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Sermon: “Moses at the Burning Bush” (Exodus 3:1-15)

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When I was a kid in the pre-video/DVD days it was a big deal when a good movie was going to be on TV, and one spring I remember watching the classic 1956 Cecil DeMille film, *The Ten Commandments*, starring Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner. One of the scenes that fascinated me the most was when God called to Moses from the burning bush. I remember thinking how cool that was.

Moses is one of the main characters of the Old Testament. He was a Hebrew born at a time when Pharaoh had ordered all male Hebrew boys to be drowned in the Nile River. Moses’ mother hid him for three months and then placed him in a basket among the reeds of the Nile. He was discovered by one of Pharaoh’s daughters, who adopted Moses as her own. Growing up in Pharaoh’s household Moses enjoyed all the privileges of being part of the leading household in all Egypt—the best food, clothes, education, recreation, the best of everything.

But Moses knew he was different. He knew he was a Hebrew, of the same blood of the thousands upon thousands of slaves whom he watched building cities for Pharaoh throughout his formative years. When he was about forty years old Moses saw an Egyptian beating a fellow Hebrew. After seeing this kind of thing for years and years Moses had seen enough and he killed the Egyptian, and then tried to cover it up by burying him in the sand. The next day he saw two Hebrews fighting and confronted them about it, and in response one of the Hebrews asked Moses, “Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses knew the word was out, and when he found out that Pharaoh knew and intended to kill him, there was only one thing to do: run away.

And so Moses ran away, far away into the wilderness and eventually found himself working as a shepherd for his father-in-law. Moses, in the prime years of his life and having received the best education in the known world and enjoying all the best privileges imaginable, found himself working as a shepherd, a job considered degrading in his day, and working not for himself, but for his father-in-law—hardly the career path he had envisioned for himself.

Sometimes things don’t work out the way we think they will. When I was a kid I thought I had a brilliant idea. I enjoyed skateboarding a lot and thought it would be cool to make skis with wheels. I had visions of skiing up and down the hilly streets of our neighborhood, tucking and zooming around the curves. So I took a couple 2 x 4’s and on each end mounted some roller skate wheels from some discarded roller skates I had found. I made straps to secure my feet on the skis, and grabbed a couple baseball bats for poles. I remember grinning ear to ear with excitement as I carried my skis and “poles” triumphantly to the top of the highest hilly street in our neighborhood, anticipating the adrenaline rush of flying down the street on my homemade

skis. I reached the top of the hill, strapped myself into the skis, grabbed my baseball bats, and pushed off. It was great, for about thirty yards or so. Then suddenly my legs went in two directions at once and I severely pulled my groin muscle. I found myself writhing in pain in the middle of the street with 2 x 4's strapped to my feet and baseball bats strewn beside me. Some neighbors walked outside and you should have seen the looks on their faces when I tried to explain what happened ☺. Things had not worked out as I had planned.

Often things don't work out as we had planned, from little things to homemade skis to not so little things like college, marriage, kids, jobs, and finances. Like Moses we can find ourselves in a place in our lives we never anticipated.

Guess how long Moses was in the wilderness working as a shepherd? Four weeks? Four months? Four years? No—try *forty years* (Acts 7:23-30). And after forty years Moses, who had probably long abandoned any thought of being a hero for his fellow Hebrews in Egypt and had resigned himself to his fate as an obscure shepherd in the wilderness, found himself in the wilderness simply doing his job. One particular day Moses was at Mt. Horeb, which in Hebrew means “desolate region.”

Moses had gotten over himself. We know this because guess what Moses' primary attribute was according to Scripture? Humility. Scripture says this about Moses—“The man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3). The reality is that if we don't humble ourselves before God, he will do the favor for us, or as one of my favorite preachers, T.D. Jakes puts it, “If you live long enough, life will shut your mouth.”

It was this Moses, humbled and alone in a desolate wilderness doing a job he had never anticipated doing who the Lord calls from a burning bush. There are some scholars who attempt to explain this episode away by claiming that Moses did not really see a burning bush that was not consumed, but rather a red bush with sunlight reflecting off of its leaves or a Bedouin campfire or an incident of St. Elmo's Fire (the electrical phenomenon, not the 80's movie ☺). But I think that after forty years of being a shepherd in this wilderness Moses would certainly have been able to tell that what he was seeing was in fact a miraculous occurrence.

Moses went toward the burning bush and out of it God called Moses by name, “Moses, Moses!”

Let's pause there for a moment. Can you relate to Moses? Perhaps like Moses you are in a Mt. Horeb of sorts, a desolate region in your life. Perhaps like Moses your life direction has not exactly gone according to your plans. Perhaps like Moses you are in a humbling season in which life has shut your mouth. If that's the case, that is great news, because it is in these seasons that God often calls us by name. Back to Moses...

After calling Moses by name God identified himself—“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”— and God also revealed his compassion: “I

have observed the misery of my people... I have heard their cry... I know their sufferings... I have come down to deliver them.”

The children of Israel had been in bondage as slaves in Egypt for many, many years. They were pawns in Pharaoh’s game, exploited for generations as they built city after city for Pharaoh. The Egyptians, Scripture tells us, “made their lives bitter with hard service.” Imagine a life in which your great-grandparents, grandparents, parents and you all lived lives bitter with hard service. Imagine a life in which your children had nothing to look forward to but the same drudgery. Imagine the depth of despair, anger, resentment, and futility. Whatever stories the Hebrews had heard about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob probably seemed at this point like nothing more than irrelevant myths.

But they were not irrelevant myths, not at all, because as God told Moses, he had observed their misery, he had heard their cry, and he knew their sufferings. And more than that, he had come down to deliver them. And Moses would play a part in that. “So come,” God said to Moses, “I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

Moses then protests, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” Moses knew that by himself there was no way he could deliver Israel from Egypt, and he was absolutely correct. But Moses would not be alone, for God responded, “I will be with you.”

Again, can you relate to Moses here? Is there something in your life that you believe God is calling you to do and you know that on your own there is no way you can do it? Or perhaps you feel alone, *really* alone. I recently read C. S. Lewis’ *Out of the Silent Planet*, the first part of his *Space Trilogy*. At one point he describes the main character, Ransom, who had been abducted and taken to Mars and while on Mars had escaped his captors only to find himself alone. Lewis writes that Ransom had “nothing to fear—except the fact of wandering unprovisioned and alone in a forest of unknown vegetation thousands or millions of miles beyond the reach or knowledge of man.” That’s rather bleak. But the good news is that we are not alone; God is with us as he was with Moses. “I will be with you,” God tells Moses.

Moses then protests again, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God responds, “I AM WHO I AM... The LORD... This is my name forever.” The Hebrew for “LORD” is known as the *tetragrammaton* (there’s a cool SAT word ☺), the four Hebrew letters “YHWH,” to which two vowels are added to form “Yahweh.” God is who he is, always has been, and always will be. God is “the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come” (Revelation 4:8).

And you know the rest of the story. God indeed delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt through his humble servant, Moses. God was with Moses and God, I AM WHO I AM, Yahweh, brought

them out of Egypt. God saw the misery of his people, God heard their cry, God knew their sufferings, and God came down and delivered them.

God met Moses in the desolate wilderness, called him by name and did a powerful work in him and through him because God was with Moses. And God can do the same in your life. It's not about what you can or can't do; it's about what God can do. You are not alone. God is with you.

But there's more, much more.

For this event of God calling to Moses from the burning bush foreshadows a much greater event, the redemption of the world through the Son of God, Jesus Christ. For Jesus Christ, in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Colossians 1:19), also sees our misery, hears our cry, and knows our suffering. Matthew tells us: "When (Jesus) saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36).

And Jesus Christ did more than see our misery, hear our cry, and know our suffering: he came down from heaven to give his life as a ransom to buy our freedom (Mark 10:45), to save us from our bondage to sin through his death and resurrection. Moreover, Jesus Christ was even more humble than Moses, for as Paul wrote to the Philippians, "(Jesus) humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (2:8).

And Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Jesus Christ is I AM WHO I AM. Jesus referred to himself as the I AM as he told the Pharisees, "before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58). He reiterated this in all the "I AM" sayings in the Gospel According to John—"I AM the bread of life" (6:35), "I AM the light of the world" (8:12), "I AM the good shepherd" (10:11), "I AM the resurrection and the life" (11:25), "I AM the way the truth and the life" (14:6), "I AM the true vine" (15:1).

And Jesus Christ, the I AM, calls *you* by name (Isaiah 43:1). Jesus Christ, the I AM, is with *you*, as he told his disciples, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

How can we respond? How can we respond to God, who meets us in the desolate places in our lives when things have not gone like we thought they would. How can we respond God, who calls sees our misery, hears our cry, knows our suffering and has come down to redeem us through Jesus Christ? How can we respond to God, who is with us.

We can respond like Moses did and put our faith in God. In describing the work of God in the life of Moses the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that it all happened *by faith*: "*By faith* Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth... *By faith* Moses... refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to

enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin... *By faith* he left Egypt... *By faith* he kept the Passover” (Hebrews 11:23-28). It all happened *by faith*.

This year Paul and I are preaching about justification through faith, that we can receive forgiveness and right standing before God as a free gift of God’s grace through trust in Jesus Christ and his death on the cross.

God met Moses in a desolate region, called him by name, revealed his identity and assured him of his presence with him. Moses responded by putting his faith in God. Perhaps today God is calling you to do so as well.

Let us pray...