Ah, Moses. If you’re of a certain age, you no doubt picture Moses as a Charlton Heston type figure—larger than life, strong, fierce, leader of his people. But it’s the back story that’s really interesting. How did Moses ever become a key figure on the world stage? What was it about him that equipped him for the role? How did Moses become MOSES?

You may know bits and pieces of his story. Born when the Jews were slaves in Egypt, his life was in danger from the moment of his birth for Pharoah had ordered all the baby Jewish boys to be killed. In order to save his life, his mother placed him in a little reed basket and set it afloat on the Nile River. Like so many mothers still today, she longed for a way to protect her precious child from the violence raging all around and she took a desperate measure to try and save him and insure his freedom.

Moses was one of the fortunate ones. He was spotted and pulled from the water by Pharoah’s daughter who raised him in the palace. In fact, she called a Hebrew slave to attend to him who turned out to be his own true mother. And so, as he grew, he learned his true identity. One day in the field, he saw an Egyptian beating one of his kinsmen and thinking no one was looking, Moses killed him. But learning that he had been seen, he fled to Midian where he settled down, became a shepherder, and married. Life for Moses seemed to take on a new calm, a new normal. He seemed headed to live out his life as a gentle shepherd enjoying his wife, his children, and his grandchildren in his new adopted country. Moses, herder of sheep.

God had different ideas. This is another of those great Bible stories that blesses us with its honesty and its humor. Moses is a pretty ordinary guy at this point, not so different from any one of us. But God saw in him much more. It’s the back story on Moses, ordinary guy, becoming MOSES, leader of his people, that opens our hearts to wondering—might God have something for me to do in this world? Is God hoping that I’ll wake up one morning and see potential I had not recognized? Is God opening doors that I still see as closed? Dare I even imagine that God knows my name, cares how I live…that God wants ME to live into the fullest potential of life, for myself and for others? Me?

Our Summer Sermon series, Questions God Asks Us, continues today with God asking Moses: “What’s that in your hand?” Interesting question. But first it’s important to take a look at what finally prompts God to ask. Let’s back up a ways to see all that’s been going on between God and Moses before God gets to today’s question.

Moses was living his happy quiet life in Midian. Things were good—family, job, nice place to live. I’m sure Moses didn’t think there was much more he needed to have or to do. Sound at all familiar? I’ve worked hard, God, thank you very much, to get where I am. I’d like to just kick back, fire up the barby, and enjoy the game. Go away, God. Stop bugging me. I don’t want to hear about anybody else’s problems. Let them or someone else take care of it.

But God has been listening to the cries of his suffering people and makes a plan to set them free. Moses? God calls. Moses? Moses tries to pull the covers over his head. “I don’t hear you…!”

So one day he’s up on Mt. Sinai looking after his sheep and God appears to him in a burning bush. That should get his attention, but Moses turns away. God says: “Here I am. …Come closer, Moses. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.” Could it be more clear? And, God continues, I want you to go to Egypt and set my people free.

Moses tries to wriggle out of it. “Who am I?” he asks God. And besides, God, if I go tell them that’s what you’ve sent me to do they will ask for your name and what shall I say? God gives Moses the answer. I am who I am. The Lord, the God of your ancestors, has sent you. Go! Moses defers again. Suppose they don’t listen or they don’t believe me. O Lord, please send someone else.

Moses has convinced himself that he absolutely does not have—the skill, the courage, the persuasiveness, the gifts, the experience, the standing, the stature, the anything to pull this off. I’m not your guy. Go away, God.

“Moses,” says God, “what is that in your hand?”

Brilliant. You know, God could instead have spent hours reminding Moses of God’s great power to create the earth and all that is in it, to set the arc above the rainbow after the floods, and so on and so forth. God could have appeared to Moses every night in his dreams for years. God could have done all kinds of things, but instead simply asks: “Moses, what is that in your hand?”

Catches him up short. Oh, gosh, there is something there. My shepherd’s staff. And God shows him how he’ll throw it on the ground and it will become a serpent and he’ll pick it up by the tail and all the people will see these signs and wonders and that will begin their journey out of slavery to freedom.

Moses, what you need is already in your hand.

Then as now, God works through people, through pretty ordinary, often stubborn, people, to work out God’s purposes in the world.

The thing is, though, most of us figure that we’re not one of THOSE people. The problems of the world are huge and we are small. We can probably list off without thinking very hard why we cannot, would not, will not be effective—we lack the knowledge, the ability, the energy, the resources, the clout. And while all that may well be true on some level, the problem comes when we take it to the next level and tell ourselves that we have no responsibility for what’s going on “out there,” and there’s nothing even God could do through us to have any kind of impact whatsoever.

What’s that in your hand right at this moment, God asks us? When we make available what’s already in our hands, it’s amazing what God can do with it.

Let me take an example from recent events. You know, we’ve all been overwhelmed by the stories of the flood of refugees, mostly unaccompanied minors, children, fleeing violence and certain death in Central America, to make the perilous journey to what they hope will be a better and safer life here in America. The issues are complex and I have no doubt that we’re all over the map in our thoughts about the politics of all this and what the government should do. That’s OK. Difference is good and we should be hashing it out as a nation and all that will get sorted out in time.

But in the meantime, I’ve been moved by the stories of church folks, including a lot of United Methodists, in Texas, Arizona, and here in California, who have come together to offer care, transport to family in the States, safe shelter for the children, some of whom they say have blank stares on their faces, traumatized by the horrendous violence they have seen or endured. My friend, Rev. Laura Merrill, superintendent of the McAllen District of the Southwest Texas and Rio Grande Conferences, says: “There were the kids whose eyes welled up the minute we started talking, and there were the kids whose blank expressions never left their faces,” Merrill said. “Then there were the young ones who brightened and smiled — beautiful children.”

The church is coming together to do what we always do in times of crisis—providing hygiene kits, and legal assistance, socks and shoe laces, infant care to mothers who have given birth along the way. In the name of Jesus Christ, they are offering compassion and hospitality to people in their time of need.

One civic leader said: “My senses tell me this is the right thing to do...we’re not a rich community, but we are wealthy in compassion...”

Sometimes, when faced with a need, God simply asks us: “What is that in your hand?” and we respond as we can. We might not have all the answers, or unlimited means, but we have compassion in our hearts and an extraordinary ability to do good.

Here’s how it’s written in 1 Peter:

“Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.”

Last week we commissioned our 2014 Youth Service Project Team by anointing their hands for the work they would offer in service to others. They left yesterday and are worshipping this morning in Tennessee as they begin their mission work.

As we move into our time of prayer today, I invite you to look now at your own hands. Open them and as we pray, consider what is in your hand, the gift you have received from God. And then, imagine it being anointed for whatever it is that God may be calling you to do for someone today, someone who needs to know and feel and hear and claim the love of God in Christ Jesus.

What’s that in your hand?
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