

After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai.  
Acts 7.30.

I'd like to go back to this verse in that incredible speech Stephen made when the Jerusalem Temple clergy had him arrested, supposedly for teaching revolutionary things contrary to Moses. The portion of the speech I want us to look at actually *concerns* Moses, and this tiny verse is something you might easily skate over, but I believe it speaks powerfully to each of us, if we open our hearts to it.

You all know the story of Moses from Sunday School. Discovered in the bulrushes by Pharaoh's lovely daughter, the baby Moses was brought up in the royal palace. As royalty he never had to work, and was used to everyone bowing down to him. But one day everything changed. He began to feel his Hebrew roots. One day he saw an Egyptian abusing a Hebrew slave. Moses intervened and killed the guard. Once he realised he had been spotted, he had no choice but to flee. He went faraway to the Sinai peninsula, to the rocky and desolate land of Midian where instead of living the pampered life of an Egyptian prince he now had to work as a shepherd of Jethro's sheep. It was quite a come-down for a spoilt rich-kid.

You know all this, but I wonder if you've ever noticed the time-scale. Look at v23 of Acts 7 on p1099. Moses was 40 when he killed the guard and had to run for his life. He was now comfortably into middle age, enjoying the life of royalty. It was hard to be reduced to being a shepherd boy at 40 when he had never done a day's work in his life. But look now at v30. The poor man had to do this for *forty* long dreary years,

if you please! I've been to Sinai and, believe me, it's a desolate, boring, treeless moonscape. Moses *must* have thought, 'What am I doing in this dump? Where is God in all this? Why am I spending the best days of my life looking after dozy sheep day after day, year after boring year?' True, he married Jethro's daughter, Zipporah, and had a family. But you could tell he was lonely, away from his smart friends, for he called his son 'Gershom', which means 'an alien there'.

There's a saying in Ulster: 'it's a long road that has no turning'. One day when he was 80 (yes, 80!) everything changed again for Moses. God spoke to him from a burning bush. He revealed himself to Moses as a God with a name, Jehovah. (That's why Presbyterians the world over have always used the burning bush as their symbol). Jehovah *also* gave Moses a job, the biggest job of his life: to go back to Egypt and to tell Pharaoh to let God's people go.

Now, as I said, it's the *timescales* I want you to note. God tasked Moses with the job of his life when he was *80* years of age. (His older brother, Aaron, was 84, if you please!)

We live in a ridiculous age when youth is everything. Old people are past it. Go to the cosmetic surgeon; go and buy your creams, to make yourselves look younger. We don't want old people. We certainly don't want our politicians to be old. So they have to make themselves look daft as they kick a football around, and pretend to like the Kaiser Chiefs! The Government is quite rightly fighting against *ageism*. Why should someone feel on the scrap-heap just because they are old? China and Japan *revere* their old people.

Winston Churchill would not have become PM today. He was too old. He drank too much and smoked too much. And yet this fabulously un-PC man became the PM in 1940 and saved the nation from Hitler at the age of 65 when he should have been settling into retirement with his slippers and newspaper. The point is that Churchill's great hour came when today we would have put him out to grass at 65. And Moses' meeting with destiny was even later at 80. No-one is 'past it'. The Bible is clearly not an 'ageist' book. Everyone has something to offer no matter what age or sex. Samuel heard the call of God when he was only a little boy at Shiloh. And Moses was 80!

The other thing I want you to notice is how dreadfully long was Moses' time as a shepherd - 40 years, the best years of his life, wasted in this barren Sinai peninsula. And yet, we now know that that was *not* time wasted. God had actually put Moses there so that this rich spoilt brat who had never done a day's work in his life could learn all about the desert, the ways of the winds and stars, the animals, the art of survival in that desolate place. Not only was God toughening Moses up to enable him to confront Pharaoh, but he was teaching him the desert skills that he would one day need to lead God's people through the desert to the Promised Land. Of course, Moses didn't know this, but God did.

In the early part of your life there are certain clearly marked steps: first day at school, GCSEs, 'A' levels, university, marriage, children. You start your job and work your way up. But then things begin after a while to plateau. Nothing much happens then. You've reached your limit. It all

becomes pretty tedious and repetitive. The excitement goes out of your life, and then we blokes enter the male menopause!

Don't get me wrong, I loved my time in Co Fermanagh, but after 17 years I was beginning to wonder what I was doing in this most remote, cut off-part of the UK as the heather was sprouting out of my ears. Sometimes I *did* feel my life was over, but looking back *now*, I can see that I was being prepared in so many ways for ministry here in Harrogate.

Winston Churchill peaked early. A cabinet minister aged only 34, but then right through the 1930s he was out in the wilderness, despised and shunned by the chattering classes for all his dangerous war-talk about the need to re-arm against Germany. He must have felt that his life was over. But events proved him to be right, and cometh the hour, cometh the man.

Moses was 40 years in the dreary desert doing nothing in particular, his life over. But God was preparing him in a way he did not realise. I watch the bees. They think they are gathering nectar. They don't realise they are actually pollinating plants. You might *think* you are doing nothing, but you don't *know* that. You don't *know* what God is preparing you for, or how he is using you, just as the bee doesn't realise its legs are pollinating plants. So don't judge yet (1Cor4.5).

Jesus just walked around Galilee and Judaea teaching people and then got himself killed. But God used that to save the whole world. We cannot judge what contribution we are making. Just offer it to God and let him make of it what he will, for he is on the throne and no experience is wasted, not 40 long, boring years in the desert or a death on the Cross.