

Sermon: A Place in This World , based on a sermon by Bass Mitchell
(with substantial additions and adaptations by Rev Heidi)
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Text: Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:21-28

The title of today' sermon comes from a song by Christian song-writer Michael W. Smith. *I tried to find it to play it for you. but I think I gave it away in the process of purging my tape collection a few years back.* He co-wrote the song "Place in This World," with Amy Grant , and for a long time it was on both the Christian and pop charts. The chorus goes like this:

- "Looking for a reason, roaming through the night To find my place in this world, my place in this world;
Not a lot to lean on - I need Your light to help me find My place in this world, my place in this world."

Have you ever felt that way? I know I have. We've all been given this gift of life, this time in this part of human history - how best can you spend it? That's what the song is about.

As I read the scripture for today, it seemed to me that Moses might have been singing a song like this in his heart. He had spent the last few years of his life tending his father-in-law's sheep. Was he happy? I don't know. I suspect that deep down inside, there was a restlessness brewing. He had not yet found his "place in this world."

You see, questions about what you should do with your life are not just for the young. You may find yourself "roaming through the night" looking for your place in this world at anytime in your life. Some persons who are retired or facing retirement sometimes wonder if maybe they have no purpose any longer. "What's my place, my role in this world now?" they ask. *In my experience, those who find themselves less and less able to do what they used to do find themselves asking the same question. "Does my life have any meaning when I am disabled and frail?"*

And how many people facing middle age begin to wonder if what they're doing is what they want to do the rest of their lives? They're not so sure any more of their place in this world.

When I was in theological school, there were more students in their 40s, 50s, even 60s than there were in their 20s and 30s - there still are. These people come into the ministry from another profession, another walk in life. Like Moses, they had been tending sheep and suddenly found themselves on holy ground, and on their way to their new place in this world.

In our text this morning we see that Moses found his place in this world. Or rather, it found him. Moses was lost, not physically but spiritually. He, like his people, had become disconnected from their spiritual roots. Did you notice that he and his people did not even know God's name?

Moses has to ask, "Who are you? Who should I say sent me?" Moses could not find his place in this world, what he was to do with his life,

until he was reconnected with the One who created him, the only One who knew what Moses' place *was* in this world.

It seems to me that our generations today are much like that of Moses. Many are disconnected from their spiritual heritage. God is just a distant, fuzzy concept, if that much. They are not on a first-name basis with God. And what they know of faith is interpreted through a very narrow viewpoint – a viewpoint that doesn't sit well with a lot of people who might otherwise find their way to God, and to a new place in this world. *I remember a conversation I had with someone who is searching spiritually. She asked me what I thought about evolution. I said, "It seems like a reasonable hypothesis to me. I don't believe the world was literally created in seven days." In shock, she responded: "Does your congregation know this?" I said that yes you do, and I still have my job! You see, my friend desperately wants to know God – but she needs to be introduced, you might say. She needs an experience of God that gets past all the "you must believe" into a living experience of the presence of God.*

I believe that none of us can ever find our place in this world until we find God, or rather until we allow ourselves to be found by God, or the Holy, or however it is you want to name that power beyond ourselves, until we are reconnected with our spiritual roots.

That's where we begin to find ourselves, our place, our reason for being. As Christians, we claim to have experienced God in Jesus. We say that in knowing Jesus, we've gotten to know God, up-close and personal. And yet, when asked the question, "Who do you say that I am?" many of us have no answer. We don't know, because we have not encountered the Spirit of Jesus alive in our lives – or if we did, we somehow missed it. Some of us really need a burning bush to move our faith from an intellectual exercise to a calling of the heart.

I think I told some of you this story: A young woman in her early twenties was dating a Christian man, the son of devout parents. This young woman had been raised in an atheist home: a home full of love, a home full of commitment to a better world, but a home devoid of faith. The man's mother was disturbed by the fact that her son was dating an unbeliever. The young woman, whom we'll call "Sarah", was aware that her boyfriend's mother was not her biggest fan – in fact, the mother saw her as Satan, entering her home to lead her boy astray! One day, the mother took Sarah aside and told her that her parents were children of the devil, and would surely go to hell if they didn't repent and convert to Christianity. Sarah, of course, was taken aback, and angry. Here was this woman, from a religion that preached love, saying hateful things about her parents, who were decent, caring people. So Sarah thought to herself, "I'm going to get back at her. I'm going to read that New Testament, and I'm going to get some ammunition to tell her what I really think of her." So Sarah started reading. She started at the beginning of the Gospel according to Matthew, and by the time she'd reached the Book of Acts, she says, "I knew Jesus loved me." That young woman is now a youth minister in an inner city church in Montreal. She encountered her burning bush by learning to know the love of God embodied in Jesus.

Scan the mountain sides, folks, as you tend your sheep.

There's a burning bush there for you. Maybe people have forgotten God, but God's not forgotten us. *You might not know what you think of Jesus. but I know how Jesus feels about you - and believe me. that matters more!*

Here's another insight from Moses' story.

Moses was a gifted man. He was tending sheep but his gifts were to tend another flock - people. He had great compassion for people and a burning zeal for justice. These are the reasons he found himself in the wilderness tending sheep in the first place! Remember he saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave to death. Moses, outraged at this injustice, killed the Egyptian and buried his body in the sand. Maybe not a smart or entirely moral thing to do, but it came from a place of compassion and an outraged sense of justice.

A day or so later Moses sees two Hebrews fighting and tries to be a mediator between them. He finds out that they knew he had killed the Egyptian. Fearful that this would get out, he flees across the wilderness. He comes to Midian, to a place where shepherds water their flocks. The daughters of Jethro are there and had drawn water from the well for their sheep. But other shepherds arrived, chasing away the flocks of the women and letting their own sheep drink the water the women had drawn. This injustice sparked a flame once again in Moses and he drove the sheep of the men away, allowing those of the women to come back to drink. Moses, a man with a profound sense of right and wrong was the perfect man through whom God could give the laws, the Ten Commandments. Moses, with his deep compassion for people, was the perfect man to send to the Hebrew slaves in Egypt who were crying out for deliverance. The gifts of Moses helped determine his place in this world.

You are gifted, too, my friends, Every one of you.. Do not ever think otherwise! And as you discover your gifts, you will begin to see how best to use your life.

"But if I have these gifts, I sure don't know what they are," you reply. "How can I know?"

The thing is, you are so gifted that it will take all your life to discover them all. It's a process: as your life changes, varying situations and circumstances will serve to bring out your gifts. Often you will not know what you do well until some situation arises that requires you to use your gifts. So it's a matter of being patient and alert.

But there is something you can do.

Moses had Jethro, a priest, a man of great wisdom. And I wonder if Jethro had a lot more to do with Moses finding his place in this world than he's given credit for. Perhaps Jethro knew Moses was unfulfilled. He knew Moses had another place in this world.

Maybe it was Jethro who suggested that day, "Moses, I've heard there's good pasture up by Horeb. Why not take the sheep there today?" And all along he was hoping, trusting that God and Moses would find one another.

Find yourself a Jethro, someone who knows you, believes in you, can help point you in the right direction. They might be a minister, a co-worker, a teacher, a parent, maybe even an in-law.

And share your heart with them. Tell them you're looking for your place in the world. And ask them point blank, "What are my gifts? What do you think I do well?"

Often others see things in us we do not see. God uses them to help us find our place in this world. I would not be a minister today if it not for all the people in the congregation I was raised in who told me I had the gifts to do it. Finding out what your gifts are will be a giant step toward discovering what God would have you do with your life.

But notice another insight from the experience of Moses. Moses was called by God to use his gifts, his life for others. He was to go to Egypt to set his people free, to give them hope and a future again, to find their place in this world.

You see, to find your place in this world, begin thinking about how you can use your gifts to do the same thing as Moses - to touch the lives of people.

God does not give us these gifts just to enrich ourselves. Yes. We must work and provide for ourselves and our families. But we will never be spiritually whole if we just live and work for ourselves. If my life, my time, on this earth doesn't make a difference for others, what good is it?

How can you use your gifts to make the world a better place? How can you best use the time God's given you at this stage in your life to help bring others into a land flowing with milk and honey?

All of us will find ourselves from time to time searching for our place in this world. Some of you are right now. Let me tell you this -

sometime, maybe this very day,

someplace, maybe this very place,

you're going to see your own burning bush...

you're going to stumble upon holy ground;

you're going to hear the voice of God calling you to use your gifts to help set people free.

You're going to find your place in this world! And when you do, give it all you've got.