

On being drawn - A sermon on Exodus 3

Ever since I began taking the bible seriously I notice that I've been particularly drawn to the Old Testament. For some reason I just love it. I'm fascinated by its enigmatic stories—the way they're written, the things that happen, the characters and their lives.

I know not everyone shares this interest, and I'm interested in that too—in the fact that we're all drawn to such different things, in such different directions. I'm interested in what it is that draw us, and in what *that* also might suggest for our lives.

I share this with you, partly to explain why the two sermons I'm preaching (while Sarah is away) are on the Old Testament. And partly, because it touches on a theme I see in both of them, namely this phenomenon of *being drawn*...

The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas suggested that this experience of being drawn is actually fundamental to *our* very being as persons, to our sense of self, to who we are and to what our lives are about. That makes sense to me, and it certainly seems resonant with the story we've just heard (a story that Levinas, a Jew, would've known well).

So, let's take a closer look; what *is* going on here, and what if anything might that have to do with *our* experiences of feeling drawn.

Now, the bit we heard in the reading is part of a much larger story. Most of you will know some of it. Moses was born to an Israelite woman when the Israelites were in slavery in Egypt. An Egyptian decree at the time of his birth ordered that all Israelite male babies were to be drowned at birth. In a radical act of defiance, Moses's mother hid him in a basket in the reeds of the river where he was discovered and rescued by of all people, Pharaoh's daughter –. She had compassion on him; Moses was saved and grew up with privilege in the Egyptian court.

Later, as a young adult, on two occasions he intervened to rescue Israelites who were being mistreated. This raised the ire of Pharaoh and Moses was forced to flee for his life. Once again, in the wilderness now, he intervenes on behalf of the oppressed. This time it was the 7 daughters of the priest of Midian, who were being denied access to a well by some shepherds. This

act of chivalry led to his being given one of these daughters in marriage, and so Moses remains in the land of Midian.

Meanwhile, the Israelites groaned on in captivity. They cried out to God, and God ... took notice.

Which brings us to our reading and back to Moses, 'keeping the flock of his father-in-law' a long way from the action, and, it seems, wandering further away by the day, out '*beyond the wilderness*'.

I haven't actually been to that part of the world but I looked it up on Google maps and I can tell you, Moses was out it! Geographically speaking he was what we'd call these days *marginalised*.

But that never really seems to be a problem to God, in fact, more often than not it seems to be a requirement that those with a significant vocation spend a significant time marginalised (apparently) from the very work they are called to do.

So, here he is, out beyond the wilderness, tending a few sheep in a fierce and unpromising landscape, as far removed as possible from his people and the action, and then, we're told... 'he came to Horeb, the mountain of God.' And suddenly, he's smack in the midst of it—so close that he's told to remove his sandals: the burning bush, the divine presence, the call... and the rest is history.

Well, you know the story. It's amazing, but what of its relevance for us?

There's so much to say. That's why I love these stories. I could talk about the significance of the divine name, and about the bigger picture of what God is doing. All of this is important, but what I want to touch on tonight is this phenomenon of *being drawn*.

As I reflect on the story of Moses's life it seems to me there's a lot of *being drawn* going on. And I think the text is trying to convey this.

From the very beginning... his name, Moses, it means 'the one who is drawn out', it was bestowed on him by Pharaoh's daughter when she drew him out of the river. Later, when he'd grown up, twice it says, 'he went out'—out of the court, out to his people; and twice he is drawn *into* a squabble, drawn to intervene in a situation of injustice. It happens for a third time when he comes to the aid of the daughters at the well.

And then there's this Horeb incident, and the call— 'Moses, Moses'... And his immediate response: 'Here I am'.

Yes, it was at *that* point that he actually received his commission, 'Come... I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt.' That was the moment when it all began, and yet in another way it wasn't. It actually began years before. For decades before he received this 'come', he'd been *coming*, as if in response to some invisible magnetic force. On one level the call came as a voice from the blue, but on another, it's as if it'd been silently calling all his life, evident in his restlessness, his wondering, his compulsion to act against oppression

Maybe it came and went. Maybe just every now and then something caught hold of him, an irresistible urge, like the times he went out to his people. I don't know, but it sure seems to me like something is drawing him.

I mean, Horeb! Of all the hills in that parched place, how is it that he came to *that* one? Did he know it was the Mountain of God OR did it just happen, did something in him say: I'll head for that hill? Again, I don't know. Either way, I suspect he was drawn. I know that feeling, and maybe you do too...

And then when he gets there he sees this strange sight – the bush blazing but not consumed. And the text seems to make a big deal of his decision to go over to it. 'Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight"' (v3). I must... I must...

Whenever I hear that phrase I have the sense I'm in vocational territory. When we say: 'I should', it's because we're feeling obliged. There's a degree of legalism in it. Sub text, I don't *really* want to do this but I know I should, if I'm going to do the right thing. It's a duty, an expectation: *I should* ring so and so. *I should* visit my Mum. *I should* go to church. It's not that all obligation is bad, it's just not really coming from our heart.

When we say: 'I must', it's different. 'I must' comes from a deep place of conviction. Jesus didn't say *I should* go to Jerusalem, he said 'I must go' (Lk 13.33). *I must*... ie, it's my vocation, an imperative, something I cannot not do. It is vital that I go. I must...

Moses said I must: 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight.' And, if that's not clear enough, the text adds, 'When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called him'.

If Moses had not allowed himself to be drawn *before* he received this commission, I do not think he would've received it—if he hadn't gone to Horeb, if he hadn't turned aside he wouldn't have received the call.

To be sure, once he *did* receive it he *resisted* it like the plague. Talk about excuses!!

But, who am I that I should go?

But how can I prove who sent me?

But suppose they don't believe me or listen to me?

But I'm not eloquent; I get tongue-tied.

But I don't want to go, can you send somebody else.

Excuses, excuses! It goes on and on. It must've driven God mad!! And, when you look at it, they all spring from the ego – it's me, me, me, I, I, I.

Moses... look at your life! Listen to your heart! You've been drawn to this since the day you were born, even when it looked like you couldn't have been further away – out *beyond* the wilderness. Look at yourself, you've been moving towards it for years, you want it, you need it, you must do it. Don't tell me what's wrong, don't tell me what you can't do; look at your life, listen to your heart.

I think there is a great lesson in this story about responsiveness, and how it relates to discernment, and being called, and living vocationally.

Do you wonder about your life, what you're here for, what you're supposed to be doing? Are you trying to decide something important? Trying to discern the will of God?

How do we do that? How do we get it right? We'd all love a sign—a burning bush, a voice from heaven, clear as a bell and unmistakable.

Moses got his sign, eventually, and maybe you will too. But, it's lik I said, it came because he was responding already, moving towards it.

So, while you're waiting for your sign, when it comes to discernment, I suggest you could do a lot worse than pay attention to your life.

What draws you? What patterns of responsiveness do you notice? What movements, interests and themes? What do these suggest to you? Maybe ask some people who know you well or a spiritual director. What do they notice?

I'm not talking about our neuroses here—our temptations, delusions and obsessions, although perhaps they will reveal things if we look deeper into them. What I am suggesting is that we attend to signs of what Thomas Merton called 'true self', what Willa Cather called our 'inviolable self', that which is distinctively and truly us.

What breaks your heart? What gives you joy? Frederick Buechner describes vocation as the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need. I find that helpful.

I don't say discernment is simple or clear-cut. It can be messy and take a long time. Moses was drawn but he also resisted. *That* can be a clue too. Maybe look at what you're resisting with a little *too much* energy. What excuses in you are testing God's patience? What decision would be a relief, even if it brings hardship? What are your '*I must's*'?

Attending to these things, moving *towards* them may well bring you to a place of clarity, to a sign that's unmistakable; and that could make a difference, not only in your life, but in the lives of others as well, lives that God loves and listens to.

And when God saw that Moses *had* turned aside to see, God called him and said: Moses, Moses, the cry of my people has come to me; I have seen how they are oppressed. So come, I will send you to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land.

Tell me... what is it that draws you???

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