

7.18.21 Being Open to the Unexpected Exodus 3.1-15, 20.1-17

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The book of Exodus describes two defining experiences in Israel's history. The first is God delivering the Israelites from slavery, what's known as the exodus from Egypt. The second is the revelation of God's law at Mount Sinai to make the Israelites a community, bound in relationship with their liberating God and one another. The first 18 chapters of Exodus are about Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt and their journey to Mount Sinai. Chapters 19-40 are about their time at Sinai where the covenant with God was made and the laws governing their life together were formed and shared. At the center of these memorable experiences is Moses who was both the prophetic interpreter and instrument of God's deliverance and the mediator of the covenant between God and the people. Moses is one of the most important individuals in the entire Bible and he laid the spiritual foundations upon which later generations built.

Exodus 3:1-15 describes the call of Moses to serve God and God's people. "Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to **Horeb, the mountain of God.** ² There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³ Then Moses said, *"I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."* ⁴ When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, *"Moses, Moses!"* And he said, *"Here I am."* ⁵ Then he said, *"Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."* ⁶ He said further, *"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.

⁷ Then the Lord said, "I have **observed the misery** of my people who are in Egypt; I have **heard** their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, **I know their sufferings,** ⁸ and I have come down to **deliver them** from 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 country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ **The cry** of the Israelites has now **come to me; I have also seen** how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ **So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my**

people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”¹¹ But Moses said to God, “**Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?**”¹² He said, “**I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.**”

¹³ But Moses said to God, “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?”¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I Am Who I Am.”^a He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I Am has sent me to you.’”¹⁵ God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord,^b the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.”

Moses’ encounter with the Lord at the burning bush teaches us the importance of **Being Open to the Unexpected**. How open are you to the unexpected? Are you a planner who likes to have things set in advance, or are you more spontaneous enjoying the freedom to decide things in the moment? Regardless of our personal preference one of the things we see throughout the Bible is that most of the time, the appearance of God, God’s messenger or Spirit is unexpected. People are usually going about their life or work, taking care of the sheep like Moses, fishing like James and John and a Spirit led encounter takes place unexpectedly and everything changes. Part of having a vital spiritual life is understanding and recognizing God may “show up” in your life in a dramatic way or through another person, anytime, anywhere. Part of what this does is to infuse your everyday life with a sense of holy expectancy. Be open to the unexpected. Be open to being surprised by God anytime, anywhere.

The initial encounter between God and Moses reflects a mixture of the ordinary and the extraordinary. Moses is at work shepherding his father-in-law Jethro’s sheep as he usually does. On his own initiative, undoubtedly in search for fresh pasture and perhaps a change of scenery, Moses arrived at Mount Horeb in the wilderness that lay between Egypt and the cultivated land of Palestine. There he notices a common desert

a Or *I AM WHAT I AM* or *I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE*

b The word “LORD” when spelled with capital letters stands for the divine name, *YHWH*, which is here connected with the verb *hayah*, “to be”

thorny scrub bush on fire, and he decides to take a closer look. However, Horeb is the mountain of God, it is holy ground. This is no ordinary burning bush; this one is not consumed. This is what causes Moses to turn aside and suddenly he finds himself unexpectedly in a holy place encountered by God and his life and human history were changed as a result.

Some of us have places where we go to experience the power and presence of God. It can be a worship service in a sanctuary, a room where we live, a place we walk in the woods or on the beach, it might be a garden. However, holy ground isn't just where we think it is, holy ground can be anywhere sometimes when and where we least expect it. God may come to us when we don't have any plans for meeting the Lord and in places we don't anticipate. Keep your eyes open for God in the ordinary and the unexpected, you never know what you might see or hear.

Moses is keeping the sheep, minding his own business, when, *"Wow! What's that?"* Just like the Gospel of Luke tells us shepherds were doing their usual thing, keeping watch over their flocks, when, *"Wow! What's that?"* Moses, like the shepherds greeted by the angels in Luke 2, like the disciples who are called by Jesus to follow him, and like you, is being called to an adventure. Moses' particular adventure is to leave the sheep and his good wife Zipporah and to go to the most powerful person in his known world to tell him to let his cheapest labor leave for freedom and a new life in a new land. That's all. Moses' old life as a shepherd was ending and new life as God's deliverer was beginning. All because he was open to encountering God in an unexpected place.

The second thing I want to share with you is a little about **the God** who shows up unexpectedly to Moses. **The God we worship is a God who delivers.** God delivers people from bondage and affliction. We just did a whole series on what God is like and you can hear echoes of that in Exodus 3 which tells us:

God **heard** the cries of the people.

God **remembered** the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

God **saw** the people of Israel, and God **knew** their condition.

God **promises** to bring the people of Israel out of the affliction of Egypt to a land flowing with milk and honey.

God heard, remembered, saw, knew, and promises. God is aware of what is going on and God acts. When you read the beginning of the Book of Exodus you quickly discover the Israelites are living under a great deal of strain and pressure. They worked long hours, at exhausting manual labor in a hot environment for very little pay. When the king of Egypt died the Israelites were hoping the new king would be less harsh, but they were disappointed, and the people **cried** out to the Lord, and God heard their cries.

God **remembered** the covenant made with Abraham that through him a great nation would be born and all the peoples on the earth would be blessed. If the Israelites died in Egypt, the covenant and God's promises would fail. There are principalities, powers, and even people who actively work to defy God and to oppose God's will. However, God doesn't stand idly by; **the Lord sees and knows** what is taking place and God promises to do something about the situation to bring about a better future. This is where Moses' story really gets interesting because the burning bush is not just God pulling off a pyrotechnic stunt to get Moses' attention.

God has something for Moses to do. Moses' mission should he choose to accept it will be to bring the people back to this same mountain to worship the God who hears their cries, sees their suffering, and who sends a messenger to deliver them so they can hear how they are supposed to live in relationship with God and with each other. God is still in the habit of encountering people in the ordinary and unexpected places of life and **encouraging you to a response of obedience within God's plan.** God has something for you to do. The story in Exodus 3 is a classic biblical story in which God's act of revelation is joined with **a call for commitment because the God who delivers works through people to accomplish what needs to be done.**

Let's talk about Moses for a moment. When I say, Moses, what's the first picture or image that comes to your mind? For many people, my age and older it's...Charlton Heston in the movie *The Ten Commandments*, a strong, forceful, commanding presence. For others it's the 1998 animated film, *Prince of Egypt*. The picture we have of Moses in the Bible is a little different than the bold Moses of movies. There's a tendency to make individuals like Moses into superhuman figures, when in fact they're much more like us. Rather than being bold and courageous, Moses is afraid, feels totally inadequate to do what God wants him to do, is worried about what others will

think of him, and wonders whether God's plan will even work. He thinks there's nothing in his life that has prepared him for what he's now supposed to do. At one time or another some of these concerns may be yours as well. Given the magnitude and importance of what God is asking, Moses would rather not have the job.

Nineteenth century American author Herman Melville wrote numerous short stories, and one is called *Bartleby the Scrivener*. In the days before computers and copier machines, a scrivener spent all his time copying documents by hand; it was very boring, soul sapping work. Bartleby finally hits a breaking point; he can't take it anymore. His boss tells him to do something, and he simply replies, "*I would prefer not to.*" Wouldn't you love to do that some time? Your boss says, "*I need this done by 4:00 o'clock,*" and you reply, "*I would prefer not to.*" That would go over well, wouldn't it? Poor Bartleby was soon out of a job and out on the street, his only response being, "*I would prefer not to.*"

Perhaps you've dreamed that God would knock on your door or appear in a burning bush in your yard and say, "*There's some serious work to be done for the kingdom of God and you're just the person for the job. Come on, I'll tell you about it on the way. Let's go!*" Or maybe your life seems so full, busy, and stressful, even if you're *retired*, that you'd just as soon **not** have God approach you with some monumental task to help the Lord's work of delivering people from sin and oppression. Moses certainly fits in the latter category.

God says, "*I've heard, I've seen, something's got to be done, go get 'em Moses.*" Moses' response is not, "*Lead me, Lord, I will follow,*" it's not, "*I'm in the Lord's Army,*" it's more like, "*I would prefer not to.*" It was,

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

God doesn't respond to Moses' objection by stating Moses' credentials for the task. God doesn't say, "*But Moses, you're so talented, so brilliant, a courageous leader, you have a Ph.D. in crisis management with a minor in tactical maneuvers with large groups of unruly people.*" God says nothing about Moses' worthiness or his qualifications all God says is, "***I will be with you.***" Is the fact that God assures Moses of constant Divine companionship enough? Would it be enough for you?

Moses is still very noncommittal, and he wonders out loud, *“If I come,”* (that sounds forceful doesn’t it) *“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, maybe starting to get a tad restless with Moses’ lack of enthusiasm says, *“I am who I am.”* That’s still not enough and Moses continues with several more excuses about why he can’t do what God wants him to do – people won’t believe me, I don’t have any authority, I’ve never been eloquent or a good speaker, until finally out of excuses he says, *“O Lord, please send someone else to do it.”* Rather than being some lofty figure we can’t identify with, Moses ends up sounding very human. *“Who am I to do this job? Who are you to ask me to do it? What if people don’t believe me? I’m not gifted enough. Please excuse me, I would prefer not to.”*

What does this have to do with you today? Perhaps God hasn’t called you to end the conflict in the Middle East, to go to North Korea, or to solve some global crisis. However, the God who shows up unexpectedly and delivers those who are oppressed, or suffering wants to be in relationship with you and has expectations for that relationship and our relationships with others which are given later in Exodus 20 in The Ten Commandments that we heard earlier. While we may not be called to a task as monumental as Moses – there are jobs to be done, needs to be met, challenges to be overcome, lives to be touched, and God wants you to be a part of God’s plan to bring hope and deliverance.

Sometimes it can be intimidating to think that Almighty God is at work in the world every day and that God wants to work through us and if we don’t respond then those things **that only we can do** on any given day, those encounters in the ordinary routine of life **that are unique to us**, will not be done. Because every person is unique God works uniquely through each person. God reaches the world through God’s Spirit moving in the lives of people. You can be thankful your tasks are smaller than the job God had for Moses, but you need to be faithful in the tasks God assigns you.

With God’s help, just as God promised, Moses delivers the people out of Egypt and brings them to God’s mountain where the Lord then shares the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments describe how people are to properly relate to God: no other gods before me, no idols, use my name correctly, take a rest

every week and remember who I am. The next six commandments are about how to have healthy human relationships in a wonderful community: honor your parents, no murdering, adultery, stealing, bearing false witness, no coveting anything that belongs to anyone else. Who would like to live in a world where none of those things took place? Sign me up. Well, that's kind of the idea.

God promises to be with us as we seek to do what God wants and needs to be done. Be open to encountering God in unexpected and ordinary places even at work, like Moses did. You never know when you might encounter a messenger of God, **or when you might be the Lord's messenger for someone else**. May God who hears, sees, and knows be present to you, whatever you're facing this day.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. How open are you to the unexpected? Would you describe yourself as a planner who likes to have things set in advance, or as more spontaneous enjoying the freedom to decide things in the moment?
2. Moses has his dramatic encounter with God "at work" while he is shepherding his father-in-law Jethro's sheep. Why is it important to be open to encountering God anywhere and not just in a worship service, small group, or Bible study?
3. In Exodus 3.1, Mount Horeb is described as "the mountain of God" and Moses is told where he is standing is holy ground. Do you have a place or places you go to experience the power and presence of God? Where do you like to go? Have you ever been in a particular place where you felt God's presence more strongly? What was it like? Where was it?
4. The first 18 chapters of Exodus are about God delivering the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt. What does Exodus 3.7-15, say about who God is and what God promises to do?
5. Moses feels totally inadequate to do what God is calling him to do. Have you ever felt that way? What was going on?
6. God promises to be with Moses in all that he is called to do. What difference does the assurance of God's presence and help make in your life?