



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## "Defining Moments"

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 28, 2016  
The Third Sunday in Lent — Based on Exodus 3:1-15*

Have you ever noticed that there are some experiences in life that are so sublime that they defy description? Have you ever been to the beach or the mountains, and you watch the sun rise, and you witness the ebb and flow of the tide or the colors breaking forth over the ridge, and you experience the awe and splendor and the majesty of nature? How do you find words to describe those experiences? Or, you were just minding your own business, walking the path of ordinary life, among the ordinary routines, and a stark encounter knocked you into another realm ... You met someone, you experienced something significant.

A number of years ago, a young man in the congregation I served called me for a meeting at my office. When he sat down, he described his life as "restless."

He said that he couldn't sleep; he couldn't concentrate. He spoke of a realization that knocked him off his feet. He asked: "How do you know if you're in love?" Answer: "You'll just know it!"

What moments have defined your life? What are the central, core experiences and people who have shaped you into who you are? When was it that you just "knew" an encounter to be the touch of God?

When Desmond Tutu was asked these questions a number of years ago, he said, "It was when I met The Rev. Trevor Huddleston in a cassock when I was nine years old. He was the revered white Anglican priest in our area, and he was on his way to important church business, and he began to pass by my family, and he stopped, and he took off his hat in the presence of my mother, and greeted her with kindness and respect. Up to that point in our segregated South Africa, I had never heard of a white male removing his hat before a black female. I learned later that his act was consistent with his whole theology: that everyone has dignity in the sight of God. And I was never the same after that day."

I ask again: What moments have defined your life?

In today's Old Testament lesson we learn that in the midst of the Midian desert, with its hostile crags, its interminable silences, and its blistering sun, the God of the Universe, the Transcendent Being, called Moses to be God's agent in the liberation of Israel. After killing an Egyptian, Moses had fled from Egypt to the desert of Midian, where he married and started a new life. Moses was tending his father-in-law's sheep in the wilderness near Mt. Horeb (aka, Mt. Sinai) when his attention was caught by a bush that was burning but was not consumed. As Moses stood before the bush, God called him to remove his sandals as a sign of respect, as he was standing in the midst of a holy moment, on holy ground.

Have you ever stood in the midst of a holy moment, and you were called to do a holy task?

Moses was filled with awe and hid his face. God had seen the oppression of the Israelites, and was calling Moses to deliver them from slavery and to lead them into freedom and a new homeland.

I readily confess that the word "call" has always made me squirm just a bit. The spiritual notion has always struck me as "thin," almost trite ... like the time I was asked to officiate at a funeral service at a funeral home in an extreme rural area of North Carolina. When I walked into the parlor I saw the deceased lying in a casket smothered in white carnations. Across one side of the casket lay a powder blue Princess phone with the receiver and chord dangling off to one side. There was a sign next to the phone that read: "Jesus Called." Whenever ordained people talk about their journey and their transitions, they refer to being "called." And when people of particular political ideology want to convince us of their perspective, they refer to their positions as God's "call" and God's "will." So I ask: Are people called to be, say, the President of the United States? Are others called to be the CEO of Chase Bank? And how about teachers, coaches, lawyers, engineers, writers, and dancers? What about the

calling of motherhood and fatherhood? How about when you're lying in a casket? What is it we are really talking about when we talk about a call?

Henry Sloane Coffin, once the Senior Pastor of Riverside Church, told the story of the Vaudeville magician who was dressed to kill, with cages and boxes and saws, wands and scarves. He would start the great show by warming up the audience with jokes and anecdotes. Then suddenly the magician would point and say, "Would the gentleman sitting on the end of row three please come forward." And the audience would chuckle and look around and see whom he had gotten this time.

"No, no, you, the gentleman looking at others, would you please come forward? I have an important task for you." And if you're that person, you would realize that you weren't ready to be called forward. The task might be too difficult. You might not be naturally talented to perform the task. Oh, you had paid your money to be entertained, but you had paid your money to be a spectator, not a participant.

This is true, at least true enough, of the nature of call. God's call often seems to come to people essentially playing the spectator role. And, like Moses, there is usually protest: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from slavery."

Or, in the situations of other biblical figures:

— Gideon: "My clan is the weakest."

— Isaiah: "I'm a man of unclean lips."

— Peter: "Depart from me Jesus, for I am a sinful man."

— Paul: "I am the least of the apostles."

No person or church is strong enough or good enough to receive and respond to the call of God. But it comes anyway. As Frederick Buechner describes it: "In the quietness of our own hearts we hear a voice say: 'whom shall I send into the pain of the world where people die?' And we find ourselves answering, 'Here I am, send me.' And we hear the voice say: 'Then go.' " Leave the place of being a spectator and enter into the realm of participant. Forego mere self-determination and self-survival, and say, "yes" to benevolent service on behalf of others. It's a call away from indifference and into engagement.

In 2004, an ordinary, middle-class homemaker from Greenville, South Carolina, was waiting for her connecting flight in the Atlanta airport. She pulled out her recent edition of the "Ladies Home Journal," took a sip of her Coca Cola, and noticed an article on "Hunger in America." She began to imagine what a response might look like in Greenville. When she returned home she began the process of planning, fund-raising, constituent-building and execution of what became the "Project Host Culinary School" whereby low-income young adults are invited to pursue an accredited cooking school degree, enabling them to secure a decent-paying job.

A call comes at night; we meet someone on a subway platform; a note comes in our e-mail box; we read an article in the "Ladies Home Journal"; we sing a hymn in church; we're just minding our own business on the third row of a vaudeville act; we're tending our sheep in the Midian desert. However it comes, it starts as information, words in the air, a message from out of the blue: "Moses," "Desmond," homemaker in the airport, "St. Bart's Church," "you and me."

The message lands on an unsuspecting person and community. But soon, maybe haltingly at first, a response emerges: "Here I am, send me." "Here we are, send us."

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