

San Lorenzo Community Church United Church of Christ

Sermon: Generation X

Preached extemporaneously by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, August 31, 2014

A reading from the Book of Exodus 3:1-15

³ Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³ So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."

⁴ When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

⁵ "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ Then God said, "I am the God of your father and mother, the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ The LORD said, "I have indeed 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. ⁸ So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, and Jebusites. ⁹ And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. ¹⁰ So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

¹² And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

¹³ Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers and mothers—the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Ruth and the God of Jacob and Naomi—has sent me to you.'

"This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.

This ends the reading from the Book of Exodus. Thanks be to God.

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I have to tell you how much fun I have been having. This has been a fantastic month of August. We started in the 1940s, in what Tom Brokaw called, "The Greatest Generation." A generation built on teamwork, commitment, sacrifice, discipline, financial and social conservatism. A generation marked by the Great Depression, the New Deal and World War II. You are the great builders of our society.

We sang "Swingin' on a Star" and "Don't Fence Me In." We watched Ron and Kathy re-enact a scene from "Casablanca." We gave our yo-yo's a great try.

Then we moved into the fifties and the early baby boomer generation. We let loose with our hula hoops and sang "Que Sera Sera" and "Rock Around the Clock."

Born somewhere between 1946 and 1964-ish. We've heard a lot about "baby boomers." These people are now in their fifties and sixties and hold a great many leadership roles in our country and world. This generation is now in their prime of their careers and beginning to take retirement, shifting roles from taking care of children to taking care of parents. A generation of idealism, individualism, self-improvement and high expectations. A generation marked by the Viet Nam War, popular television, Woodstock, Watergate, sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

We sang our hearts out with "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Turn, Turn, Turn." And our memory of the 1960s would not have been complete without "Sweet Caroline," "What a Wonderful World" and The Ed Sullivan Show.

And now we have arrived at "Generation X." This is the generation born between 1964 and 1980. What can be said about the generation of 1970s? As a group, they are pragmatic, diverse, savvy, entrepreneurial, and very aware and focused on the quality of life – the personal pursuit of happiness, the personal impact and personal growth.

This was the first generation of latchkey kids. By the early 1970s, young Boomers were entering the workforce—but did so in a rapidly down-turning economy. Oil embargoes and long gas lines, war and post-war inflation, high unemployment, and financial uncertainty. So the Generation X learned that they "don't need nobody," Being "loners" is "in their blood."

The Builders and Boomers from earlier generations have been taught to see this as a negative trait, as something to be "fixed." After all, we all need each other; and the only time good things happen in society is when people, well, "work together." But that is Boomer thinking. So let's not be mean and say this is the "Me Generation." What choice did they have, really?

The Xers were children during of the late sixties and seventies. They watched the world change and their family change in ways never seen before. The divorce rates rose dramatically and kids had to figure out how to live among multiple-family dynamics. The motto became "embrace change." Change is the very essence of society.

Now this is quite a transition for those of us from another generation. We kind of like our absolutes; our rules and principles. We don't really want everything to be "relative" or "based on circumstances." We don't want "situational ethics." We like being able to say facts and certainties about the nature of God and about our faith.

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But, alas, the old ready-made "absolutes," conditioned by time and circumstance as so many of them were, must give way to new principles and ideals of living. Faith is no longer a noun, a thing. Faith becomes a verb – faith is a doing, a way of being.

This Generation X does not want – and will not put up with – our notion of pre-packaged "rules" or "doctrines," however "fixed" they are. Generation X wants "tools" for coping with the unexpected. Where do you think we got the "information highway" from? Being in a state of constant change requires a lot of information.

Change is good. Change breeds spontaneity. Spontaneity is fun, exciting. To live in the 1970s is to want that spark of enthusiasm and laughter. Who doesn't want a good surprise?

So I love this story from Exodus this morning. Talk about a surprise. We've seen the movie with Charlton Heston as Moses climbing up the mountain, standing with a large walking stick in one hand, seeing a bush glow in front of the rocks and talking with God. This story of the burning bush is one of the most well-known and well-loved stories in the Bible. But the images from the movie, "The Ten Commandments," are emblazoned in our brains and most of us think this is how the events actually happened.

But I think the scene is completely different. In fact I think the movie got it all wrong. The way the story actually goes is something like this:

Jimmy Fallon arrives in the lovely village of San Lorenzo to start life over. He likes the houses and tree-lined streets. He likes the friendly people and proximity to big-city events. So he settles down. He meets a lovely woman, whom he marries, and they have a son. They name their son, "Sojourner" because they will always be on the run and must keep a low profile to keep his cover.

Over time, he hears the news that things are not going well back home in New York. More crime, more riots, more harassment, more fear, more terror.

One day he's out walking the dog. A regular day really, except for the fact that he hears something around the corner talking to him: "Yo, Jimmy, Jimmy. Over here." The ever zany and endlessly skeptical Jimmy turns the corner and sees an open gate to a backyard. In that backyard the voice is coming from the hedges. The shrubs are on fire but not burning. The fire is hot but does not scorch. Still, clearly the hedges are speaking. As you might imagine, Jimmy is quickly thinking of a way to test what he sees in front of him – if you are really a fire, can I make a s'more? If you are really not burning, then if I pour water on you, will you continue to flame? What I give the shrubbery a quiz to see if it really knows who I am?

This is the real version of the story from Exodus. It is not Charlton Heston standing and kneeling and behaving all shy and timid. No, the energy of the story is about Jimmy Fallon nervously, anxiously, hilariously second guessing everything going on. There is no trust without proof; there is no listening without wonder; there is no following without knowing more information – what did you say your name was? I think I missed it? Are you God? Are you Allah? Are you Yahweh? Oh, so you simply want to be called "I am who I am." Well, that helps – not.

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You see Jimmy Fallon was born in 1974. He is the epitome of a world in which nothing makes sense anymore. Everything is changing. Does a talking shrub mean you are going crazy? Or any crazier than you are normally are? Does watching a fire that doesn't burn transport you to the Twilight Zone? Was that God singing: "Imagine all the people, living for today. Living life in peace. Sharing all the world." Really? God sings The Beatles?

This is that moment when you want to get closer and get a better view and also, simultaneously, you want to stay away because it is all jumbled up, maybe a little creepy but definitely not what we are used to.

God says to us, come closer this is holy ground, no, stay away you might get burned. Come closer. Stay away. "Look it's me," God says, "I know your people are in pain. I see what is happening in back home. I am going to change all that, so it's okay, come closer. No, you're seeing a real fire, you will get burned, better stay away. If you get any closer, you will have to do something, encounter and change something, become aware, shout and dance; you'll have to write new laws, get rid of the old oppression; you'll have to go to places that will be scary and less than ideal. Be careful because if you come any closer, you will get burned."

This is exactly what it is like not only in the 1970s but even today. This push-pull, this moment of not knowing what to believe, who to believe, or even if you can believe what you see in front of you. It's a mixed message. There were a lot of mixed messages in the 1970s:

- In 1972, we are a church of open hearts and open minds, but not if you are gay or disabled or want to have your own opinion, right?
- In 1974, you can trust the government institutions to do the right thing, but those 18 ½ missing minutes on the tape sure make you wonder.
- In 1979, nuclear energy is renewable and safe, but not if you live in Three Mile Island.

Come close, stay away. The truth is we have weathered all of these storms and more. We have stepped closer to the fire. We have won some battles and we have lost others. We have the scars to prove it; but we also have the faith that the truth may speak from strange places but the truth will always stand. Love will always win.

The good news is that, if you listen closely, you will hear God singing even today: "You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us. And the world will live as one."

Amen.