

My name forever

Exodus 3:1-15

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March 2, 2013 (Lent 2)

[Now] Moses was shepherding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, who was a priest of Midian. Moses led the flock to pasture in the wilderness. Eventually, he came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 [There] in a flame of fire in the midst of a bush a messenger of the Lord God appeared to him. [Here is what happened.]

Moses saw that a blackberry bush was burning with fire but [he also saw] that the bush was not consumed by the fire. 3 And Moses said: I will go over there and see this great sight, why the bush is not burning up. 4 [Then] God called to [Moses] from the midst of the bush when the Lord saw that Moses was coming over to see. God said: Moses, Moses. Moses replied: Here I am.

5 [The Lord] said: Do not come near. Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. 6 [The Lord] continued saying: I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. [Then] Moses hid his face, for he feared to look at God.

7 The Lord said: I have truly seen the sufferings of my people who are in Egypt and I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sufferings. 8 I have descended to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and ample land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Peruzzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. 9 But now behold: The cry of the Israelites has come to me and I have seen the oppression by which the Egyptians oppress them. 10 But now behold: Arise and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the Israelites, from Egypt.

11 But Moses said to God: Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, or that I should lead the Israelites out of Egypt? 12 And [the Lord] said: I am with you. But, here is the sign of the covenant that I make with you when I send you (lit. and this will be for you a sign that I have sent you): when you bring the people out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain.

13 Moses said to God: Behold, [when] I go to the Israelites and say to them: the God of your fathers sent me to you, they will say to me: What is his name? What shall I say to them?

14 God said to Moses: I AM WHO I AM. And [God] also said: You shall say this to the Israelites: I AM sent me to you. 15 God said again to Moses: You shall say this to the Israelites: The Lord God of your fathers, I AM the God of Abraham, I AM the God of Isaac, I AM the God of Jacob sent me to you. This is my name forever, and this is [how I am to be known] (lit. the memory of me) for all generations.

Where is God when it hurts? If you have ever asked that question, then this Scripture and this preaching of God's Word is for you.

In fact, everyone who believes in God probably asks that question at some point. Those who don't believe in God simply find God's absence in the midst of suffering to be proof that God doesn't exist. But, those who do believe in God are troubled by God's absence. After all, if God does exist, surely God would do something for those whom he's supposed to love, right?

As a result, those who believe in God but find God absent in sufferings eventually end up tying themselves up into knots trying to explain God's lack of action. People around say: "You must have done something." That's the approach of Job's wife to his suffering and God's apparent absence from the picture. "Or maybe you didn't do enough: Maybe you didn't pray hard enough. Maybe you haven't got enough faith. You need to have hands laid on you." That's the approach of Job's friends.

I remember reading the account of the great British Evangelical Charismatic writer, David Watson, as he was dying of cancer. He went through every conceivable explanation for his sickness and tried to find why God was letting him die of cancer: what had he done? what hadn't he done? whom hadn't he forgiven? why? why? why?

It's bad enough when one person suffers, but what about when a whole people suffer?

I remember sitting on a mountain above the city of Barcelona. Legend has it that it was the place to which Satan had brought Jesus when he offered him all the world if Jesus would serve him. (That's why the mountain place is called Tibidabo, which in Latin means: "I'll give this to you".) As I sat there with an old atheist friend, he stretched his arm toward the city, then a packed, polluted city of 4 million people, and said to me: How do you explain this? If your God is so loving, why doesn't he do something about the misery of this city? Surely there are lots of his people here who worship him?

And the misery of that place pales into insignificance in light of the horrific and widespread sufferings, such as the genocides of the Jews in Hitler's Germany or the Tutsis in Rwanda, or the mass slayings in the Ukraine and Russia under Stalin, or the millions who died in Maoist China or Pol Pot's Cambodia. True, many of these were probably not people who called on the Lord, but many were.

This sets the stage for our Scripture today. We learn later in the book of Exodus that for some 400 years, the Israelites had been in Egypt. While they hadn't been slaves all that time, they certainly had been for most of that time. And so for most of those 400 years, they had been suffering. Almost assuredly they had been crying out for help. Yet one generation after another of Israelite slaves had died with no apparent response from God. After awhile, they probably gave up crying out.

If God HAD been actively involved in the lives of the Israelites during that time, there would probably have been some record of it. But, from what it appears, God had not been. We're not told why. Suffering rarely comes with an answer from God: Here's why you are suffering... Here's why I haven't helped you to avoid the suffering ... Here's what you should have been doing....

But, God was there. And God did hear their cry. "I have seen the suffering of my people, and I'm going to do something." And God does.

One of the descendants of Jacob's family, which had gone into Egypt those 10 generations earlier, a man named Moses, brought up comfortably in Pharaoh's household while his fellow Israelites slaved away outside, now in exile in the barren desert of Midian in the Sinai peninsula, this Moses has brought his father-in-law's sheep to pasture near Mt. Horeb.

Moses has not been praying earnestly, seeking the Lord for the sake of his people. Moses is simply engaged in ordinary activity. Moses is just pasturing the sheep. But, it is there, in doing this simple daily activity, that Moses sees a sight and there that he hears God.

What is so astonishing to many biblical commentators about this passage is that in the first 7 verses of this passage, the verb “see” is used 7 times, 5 times of Moses who sees the sight, sees the bush, says to himself, I’ll go over and see this sight, and who turns aside to see. Then, when God sees Moses coming over, God speaks to Moses in the words that cap off the 7th use of the verb: I have seen very well the sufferings of my people who are in Egypt. While Moses is captivated by something physical that fills his physical eyes with wonder, God’s seeing is comprehensive and not limited to a sight. His seeing involves his knowing: vs, 7 I have seen the sufferings of my people... and I know their sufferings.

Not I “know about”, but what we would say today: I feel it. For vs. 7 also says that God does not simply see the sufferings of his people. He also hears their cry. How many of you can hear the cry of someone in pain, and not feel it? How many of you can hear a baby crying out again, and again, and not squirm a bit, hoping that someone will attend to the baby. God sees, God hears, and God knows.

And ... because of that, God acts. God says, I am going to do something. I’m going to bring my people out of that land of slavery into a land that is (1) good and ample, (2) flowing with milk and honey, and (3) a land that is big enough for 6 tribes who are already there AND for you.

And I am going to do it, God says to Moses, through you.

Moses’ protest in vs. 11 is sometimes seen as a dispute with God: What do you mean, me? Who am I to do this? But it’s not: It’s the normal expression in the ancient Near East and in the Middle East today of someone who expresses the expected humility before being commissioned a task: Surely another more honourable or powerful than I would be a better choice to represent you, Lord?

God responds: No, you are the perfect choice to represent me before Pharaoh.

Why? We’re not told exactly why but we can discern it from what God then says to Moses in vs. 12: I am with you . The reason that Moses is a good choice is because, as the story of Moses before Pharaoh will eventually show, Moses is such an inadequate presence. Therefore, if anything out of the ordinary is going to happen through Moses, it will only happen BECAUSE of God. Because it’s very clear that anything that he is doing, he is quite incapable of doing himself. Some God MUST be with him. Even the people of Israel, the ones who are suffering, surely felt the same way: You are the one who is going to deliver us from our sufferings? How? Moses’ only response was: But God is with me.

It is a lesson that actually is confirmed again and again throughout Scripture. God seems to choose weak, inadequate, deficient, suspect vessels for his message because only in that way will it be clear that the power is not in the vessel but in the God who uses the vessel to achieve his purposes. The apostle Paul will say it best perhaps: Speaking of the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul writes: “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.” (2Co 4:7 RSV)

Moses accepts this challenge. But he then asks a logical question of the voice in the bush: who are you?

This is a logical question for a people who have been in Egypt for 400 years and whose record shows no action by their God. Almost assuredly, they knew of various gods who had at various times shown power. But, the Lord God of Israel, the God who had brought the world into existence, saved it during the days of Noah, called Abram from Ur and made him into the great people that the Israelites now were through Isaac and Jacob....? It is not surprising that after some 400 years, they had forgotten their God. It hasn’t taken this

Christian nation in which we live more than 50 years to forget its God, and this nation is not in slavery. Imagine where this nation in which you and I live will be 350 years from now if the same forgetfulness continues?

No, it is a logical question. Who are you? Well, Moses has already been told who this God is: The God of his ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. But now he is also told: I AM still that same God and I always will be for I AM is my name. And you can tell the Israelites that the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, who was, and is, and always be, has sent you and is with you. For I AM is my name and it always will be.

Well, we know how this story ends, don't we? Moses returns to Egypt and God is with him to do miracles and ultimately to challenge Pharaoh to let the Israelites go before something terrible happens. Pharaoh doesn't let the people of Israel go and something terrible does happen -- the first born children of all the Egyptians die. Only then does Pharaoh relent and let the slaves of Israel leave for a land that none of them has ever known. Miracles lead them forth; miracles save them; miracles accompany them for 40 years as they wander in the same wilderness of Midian where Moses tended Jethro's flock. But, true to the promise, God was with them and does the miracles and leads them back to Mount Horeb, where God establishes his covenant with this people, and then into the land promised to them, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land in which they once had lived almost 500 years earlier and which they had completely forgotten.

The end.

Is it?

Of course, not. Because if it were, it would suggest that the story that you and I treasure to this day of this event in the wilderness and the subsequent freedom of the Israelites was all about them. It's not. It's all about God, I AM, whose name is always the same.

For this God did not say to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob... I have only ever been, am now, and only ever will be your God. God said: all the nations of the world will bless me through you. This God, I AM, will finally reveal himself more fully to the people of Israel to be the God who brought all things and all people into being and to be the God and Lord who has dominion over all, not just Israel. Israel will be charged with keeping this message and sharing it with the nations... until such a time as God, in his sovereignty, chooses to make it known in a fuller way to all nations.

And that's exactly what happened in Jesus, our Lord. For it was in Jesus our Lord, that the Word who brought all things into being, spoke not from heaven, or mysteriously from a bush, but descended as the Word who took flesh and become a man. It was in this Jesus that Israelites, and then Greeks, and then the whole world heard the very words that Moses had heard on Mt. Horeb in the desert. What is your name? I AM.

To a Samaritan woman, who asked Jesus whether he was as great as our ancestor Jacob, Abraham's grandson, Jesus replied that he was. When the woman, puzzled, then said to Jesus: I know that when the Messiah comes, he will reveal everything to us, Jesus replied: Woman, I AM (John 4:25-26). Like Moses she had just been about her ordinary activity, and God comes to her: I AM.

To the Jewish crowds, gathered in the Temple in Jerusalem to celebrate a harvest feast, who heard Jesus and were puzzled by Jesus' wise teaching and his sayings, Jesus said: Your greatest ancestor Abraham delighted to see me. To which the crowds responded: Don't be foolish. What do you mean, Abraham delighted to see you. You're not even 50!! Laughter. To which Jesus responded: Before Abraham came into being, I AM. At which point, these descendants of Jacob and faithful followers of Moses picked up stones to stone Jesus because they knew exactly what he was saying. It was I that Moses heard speak to him in burning bush.

And what Jesus was saying, he said again and again and again: I AM is the bread of heaven. I AM is the light of the world. I AM is the sheep gate. I AM is the good shepherd. I AM is the way, the truth, and the life. And I AM that I AM. Where Moses had fallen on his face in fear when he heard these words from the burning bush, again, and again, these so-called disciples of Moses were scandalized and tried to kill him.

Only one group of people responded to the Word as Moses himself had. When the Roman cohort came to arrest Jesus in the garden on that last night of his earthly life, he calmly confronted them: For whom do you seek? The Romans responded: Jesus of Nazareth. To which Jesus calmly but with all the authority of heaven and earth responded not "I'm Jesus of Nazareth" but with the words that Moses heard God speak: I AM. And what was the Roman response? Romans? Who know nothing of the story of Moses on Mount Horeb? Who, unlike the Jews, have many gods that they worship? The Jews are supposed to know and honour the God who revealed Himself on the Mountain to Moses and they have been trying to kill Jesus? But, what do the Romans do? Do they seize Jesus, try to stone him, beat him? No. When Jesus utters the same words that he, the Word, had uttered to Moses on Horeb, I AM, the Romans, all 600 of them in the cohort, fall flat on their faces before him. Just as Moses had done.

And just as you and I are supposed to do before the great I AM, the same God, with the same name, who revealed Himself to Moses on Mount Horeb, the author and finisher of our salvation, the one through him all things have come to be and who is still the same today.

My friends, it is not a question of whether God will answer the cries of his people. He has seen, he has heard, and he knows. He will act. The question is what will you do when you least expect it and God appears to act? What will you do not if he responds but when he responds? You will be on holy ground. You are on holy ground. Will you take off your shoes, be it your physical shoes or the shoes of your heart? Will you fall on your face before him? He has said he cares for you and always will. His name is the same forever, the one who hears you, who sees you, who knows you. Even if you change, he never will, for he never has. His name is the same forever.