

“Beyond the Wilderness”
Exodus 2:23-3:15
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You’ve heard all the jokes about the difficulty men have asking for directions, and perhaps some of you have lived it. And Moses was true to form. You see, when God caught Moses’ attention with a bush that acted like the Olympic torch, Moses was lost; he had led his flock “beyond the wilderness,” to a place so far from home that he ended up somewhere so out of the way that experts can’t even figure out where it is! That’s right, even the best Biblical scholars and archeologists have only the vaguest of speculations as to where Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, really lies. Some say the Sinai Peninsula; others say Mount Carmel, others as far away as present day Saudi Arabia. Nobody knows for sure. But that’s OK, because what happened to Moses, and what has happened to us, or can happen to us, doesn’t depend so much on being at a particular geographical place at a specific time, so much as being at the right geographical place at a divine time. Let me say that again: What happened to Moses doesn’t depend so much on being at a particular geographical place at a specific time, so much as being at the right geographical place at a divine time. You see, it’s certainly not that Mount Horeb doesn’t exist; it’s just that geography fails to explain fully the mystery of God’s call.

Without a doubt, the Bible is a book of places, important places, key places made memorable by naming them after what happened there; Bethel, Jerusalem, and so many other places have names that mean something to the story. The land and the landscape were how God's people oriented themselves, how they knew where home was, how they knew where God was. And it was not just an ancient phenomenon; that Biblical emphasis on the land and its places still matters, is still the source of conflict. Look at the battle over Jerusalem, over the Temple Mount, and Rachel's tomb, and the other great sites of the Old and New Testaments. But despite the care in naming and remembering important places, the geographical specifics of some of those places are lost in the mists of time, and so, ironically, the meaning and interpretation of certain places and events is left to the theographical memory.

But what do I mean by theographical memory? Well, let's start with geography and deconstruct that word a little bit. Geography is a compound word that combines the Greek roots geo-, meaning earth, and -graphos, meaning "writing" or "description." And so geography concerns itself with describing the earth and all of its features, its rivers and streams, its deserts and dry places, its mountaintops and its valleys. Sub-disciplines of geography are concerned with how humans or animals use the earth, how we are distributed, what impact we have on it. Geography is not the same as cartography, also know as map-making, although they are obviously related. We live on the land, and we are curious about

the land, and so we want to describe it to the best of our ability, with maps and definitions, and for both helpful and not so helpful reasons. I once thought about becoming a geographer. As a college student on the verge of flaming out of architecture school, I began to explore other career options, took some of those standardized career tests, and learned I was most apt to be a geographer, journalist, or police officer. Of the three, geography seemed the least risky, and so I gave it a few minutes more thought than the other options, and in the end concluded that since the only school worth attending for the study of geography was in the God-forsaken location of St. Cloud, Minnesota, that was the end of my geography career. I was after all, living in sunny Atlanta at the time.

Little did I know, however, that my momentary dalliance with geography was an integral and ironic part of my theography. You see, if geography is the discipline of describing the earth, theography is coming to terms with God in your midst, wherever that may be. Theos, is, of course, the Greek word for God, from which we get the word theology, of the study of God. And so theography might be described best as describing the story of your relationship with God, or God's relationship with you. As one Christian seeker has put it: "I love the idea of theography (writing about one's personal experience with God), as opposed to theology (making claims about the nature or character of God). I love the humility of theography, which seems to say, 'I don't understand God, and I cannot create definitions or concepts that accurately portray who God is. All I can tell you is my

own experience with God, which need not be in competition with yours.’ The theologian is less interested in catching and canonizing some truth about divinity than in receiving gifts of wonder and beauty, and sharing these gifts with others.”

Now, it must have been with profound humility that Moses must have had his first experience with theophany. Perhaps Moses had some other experiences with God, but the beginning of Exodus certainly doesn’t reveal anything about them; nowhere does Moses reveal any knowledge of God or religion, except that we are told that his father-in-law was a priest of an unspecified kind. As we heard, Moses experiences a moment of wonder and beauty as an “angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.” Now, a geographer might be interested in where such an amazing bush might be found, but a theologian takes note of the role the bush played in Moses’ life, and the life of his people, mainly to capture Moses’ attention, and direct him to his first encounter with the divine, to get him to stop long enough to hear the voice of God call out to him, “Moses, Moses,” and to receive the charge to be God’s agent in confronting Pharaoh and bringing up out of Egypt those whom God called “my people.”

And so it was with similar profound humility, although without quite the same fireworks, that I found myself seventeen years after dropping out of college contemplating a call to ministry in, of all places, the God-forsaken location of St. Cloud, Minnesota. In the years in between, I had not given another moment’s

thought to going anywhere as cold as Minnesota, and I approached the decision of going anywhere with a great deal of disappointment, since I had in mind to stay in the delightful city of Pittsburgh, where there were, geographically speaking, in Allegheny County alone, 156 Presbyterian churches to choose from. However, theographically speaking, the only place that mattered was St. Cloud, Minnesota, and so try as I might to stay in Pennsylvania, there were no open doors, and so we sold our house, packed our things, and headed off to live in not just a God-forsaken geography, but also God-blessed theography, as we spent wonderful five years there.

I doubt it was a sense of spiritual geography that led Moses “beyond the wilderness” with his father-in-law’s sheep. More likely it was, as I mentioned, that Moses got lost in an unfamiliar landscape, and just kept going until he came out the other side, wherever that may have been. You see, Moses did not grow up as a shepherd; he was raised in the palace. His job tending Jethro’s sheep was one he had only because he was in his own exile, not because he was qualified. You remember that he fled Egypt after it became known that he had killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. He fled to Midian, a safe and obscure place, but also a place vastly different than his upbringing. And so he settled there, and began the life of a Midianite, tending sheep, because there were no pyramids to build in Midian. He was a stranger in a strange land, so much so that he even named his son Gershom, from the word for “alien,” for he said, “I have been an alien residing in a

foreign land.” Now, I think that Moses’ sense of alien-ness had less to do with where Midian was located geographically, and more to do with his dislocation from both his people and his God. His home, and his heart, were elsewhere, in a place no geographer could ever precisely locate or describe. But God was about to bring him home, even if the road there would be as theographically challenging as it was geographically.

And so, on Mount Horeb, wherever it may be, God called Moses to be the human representative from the divine court to Pharaoh’s court, to bring God’s message of liberation and freedom. Moses, of course, objects, citing his deficiencies, and there are those commentators who contend that Moses was utterly lacking in the skills needed for the job, but I think they are wrong. He was the ideal man for the job. It’s true that Moses wasn’t much of a speechmaker, but he was a man of action, and that’s exactly what God needed. I think in his objections, Moses was simply afraid; afraid to go back to a serious threat to his life, afraid to go back to a people he barely knew and who had criticized him already, afraid to leave his newly found comfort zone of rural life, loving wife, and newborn child, even if it was a “foreign land.” From his days being raised in Pharaoh’s palace, Moses knew politics; Moses knew economics; Moses knew loyalty and leadership. These were the areas of competence that over the long run would be vitally important, as he guided his people through their forty years in the wilderness, but also in the short term, as he made the decisions that needed to be made to part the Red Sea. I think

that God was simply writing the next chapter of Moses' unique theography, describing those intangible places of home and heart that have neither longitude nor latitude.

God's call to Moses, and God's call to each of us, don't always correspond directly to a place on the map. It corresponds to God's needs, and the needs of God's people. The call doesn't happen when we finally arrive at a certain destination, but when we are in the right place to hear God's call. Moses didn't set out to find the mountain of God. In a very real sense, the mountain of God found him, and the rest is history. And that's the difference between geography and theography, a difference I invite you to reflect upon as you leave this place tonight. You see, just as God wrote the next chapter of Moses' story on Mount Horeb, God is still writing your story, and my story, and our story together. But it is a story we are living, not just reading. We are participating in the liberation of the world, just as Moses did as he took staff in hand and told Pharaoh, "Let my people go." We cannot be innocent bystanders to our own drama. You may be here tonight in Guachipelin de Escazú, but you are also in the kingdom of God. And no matter where you go in that kingdom, the same amazing promise God gave Moses on Mount Horeb, God gives to you, "I will be with you." And that's a promise that doesn't depend on geography, thanks be to God. Amen.