



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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I AM WHO I AM (Part One)

Exodus 3:1-17

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Our text last week ended with Moses finding a home of sorts with the Midianites. They were distant relatives. They worshipped the God of Abraham. And, unlike the Hebrews, they were free—free to live, but more importantly, free to worship the God of their fathers. Abraham married the daughter of a Midianite priest, became happy with life as a shepherd, and had a son, whom he named “Gershom”. It literally means “driven out”, but it sounds like the Hebrew words for “stranger there”. Providence drove Moses from the palace of Egypt to the wilderness of Sinai, but there he’s found his home. Now, that’s great for Moses, but what about his people? Chapter 2 ended with the camera sweeping from the wilderness back to Egypt. The old Pharaoh has died and a new Pharaoh has taken his place and the Israelites cry out all the louder from their slavery. In 2:24-25 we read, “And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.”

God does not forget his covenant promises. He is faithful. What his people—and that includes us—often forget is that he fulfils his promises in his own perfect timing. Moses tried to take on the role of Deliverer on his own strength and failed. The Hebrews have been crying out for many years. God seemed absent. The writer of Exodus makes a point of this. God isn’t even mentioned until these last verses of Chapter 2. And yet he makes it clear all along that God is present, that he’s aware, that he’s orchestrating events. When the time is

right, he will act. We want God to act now. But God’s timing is always perfect. We need to remember that he is wise, that he is good, and that he is faithful.

There’s a cue in the story that something is about to happen. Circumstances have changed. Egypt has a new Pharaoh. God is ready to act. With that, the camera swings back to Midian. Look at 3:1-3.

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.”

Moses is ranging far afield to find food for his father-in-law’s flock. He finds himself somewhere he’s never been before. Horeb literally means “desolation”. In Chapter 2 God drove him into the wilderness. Now he drives him even further to a place of desolation. And yet here, as far as Moses can get from the palace in Egypt, God is finally ready to meet him.

In the midst of desolation, surrounded by a bunch of dusty and smelly sheep, the angel of the Lord appears to Moses. The angel is the Lord’s messenger. In fact, the Hebrew word is usually translated as “messenger” and often refers to royal messengers working for kings. But when it’s the Lord’s messenger, it’s an “angel”. It’s a being distinct from the Lord, a member of the heavenly council, but he speaks for the Lord and, as we’ve seen before in Genesis, he’s to be received as if he were the Lord—just like a royal messenger. The angel appears as a flame within a thornbush.

Of course, Moses doesn’t realise all this at the start. He sees a bush and

sees that the bush is on fire. It’s hard to say whether brushfires were common or not. Whatever the case, as Moses watches he notices that the bush isn’t actually being consumed by the flame. Something weird is going on, so he decides to take a closer look. Look at verses 4-7:

When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Imagine Moses’ surprise. The burning bush that wasn’t consumed by the fire was weird. But now the fire in the midst of the bush calls his name, “Moses! Moses!” Moses recognises that something is going on that’s beyond merely weird. It might be some kind of magic, but it’s more likely something involving deity. He answers back, “Here I am”. And from the flame the Lord warns him: “Come no closer. Take off your shoes, because you’re on holy ground.”

This says something about God and about his creation. The almighty Creator of the Cosmos humbles himself to appear to Moses in a common, dusty, ugly bush, surrounded by dirty, smelly sheep, in the midst of a wilderness literally named “desolation”. Despite the surroundings, the Lord remains holy. In contrast, however, Moses must take off his shoes before he approaches. I’m reminded of the story of Uzzah and the ark of the covenant in 2 Samuel 6. David’s men were finally bringing the ark back to Jerusalem, but they didn’t follow God’s commands. God had given instructions for rings to be mounted on the sides of the ark. Poles were to be put through the rings, one on each side, and men were to

carry the ark. But David's men disobeyed the Lord. They put the ark on an ox-cart. At one point, one of the oxen stumbled. The cart tipped. The ark started to slide off into the mud. And one of the men, Uzzah, reached out to steady the ark. Uzzah had the best of intentions, but the moment he touched the ark he was struck dead. Brothers and Sisters, there's nothing unholy about mud. It's what water and dirt naturally become because that's how God made them. The same goes for dusty thornbushes and smelly sheep. But human beings are not as God created us. We are rebels. We are idolaters. We are sinners. We are unholy. We cannot touch the holy without consequences. And so the Lord warns Abraham to approach in humility by removing his shoes. "We are not worthy to gather up the crumbs from under your table." But at the same time we can also pray, "But you are the same Lord whose property is always to show mercy." We can enter his presence, but only in humility. Moses took off his shoes. You and I put off our old selves and clothe ourselves with Christ, who died for our sins and gives us God's own Holy Spirit to dwell within us.

The burning bush, too, is a symbol of God's presence with his people. He is a holy fire, a purifying fire, present in the midst of a piece of scrub unfit even for kindling. But he doesn't consume it. It's a picture of God and his people. God will be present with his people, Israel, exerting his purifying influence and withholding his wrath, even as they rebel and practise idolatry. It's a picture of the Holy Spirit, too, in the lives of believers. God's purifying presence in us, not destroying us for our sins and failures, but ever working to make us holy and fit for his presence.

But what the narrator tells us really strikes Moses, what causes him to hide his face is the revelation of who this god is in the midst of the bush. It's not just any god. It's the god of Moses' father and, in turn, the god of

the patriarchs—of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is the God of the covenant, of the promise to make his people into a nation and to give them a land. This is the God who appeared to Abraham as the flaming torch, who passed through the sacrificed carcasses, and who entered into a sacred covenant with him. But this is also the God who has been silent for four hundred years. It's the God whom many thought had abandoned them, whose power was no match for the gods of Egypt. And now he reveals himself and speaks and Moses hides his face from the holy.

From the bush the Lord announces:

"I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

Repeatedly the narrator has told us about the oppression of the Israelites by the Egyptians. He's heaped up phrase upon phrase to give us a sense of just how hard, how horrible, and how demoralising it was. Moses, too, had seen it. He'd seen it and it was too much to bear and he'd lashed out against it when he killed the Egyptian taskmaster. He wept with his people and he had cried out with his people. And the Lord says to him, "I have seen them too. I have heard them. I know." We've seen before that for God to see is for God to act. For God to know a need is for God to provide.

He's seen the misery of his people. Now he's going to bring them up out of Egypt and into the land he had promised.

In verse 9, the Lord says it again, "I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them." "I have seen the same thing you have, Moses!" And then the twist that everyone but Moses sees coming: "I'm going to send *you* to Pharaoh and you will bring my people out of Egypt." And Moses says, "Ummm..."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain." (Exodus 2:11-12)

"Lord, I already tried that. I tried to lead the people and they wouldn't follow. I'm just a spoiled rich kid to them. On top of that, Pharaoh wants me dead." The Lord responds to Moses, but notice that he doesn't actually answer Moses' question. He doesn't assure Moses that circumstances have changed. He doesn't tell Moses, "But you're the right guy. I saved you from the Nile, I orchestrated your being found by the princess, I made sure you grew up in the palace with an education and an in with the royal family." He doesn't tell Moses, "You have what it takes. You've got this." The Lord says none of that. Moses asks, "Who am I to do this?" and the Lord responds, "I will be with you and the proof will be that when you bring the people out of Egypt, they will join you in this very place to serve me." *I will be with you.* The fire will go with Moses and the fire will be with his people.

In verse 13 Moses objects again:

Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has

sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

Moses is asking God something deeper than just, "What's your name?" We need to understand that a name held far more meaning in the Ancient Near East than it does in our culture. We pick names for our kids because we like the sound of them or because the name is a tradition in our family or reminds us of a loved one. Names went much deeper for these people and that goes double for God. Moses wants to know who it is he and his people will be invoking when they call on this god for deliverance. They want to know his credentials. All of that is carried by his name. If all you wanted to know was a person's name so you could stop saying, "Hey you!", the normal way of asking in Hebrew was "Who is your name?" Moses, instead, asks literally, "What is your name?" I know that's how we would ask, but in Hebrew this goes beyond superficially knowing how to call someone. It goes to who they are. The Israelites *already* knew God's name. Wherever you see "LORD" in all caps, that's God's proper name. (I'll get to that in just a bit.) It's all throughout Genesis. They already knew it. But Moses is anticipating his people confronting him, "Why should we follow this God, the LORD, who's allowed us to suffer all these years? Behind "LORD" is the Hebrew word *Yahweh* or "I AM". What does 'Yahweh' really mean?" And the Lord responds. Look at verses 14-17:

"I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your

fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.""

Again, the Israelites already knew God's name. Moses wants to know *who* I AM is—why he's worth listening to, trusting, and following. And so God responds and says, "I AM WHO I AM. Tell them that I AM has sent you to them." But what does that mean? It seems more than a little cryptic, doesn't it? We inhabit a very different thought-world and this kind of thing is hard for us to compute.

In short, God gives Moses a longer version of his name. Again, names meant more to them than they do to us. A name often told a whole story. Sometimes the name someone went by was a short form representing a phrase or whole sentence. God here gives Moses that whole sentence. The Israelites knew God as "I AM" and God reveals that I AM is something of a shortened form of "I AM WHO I AM".

This is a good time to talk about the name of God. I've been talking about "I AM" and a few minutes ago mentioned "Yahweh". We'll start with the word "LORD" that you've seen in the Old Testament, written in all caps. LORD represents the letters YHWH in Hebrew. Hebrew was not originally written with vowels; it was just the consonants. YHWH is the proper name of God. When we translate it, we translate it as "I AM" (again in all caps). But at some point in the time after the Babylonian Exile, the Jews stopped pronouncing it. They were afraid of misusing it. So, where they saw the letters YHWH, they would instead read *adonai*, the Hebrew word for "Lord". This is why

most English translations read "LORD" in these places. When Jewish scribes added vowel markings to the text, they used the vowels for *adonai* as a reminder to read that, instead of God's actual name. This is where Christians, around the time of the Renaissance, got the name "Jehovah". It's a straight-up reading of what's written in Hebrew, but it's nonsense. It's the consonants of one word combined with the vowels of another. Of course, the million dollar question is, "How do we pronounce God's name when we don't have the vowels?" Well, we can work it out with pretty reasonable certainty. It's based on an archaic form of the verb "to be" and it's in the stem—kind of like a verb tense in English—that has the sense of "to cause to be". So we can work partly from what we know of the way that verb would have been conjugated. But we also get a good idea from the way God's name was incorporated into many Hebrew names—like Joshua, Elijah, and Abijah. You don't need me to get into the technical information, but we can work it out and most scholars agree that the proper pronunciation is "Yahweh". It's the third person singular of the verb "to be" in the causative stem. It literally means something like "he causes to be" or "he is" for short. It's proper for God to call himself "I am" in the first person. In Hebrew, God calls himself *'ehyeh*. But his people refer to him or address him as "he is" in the third person. All that said, as much as most scholar agree on the pronunciation of *Yahweh*, it's still not a sure thing and this is why I prefer to simply stick with over two thousand years of Jewish and Christian tradition and read "Lord".

But, more importantly, what does it mean that God says his name is "I AM WHO I AM"? Again, without getting into the technicalities, the sense is that God's existence and his character are not dependent on anything else. He is pure being. He is pure power. He is pure love. He is pure wisdom. He is pure goodness. God's name reminds

us of his faithfulness. Neither his being nor his character depend on anything else and so, when he says he will do something, he *will* do it. Moses expresses his doubts and even objections to going back, leading his people and confronting Pharaoh and God says, “I AM WHO I AM”. What I’ve promised does not depend on Moses. It does not depend on Israel. It depends on me and I depend on no one.

We’ll pick up the text with verse 18 next Sunday and, Lord willing, get into Chapter 4. We’ll pick up this theme again of the Lord as the faithful one there. This is what the people needed to hear. This was the assurance they needed. Would the Lord finally act after all these years? And if he did act, they knew him as their tribal deity, but Israel was small-time when it came to the international scene. Could the Lord take on the gods of Egypt? Could he take on the great god-king, Pharaoh? Could he do what he promised? The assurance of all this is tied up in God as the great I AM.

This week I’d like us to think about Moses and his calling as we close. Moses knew the suffering of his people. He had a fire in his belly to see them delivered. He hungered for justice. He even tried to take on the task himself, but he failed. And what did he do? He fled into the wilderness and there he took up a simple life as a shepherd. But in the wilderness he was free and not only free, but also free to worship the God of his fathers. This was good for Moses. But his fiery passion to see his people delivered gradually went out. He became satisfied with his life in the desert. Even when the time was finally right, when the Lord came to him in the burning bush and said that he was sending him back to Egypt as the Deliverer, Moses objected. The desire was gone. He just wanted to stay where he was.

I wonder how often that happens to us. How often do we have a passion for ministry or a passion for justice and seeing right done in the world around us, opposing some evil we see, fixing some broken relationship we have, seeing some project done for God’s kingdom. But the time isn’t right. Maybe the resources or the people aren’t available or ready right now. Maybe we try and fail. Maybe we try and face opposition. And we retreat into our private relationship with God. Like Moses, we nurse our wounds, we find peace—or, I suspect, we often misinterpret complacency and ease for peace—we retreat from the world, we retreat from evil, we retreat from injustice, we retreat from the relationships that need restoration, we retreat from speaking out or taking a stand. And then we stay in our retreat and gradually the pressing concern, the fire in our belly goes cold and we become complacent in our retreat. Brothers and Sisters, sometimes retreat is good. It was the Lord who drove Moses into the wilderness. But he didn’t do it to leave Moses comfortably with the Midianites. He did it to prepare him, to prepare the Israelites, and even to prepare Pharaoh and the Egyptians. The same goes for us. Sometimes the time isn’t right. Sometimes we really do need to retreat, regroup, make plans and gather our strength before charging out again. Jesus sometimes retreated from the crowds to regroup, to rest, to pray—to *prepare*.

But the Church is often ineffective because we make our retreat permanent. Sometimes our problem is that we become so compromised that our gospel message is lost. But often times we have simply retreated from the world in the face of hostility and remained in retreat when we should have charged back out after nursing our wounds and being reassured that it is the Lord who is with us and the Lord who empowers us and makes our work effective. Too often Christians retreat into the Church and make excuses: “Those battles aren’t are

battles,” we say. Sometimes the battle seems overwhelming. I’ve watched the news out of my own country this week with great dismay. Politicians are defending and passing laws that essentially legalise infanticide and the response from the opposition has been largely pathetic. It’s easy to despair, to give up, to climb into a holy hole with Jesus and wait for the whole world to go to hell. But that’s not our calling, Brothers and Sisters. Our Lord has risen from the grave. He has inaugurated God’s new creation and we know that what God promises and what he begins, he always fulfils and completes. Our king calls us to proclaim the gospel of his kingdom, to shine the light of that kingdom, to do the work of his kingdom in the midst of the darkness. So crawl into that holy hole with Jesus when you must, retreat to the Church when you must, but do so to be renewed and assured that the God who is I am is with us. Come to his Table and recall again that he is the God who died and rose again for Creation, be renewed by his indwelling Spirit, and go back out to proclaim and to live the Gospel. Bring reconciliation to those relationships that are broken. Work for justice where there is injustice. Show mercy and lift up the broken. Defend the oppressed. Proclaim that the King has come. And do it confidently and in faith knowing that it is the great I am who causes our work to bear fruit.

Let us pray: O God, you know us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright: grant to us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen*.