



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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I AM WHO I AM (Part One)

Exodus 3:18-4:17

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February 10, 2019 – Epiphany 5

Last Sunday we made our way through Exodus 3, up to verse 17. This is the passage where Moses meets the Lord in the burning bush. In reading various commentaries on Exodus 3 and 4 I've noticed that some title this passage something like "The Call of Moses" and others something like "The Divine Name Revealed". They're both right. Moses is called to be the deliverer of Israel, but in calling Moses, the Lord also reveals or reminds Moses of who he is. The call of Moses teaches us and reminds us that God does not call us to do his work on our own power or authority.

Last week our focus was on God's confrontation of Moses in the wilderness—in a place where Moses had found freedom from Egypt. When he was a prince of Egypt, he saw the oppression of his people. Seeing their oppression stoked a fire in Moses' belly. He wanted to see them delivered. And he tried to act as their deliverer. But when he tried, he failed. His own people rejected him. Pharaoh heard what happened and put a price on his head. And so Moses fled. He retreated into the wilderness. And there was nothing wrong with that. Sometime we need to retreat. Sometimes we need to regroup or to prepare. In Moses' case, it was more a matter of timing. Moses was the right person. His cause was the Lord's cause. But the time wasn't right. The problem with Moses' retreat was that he became complacent. His passion to see his people delivered died. He gave up on his calling to be their deliverer. And, we saw, even when the time was right and God confirmed his calling, Moses was reluctant. He'd become comfortable in his new life and didn't

want to leave in order to go muster his people and confront Pharaoh. Last week our focus was on the timing. This week I'd like to focus our attention on the one who calls and equips us. We got into a bit of this already last week.

The first thing the Lord said to Moses was that he had heard the cries of his people in Egypt and he was going to deliver them and bring them into the land he promised to Abraham. And then the Lord said, "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring my people...out of Egypt." Again, many years before, Moses tried to take on this role. His own people rejected him. And so in 3:10-11 he asked the Lord, "Who am I that I should do this?" And the Lord didn't respond my telling Moses that he was the one or even listing all of his qualifications that made him the perfect man for the job. When Moses asked, "Who am I to do this?", the Lord responded, "I will be with you."

Now, the fact is that the Lord *had* orchestrated everything up to this point. He had saved Moses. He had put Moses in the royal palace. He had seen that Moses had an in with Pharaoh and that he had a royal education. He had gift and equipped Moses. Moses was the right man for this mission. But ultimately what mattered and what was going to make the mission successful was the Lord's presence with Moses. That's what I'd like to focus on today as we continue the story in Exodus 3-4. God equips us. He makes us who we are and gives us talents, abilities, and passions, but without his presence our plans are all for nothing.

The Lord said, "I will be with you?" And Moses objected again: "If I go to my people and say, 'The God of your fathers has sent me,' they're just going to ask, 'What is his name?'" I said last week, this wasn't so much a question as to what God is called. They already knew God's name. It was a question about ability or credentials. "Who is this god and why

should be trust him? Why should we believe that he can overcome the powerful gods of Egypt and the might of Pharaoh? Who is this god who has been silent for four centuries while we've toiled under the heavy yoke of the Egyptians?" And God said, "I AM WHO I AM". I am the one whose being depends on nothing and no one. I am the one whose wisdom, whose love, whose mercy, whose power are contingent on nothing. And so you can trust me to do what I have promised. Nothing can get in my way. Nothing can stop me. Nothing can thwart my plans. I have seen the oppression of my people—and, remember, for God to see is for God to provide—and so I am sending you to bring them up out of Egypt to the land I promised. Now, we'll pick up the story at 3:18.

And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.' But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.'

As if it wasn't crazy enough—from Moses' perspective—that the Lord was sending him back to Egypt to act as the leader of his people in this impossible task, the Lord now says, "And here's how it's going to go down." And he gives the details and the plan goes from unrealistic to crazy. He, the Lord, will cause the leaders of

Israel to receive Moses as their spokesman. That itself will be a miracle! They're going to go to Pharaoh to explain that the Lord, their God, has manifested himself to them—right here in Egypt, which Pharaoh would have taken as a threat to his own gods and divinity—they're going to ask to be allowed to go three days into the wilderness to offer sacrifices.

Why just three days journey? And the implication is that it would only be the men or maybe even just the elders. What's going on with this? It's not entirely clear, but it seems like this is just the opening of negotiations between the Lord and Pharaoh. The Lord knew—as he says here—that Pharaoh will reject even this small request. But Pharaoh's refusal will open the door for the Lord to act—to strike Egypt with his mighty hand—and to do so justly. Remember that we see this principle throughout the Bible, going all the way back to Adam and Eve. The Lord doesn't just smite evildoers. He confronts and reveals their wickedness first. Quite often, he gives an opportunity to repent and unleashes judgement only after the wicked have refused to do so. So the Lord is giving Pharaoh a chance to demonstrate his wickedness. Then he will unleash judgement and the world will know that the Lord is just. But as if that weren't enough, the Lord also says that the Israelite women will despoil the Egyptians. Not only will the Israelites take with them the wealth of Egypt as they leave, the Egyptians will be in the humiliating position of having been despoiled by women. So there's the plan.

And I think we can understand why Moses responds the way he does in 4:1:

Then Moses answered, "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The LORD did not appear to you.'"

They didn't listen to me forty years ago; why are they going to listen to me now. The answer is that "I will go with you", but when God calls us, this idea that he's the one who will make the work possible sometimes takes a while to sink in. I think most of us have been there. Three times Moses has expressed his doubts. Notice the Lord isn't angry with him. The Lord is very patient. He knows how big this is. And so he condescends to Moses. We doubt. The Lord assures. That's how it works. In this case the Lord will give Moses three signs. Notice, though, that Moses doesn't ask for signs. That would be presumptuous. The Lord offers them, knowing that the elders of the Israelites are going to want proof. Here are the three signs—look at verses 2-9:

The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff." And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it. But the LORD said to Moses, "Put out your hand and catch it by the tail"—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand—"that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you." Again, the LORD said to him, "Put your hand inside your cloak." And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. Then God said, "Put your hand back inside your cloak." So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh. "If they will not believe you," God said, "or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter sign. If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground."

Moses says, "They won't believe that you have sent me." And the Lord has him throw down his staff and it turns into a snake. It's a beautiful touch that the narrator of the story tells us that Moses runs from the snake. Who wouldn't? Moses is just like us. But then the Lord tells him to pick it back up—by the *tail*. Trying to pick up a snake is stupid. Trying to pick it up by the tail is *really* stupid. My grandfather was a park ranger and I grew up hearing his stories about rattle snakes and the stupid things people did with them. If you have to pin a snake down or pick it up, you do so right behind the head. That way it can't bite you. But if you pick it up by the tail, it's going to twist up and bite. But again, this is the Lord at work. And so Moses musters up his courage, grabs the snake—and the Lord turns it back into a staff.

Was there significance behind the snake? Probably. The snake was the symbol of lower Egypt. Egyptians also worshipped snakes. And turning the staff into a snake and back again shows that the Lord not only has power, but power over the Egyptian gods.

Now, the Lord says that this alone will bring around the elders of the Israelites, but he still gives two more signs to assure Moses. He afflicts Moses' hand with disease and then heals it. Leprosy was a sign of divine judgement. And then the Lord tells Moses that he will turn water from the Nile—the lifeblood of Egypt—into literal blood.

He's seen the burning bush, he's seen his staff turned into a snake and his hand diseased and healed again, but Moses objects a *fourth* time. Look at verse 10:

But Moses said to the LORD, "Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue."

“Who am I to go?” And the Lord says, “I am with you.” Why should the people trust you?” And the Lord says, “I AM WHO I AM. You can depend on me.” “But they won’t believe me when I tell them about this?” And the Lord says, “Fine, Moses, I’ll give you three signs to prove that I am with you.” You’d think that would be enough, but it’s not. “But I’m not eloquent,” Moses objects. And still God is patient.

Then the LORD said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.” (Exodus 4:11-12)

“If I am with you, if I can turn your staff into a snake, do you not think that the one who made your mouth can’t also give you the words to speak?” “Now, go,” the Lord says. “Enough. I’ve answered all your doubts. Go!” And now we see that there’s more here than doubt. Moses just plain doesn’t want to go. Maybe he was afraid. Maybe he was happy where he was. I suspect it was both. He’s gone as far as he can framing his objection as questions and doubts, so now he just refuses outright.

But he said, “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.” Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses and he said, “Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him. And take in your hand this staff, with which you shall do the signs.” (Exodus 4:13-17)

Brothers and Sisters, honest doubts and questions don’t anger God. Refusal does. The Lord has been patient with Moses. He’s even given signs where no signs were requested. But when Moses refuses to go, the Lord becomes angry. And, yet, even in his anger, the Lord is still patient with Moses. Again, nothing will get in the way of his plan. Moses brother, Aaron, will go with him. In fact—reading between the lines—the Lord has already spoken to Aaron and Aaron is on his way out into Midian to meet Moses. The two can go together and the Lord will give both of them the words to speak. The Lord overcomes every objection. The Lord sees and the Lord provides—even when it’s to overcome the obstinacy of his own people.

As I said last week, the burning bush is a picture of God with his people. The bush was hardly fit for kindling—and maybe not even that—but God made his presence in the midst of it, making it holy, using it for his purpose, rather than consuming. We see this worked out right here with Moses as the Lord assures him, “I will be with you”. Moses objects and objects and finally refuses, but even in his anger, the Lord maintains his promise of presence. The Lord is present, he will make holy, he will equip, he will make himself known.

We see this pattern throughout the Bible. God called Joshua and his promise was, “I will be with you.” God called Gideon and his promise was “I will be with you.” And think of the prophets. God manifested himself to Isaiah and issued a call. Isaiah collapsed under the weight of God’s holiness and cried out, “Woe to me! I am ruined!” Isaiah didn’t object as Moses did, but in the presence of God’s holiness he became so aware of his own sinfulness that he knew he was unworthy to even be in the Lord’s presence, let alone be his messenger. But the Lord’s response was not to reject Isaiah; it was to make

him fit to serve. In Isaiah 6:6-7 we read:

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

Brothers and Sisters, our inadequacies, our failures, and our sin do not determine what God can do with us. He prepares those whom he calls. As I said several weeks ago, quoting Bruce Waltke, “God’s election entails completion.” What God says he will do, he does.

When Jeremiah was called to speak the Lord’s message, his objection was the same as Moses’, “Lord, I don’t know how to speak” (Jeremiah 1:6). And the Lord assured him, “Don’t be afraid. I am with you” (1:8). The Lord reached out, touched Jeremiah’s lips, and declared, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth” (1:9).

Ezekiel, similarly, was called to speak God’s word of judgement. Like Moses, he fell down in awe and fear in the presence of the Lord. He didn’t object to the Lord’s call, but the Lord equipped him, nevertheless. The Lord gave Ezekiel a scroll to eat, a symbol that God would give him the words to speak as his messenger.

The Lord calls and the Lord equips. The Lord is with his people and his salvation is in his hands, not ours. We speak and we act on his behalf. He is the one who empowers our actions and our speech. He is the one who causes our faithfulness to bear fruit.

Brothers and Sisters, consider that we are here because the Lord is with us. I heard a preacher this week say that Christians gather together in order to attract the Holy Spirit. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is God’s Spirit who draws and gathers us and it

has been that way from the beginning for each of us. Sinners do not choose God. Our hearts are black with sin. Our hearts, St. Paul writes, are set on idolatry. But the Spirit of God reaches out and, however he works, he not only calls, but he is with us. He turns our twisted hearts towards God, changing our desires until we long to be united with the Lord Jesus. Sometimes—most of the time—we put up a fight, we doubt, we question, we object, but God’s grace is greater than all our sin, than all our rebellion. In our very salvation we see God’s promise at work. He is with us and he will lead us to Jesus no matter how long it takes.

But having been brought to faith in the Lord Jesus, Brothers and Sisters, the Lord is still with us. In our baptism we are plunged into the Holy Spirit. He fills us and he unites us to Jesus himself, who makes us sons and daughters of God. In Jesus and the Spirit we know the reality of God’s promise to be with us in a way Moses never knew. He may have been able to see with his eyes the presence of God in the bush, the presence of God leading his people in the cloud by day and the fire by night, he saw with his own eyes the glory cloud of God in the holy of holies. But the presence of God with his people was, for Moses and the Israelites, *external*. God was in their midst, but he was not in them. That was a promise for another day. You and I experience the fulfilment of that promise as we live, united to Jesus by the indwelling Spirit of God.

And so God calls to each of us. Not audibly as he did to Moses or the prophets. We have his word. If we would steep ourselves in it, we would know his calling to be his people in the world, to be his royal heralds, proclaiming the good news that in Jesus the King has come. Brothers and Sisters, to sit and wait for God to speak or to give a sign is presumption. God has *already* spoken. We merely need to listen to him—to know his word—and then to be obedient.

But we’re not. We don’t steep ourselves in his word as we should and even when we do, like Moses we object. God’s word tells us to make right a relationship that we’ve had a hand in breaking, but we resist. “She won’t listen to me. He won’t forgive me. She’s still angry with me. I can never forgive him.” Dear Friend, the Lord is with you. Go to that person and trust in the Lord.

God’s word tells us not to forsake gathering with our brothers and sisters in Christ, but we object. “I’m tired today. I don’t have the emotional energy to interact with people today? My heart isn’t in it today. I’m doubting God today.” Maybe even, “I don’t want to go because it means being confronted with that relationship that is broken.” Dear Friend, the Lord is with you. He will strengthen and equip you to do the things he commands.

As a pastor there are weeks when I think to myself, “I don’t have the strength to preach what I have to preach this week. They aren’t listening. They won’t get it. It won’t make a difference.” But then I remember that I don’t preach my own ideas. My calling is to preach God’s word and he has promised that his word does not return void. I preach to people in whom God’s own Spirit dwells and it is not I who make a difference, but God’s word and God’s Spirit.

And how often do we avoid proclaiming the gospel out of fear and out of doubt? “She won’t listen. He’ll think I’m crazy if I tell him about Jesus. I don’t want to offend. They’ll laugh at me.” That happened to me two days ago. I talked to one friend about Jesus and the whole time two other guys weren’t even bothering to hide their snickers and when I was done, my friend said “No”. But Brothers and Sisters, Jesus himself tells us that our calling and mission in this word is, first and foremost, to go

out and make disciples—to proclaim the good news that Jesus has died, that Jesus has risen, and that Jesus is the world’s true Lord. He has called us to this mission and, if we’ve learned anything from our own calling, it is that the effectiveness of proclaiming the gospel and of proclaiming God’s word, does not rest with us; it rests with God himself. Our calling is not to grow the fruit. Our calling is to do the work that God has called us to do. He will cause that work to bear fruit. We have every reason to be confident and joyful as we go out in faithfulness to God’s call. My friend said “No” when I was done with my part, but God is not finished with his part. As the Lord said to Moses, “I will be with you” so Jesus says to us, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Let us pray: Lord, as we prayed in the Collect, teach us to lean on your heavenly grace. Remind us that you are with us—that you have filled us with your Spirit and have united us to your Son, Jesus. We thank you for your patience with our doubts and our disobedience, but we pray, strengthen our faith and give us assurance that as you speak, we will be obedient. Teach us to trust you to bear fruit as we are faithful to do the work you have called us to. Through Jesus our Lord and Saviour we pray. Amen.