

Cashmere Presbyterian Service 29 September 2019

Sermon: "What is that in your hand?"

Alistair Mackenzie guest preacher

Before You I Kneel (A Worker's Prayer) video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPVtx_HCpOo&list=RDIPVtx_HCpOo

Reading Exodus 3 1-12 and 4:1-2a

Work is Worship video <https://www.theologyofwork.org/resources/work-as-worship>

Kia ora, good morning and thank you for your welcome.

This morning I have been invited to come and speak about faith at work. About how we can forge stronger connections between the faith we celebrate here in church and our daily work in the world.

But in case some of you are already thinking well that doesn't include me I'm retired or unemployed or I'm a student, what I'm talking about is our whole life's work in the world, everything we do paid and unpaid, voluntary and domestic and including study too. Because I don't believe that there is retirement or unemployment in God's economy. There is work for everyone to do all the time.

And there are two reasons in particular why I think it is important that we talk about this.

Firstly because I believe that the future of the church will be decided by the extent to which we see the whole church mobilised in ministry to the whole world through the whole of life. Because God's kingdom work is not primarily done by the dramatic ministry of a few Christian superstars but in fact its more dependent on the extent to which ordinary Christian people are encouraged to live lives of integrity and make a difference wherever we are every day. Yet most Christians don't think of their everyday interactions as missionary encounters we seldom do much intentionally to equip and support Christian people for this ministry in daily life.

And secondly I know this is important because survey work that I and others have done show that it's in the course of their daily work that Christians feel most disconnected from God.

Our work matters to God yet that's where Christians feel most disconnected from God.

So why did I choose Exodus 3 as our Bible text for this morning?

Well let me just remind you of some significant parts of this story before we get to the punchline this morning.

Moses was a man with his feet in two worlds - the baby son of slaves who was rescued from the river Nile and then adopted by an Egyptian princess and a Hebrew raised as a prince among Egyptians. And I think that's a great starting place for thinking about how we live and operate as the people of God in the world.

Its only much later in the Old Testament that we hear the perplexed psalmist asking "how can we sing the lord's song in this strange land?" But it's the same question Moses and every other generation of believers has asked when they find themselves trying to live their faith with integrity in the context of a dominant culture that isn't shaped by our beliefs.

What does faith look like in the modern marketplace? How do we sing the Lord's song in this strange land?

And fortunately the Bible is no stranger to this situation, because most of the Bible is the story of people God encounters and enlists in his service in the middle of an ordinary working day. It's not the stories of priests and professional preachers that the Bible talks

about so much as ordinary believers invited to do stuff with God when he encounters them in the midst of their daily work. And Moses was such a person.

And on this occasion Moses encounters God when he wanders over to catch a closer glimpse of a bush that appears to be on fire but doesn't seem to be getting burned up. Nothing is crackling or going black. Then as Moses gets closer he hears his name being called out and realises that this is God trying to get his attention.

This is not Moses deep in prayer and fasting on some spiritual retreat but just going about his shepherding, a routine day until this moment. And reassurance that God will get our attention when he needs to. Certainly it helps if we are endeavouring to keep more spiritually alert and tuned in but let's not feel that daily chores are keeping us from experiencing God in a way that only monks and nuns and pastors and missionaries can.

Most people that God has enlisted in his purposes have been apprehended right in the middle of an ordinary day. And most often they have been used for purposes in ways that they didn't even realise at the time. We must be careful that we don't underestimate the ways in which God may be using us just because they go unnoticed in the midst of the mundane.

Anyway God says to Moses "Don't come any closer" as he approaches the burning bush. "Take off your sandals for the place where you are standing is holy ground." But this is just the desert. No shrine or temple here. Just rocks and sand and a few stunted shrubs and the smell of sheep dung in the air. But then God is everywhere. And as a result every place is holy and needs to be approached as a sacred place where we can encounter God.

We don't take God with us into our places of work. God is already at work before we come on the scene. He wants to welcome us as we come through the door. To remind us there is a work he has already begun here that we have the opportunity to be partners in. Take off your shoes. Treat everything as sacred. Your workplace is holy ground. God is on the job there too.

Then God speaks to Moses about events in Egypt. That wonderfully reassuring message from Exodus chapter 3 verse 7

I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt

I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers

and I am concerned about their suffering

So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians

The essence of the Gospel in just 4 short lines

God does see.

God does hear

God does care

And God has come down to rescue us

But then the crunchline that makes Moses quake. *So now go I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.*

And then there's the bit that's probably most often preached on, where God asks Moses to be his spokesperson and Moses protests saying "I can't do it because I can only stutter and can never find the right words to say." And nothing has been clearer in my surveying people about faith at work than their self consciousness about this. Because as I've approached Christians saying that I'm interested to talk with them about faith and work issues the great majority immediately assume from the outset that it's their effectiveness in evangelism that I'm wanting to examine and so the conversation almost always starts with someone saying things like, "well, I don't often talk plainly with my workmates about my

faith and to be honest I don't find it all that easy." And "maybe you should be talking to someone else about this." So that I've been left feeling uncomfortable and sad that church people have felt so burdened about some approach to evangelism that doesn't seem to fit naturally. It seems that somehow evangelism has become a word that generates such a degree of discomfort and unrealistic expectations and guilt that it needs rehabilitating. Because when it come to sharing our faith I suspect that most of us are just stutterers like Moses.

Anyway Moses' protesting goes on for some time until we're told that God actually got angry with him and says that he will also send his brother Aaron along with him with this promise "I will help both of you to speak and I will teach you what to do." And I can't help feeling that the church is being crippled by this sense that ordinary Christians just aren't enough to make the difference. That somehow it will take super believers.

But that's a lie. Because it's only God who can make the difference but he delights to do it most of the time anonymously through ordinary believers like you and me. But we find that hard to believe. And we know that Moses struggled to believe it too. Because he says, "But what if they don't believe me and won't listen and what if they just scoff and say 'You're kidding, the Lord didn't appear to you?'"

Then we read in Exodus chapter 4 and verse 2 and this is the punchline this morning "The lord said to him 'Moses what is that in your hand?'"

Moses What is that is your hand?

In fact it's his shepherds crook that Moses is holding on to. And God is asking Moses a question about his faith and his work. Has he made any connections yet? And it's a question for each of us to ponder, because I think God wants all of us to think about our present circumstances and how and where he might be at work. So think about that for a couple of minutes and then I want to conclude by coming back to that question.

But first let's remember what had happened to Moses. Because at this stage in his life Moses was feeling pretty sidelined from God's purposes. He'd had dreams of really making a difference. He'd been trained as a prince to become a leader in Egypt. But then he'd murdered an Egyptian who was beating up a Hebrew slave and he was forced to flee for his life. So that he had taken refuge in a remote part of the desert and ended up there looking after the sheep of his father in law. And so he started to wonder Is this all there is? And maybe you wonder too - Is this really all that I was made by God to do?

Quite a few of you are retired as I am too. Which means a lot of different things these days. But usually it means that we are not doing the same things that we used to do for a living and that can be a very difficult transition for many because our culture places such a strong emphasis on our identity being tied to having a job. What do you do? Is the question we are constantly asking. Because significance and status and security all go with having a professional identity or at least a good job. And losing that through redundancy or sickness or an accident or retirement can throw us into an identity crisis. And I could say a lot more about this but we don't have time this morning except for me to say three things.

Firstly your work really matters to God.

Secondly Your work really matters but not in the way that our culture promotes as the primary source of our identity and significance and security. Then we are making our job the key to our salvation. As Christians our identity and security are grounded in knowing we are safe in the love of the God who created us and who has reached out to embrace us in Jesus. Our work matters to God. But not through the idolatry of work that Western culture promotes.

Because thirdly it is our whole life's work that matters. The mixture of paid and unpaid roles that you and I juggle all the time and that gets renegotiated at every new stage of life. Domestic work at home, community work, church work and the paid work that we do. It all matters to God. Which is why I say there is no unemployment and no retirement in the economy of God. Just different opportunities to work all the time and it all matters to God.

But Moses had been through a tough transition and he was much more aware of what he had left behind him and fears about what lay ahead rather than excitement. Because Moses felt sidelined and had decided that if he was going to be useful to God he needed to be a different sort of person in another place. But God had other ideas. So when Moses says But lord I just haven't got what it takes anymore, we read the lord said to him "Moses what is that in your hand"

Such a strange question because as Moses looks down at his hand all he can see is a stick of wood.

Its my shepherd's staff, he says

And the Lord says throw it on the ground

And so Moses threw it on the ground and to his surprise and alarm it became a snake. So that Moses had to run away from it.

Then the Lord said Reach out your hand and take it by the tail

And so Moses took hold of the snake and it turned back into his wooden staff again. And from this point on the staffs of Moses and Aaron become instruments that God uses to perform all sorts of miraculous things. Turning them into snakes in front of Pharaoh.

Turning the water of the Nile river into blood. The staff is used to make a plague of frogs come up out of the river, and then gnats from the dust of the ground. It's the staff of Moses raised over the Red Sea that parts the waters to let the people of Israel through, and then raised again from the other side causes the waters to engulf the chariots of the Egyptian army that is pursuing them. And then later when they are all so thirsty in the driest part of the desert and they are sure they will die, it is from the rock that Moses strikes with his staff that water suddenly gushes for these desperate people to slake their thirst.

So why go on about the significance of this staff at such length? Well because it represents the everyday working tool of a shepherd, and because it was what Moses already had in his hand that God wanted to use, but in ways that Moses had never realised was possible before. Not for a moment had Moses thought that his shepherd's staff might be an instrument of God. But God wanted Moses to realise that it was.

And so now the question is What's that in your hand?

Because God wants you and me to understand that we don't have to be someone else or somewhere else for him to use us. Its the very things that he's already put in our hands and that sit right in front of us now that he will use in his purposes - even those things that we haven't started to think of yet as instruments of God.

Moses didn't have a clue how God would use this simple stick of wood in his hand. And mostly you won't know until much later how God has used you and your daily work in his purposes. But God will.

The trouble is that for most of us some things seem to be invested with a lot more spiritual significance than others, and our daily work isn't usually one of those things. But God sees things differently. That's what he was trying to teach Moses and that's what he wants to teach you and me. That even a shepherd's staff can become an instrument of God. And so can the tools of your daily work and mine no matter how mundane and ordinary they might seem.

So where do we start? Just where we are. But perhaps just a little more conscious that we haven't just stumbled into what we are doing. But God is in it, and inviting you and me to

look again. What is that in your hand? Because it is an instrument of God if only we are open and willing to let him use it.

Let me finish with one of my favourite benedictions

**You are God's Servants gifted with dreams and visions.
Upon you rests the grace of God like flames of fire.
Love and serve the Lord in the strength of the Spirit.
May the deep peace of Christ be with you,
the strong arms of God sustain you,
and the power of the Holy Spirit strengthen you in every way.
Amen.
(Diane Kamay Tripp)**