jacob and engaging him in an epic wrestling match. God also showed up at times in the form of an angel, as God did to Jacob in a dream and to Abraham to stop him from sacrificing his son Isaac on a mountaintop.

God showed up to Moses' ancestors, but always appearing in unexpected forms and acting in unexpected ways. Their God was not (yet) housed or worshipped in a building, unlike so many of the gods of the Israelites' neighbors, and their God was not controlled or manipulated by sacrifices or other religious activities of people and so was unboxed and unbound, showing up however God chose to show up and doing whatever God decided to do.

On Mount Horeb, the unboxed and unbound God showed up in a burning bush, and from there gave Moses a new job, to deliver the children of Israel, taking them from the land of Egypt where they were slaves back to freedom in the land of Canaan. And from the bush, God revealed not only a new identity for Moses, but God revealed a name, Yahweh, most often translated in our Bibles as LORD with all capital letters. And most importantly, God reveals that as Moses goes about doing his work of unbinding the Israelites, God would remain with him, not being confined to a blazing bush on that mountaintop or in any other form. The unboxed God of Israel would always be present with Moses and with the Israelites, even if unseen, and would always be blessing them and leading them to becoming unbound.

Of course, and unboxed, unbound, uncontrolled, and uncontrollable God is unpredictable and unsafe, acting in unexpected ways and calling people to take on undesired tasks, like taking on the ruler of a great empire and leading a nation of people to freedom.

In today's gospel lesson from Matthew, we read of Jesus telling his disciples that God has given him a difficult task of suffering at the hands of the people's rulers in order to, like Moses, set others free. And Jesus teaches that all who would follow him should likewise sacrificially give of themselves for the good of others. The God who called Moses to take on the job of setting people free and who called Jesus to give of himself to set people free calls us to continue the work of deliverance. The message of Pentecost is that God calls us all to continue God's delivering work, that God did not just appear to a hero of our faith long ago in a

bush burning on a distant mountaintop or to his ancestors in other ways, but that God is present with us now and always, perpetually burning within each of our hearts, calling us and enabling all of us be heroic unbinders and unboxers of others.

Maybe that means we have to give up more familiar and comfortable ways of being, giving up just managing the sheep as Moses did, or wielding the woodshop tools as Jesus did, or handling the fishing nets as Jesus' disciples did, and maybe that means that we have to work on becoming more unbound and unboxed ourselves, giving up things in our lives that bind us and keep us from more faithfully serving God and others and from experiencing the joy and peace that comes from this service. But today, let us all do what we can to take on the good work that God has given to us, and together as a community of God's servants, let us labor on together. Amen.