

Exodus 3:1-10

Have you ever lived through a season where life just felt... *blah*? Where the passion and excitement you had about things burned low, and the routines of everyday life just kind of took over? I've been feeling a bit of that lately. Both of my boys are away at college now, and I've entered this new "empty nest" season. The house is quieter than it used to be, no pile of sneakers by the door, no hoards of laundry and plastic water bottles shoved under beds, no curfew negotiations, or homework monitoring. I can go for hours on end without being interrupted, my days are less full, and, honestly, I'm still figuring out what my role looks like during this stage of life. Not just as a Mom but, like, what now? It got me wondering is that the season we find Moses in here in Exodus 3. A "what now?" He's in a quiet, ordinary season, too, out in the wilderness, tending sheep that don't even belong to him, day after day. Once upon a time, he lived in Pharaoh's palace. Once, he had a sense of calling, maybe even destiny. But now he's out in the desert, watching the sun rise and set over the same rocky hills, day after day, month after month, year after year. And, then, one ordinary day, something extraordinary happens.

When we come to Exodus 3, God's people are living in the midst of deep suffering. What began in Genesis as a family sheltered in Egypt during famine has become a 400-year oppressive exile under Pharaoh's harsh rule. The promises God made to Abraham, that his descendants would become a great nation and inherit a land of their own, must have seemed far removed from present reality. In chapter 2, Moses flees into exile after attempting to intervene in the suffering of his people. We know from Acts

chapter 7 that the events here in Exodus 3 take place forty years later, and we find Moses, at 80-years-old, tending Jethro's sheep in Midian:

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. (Ex. 3:1)

The Hebrew verbal form used in verse one stresses continuance; in other words, for forty years Moses has been shepherding the sheep, day in and day out. This existence was probably unimaginable when he was growing up in the Egyptian palace. Yet here he is — the wealth and power afforded to him in his youth are gone. But that is when God appears to call and commission Moses. In our earthly economy, the timing doesn't seem ideal. If God needed a leader to lead his people, wouldn't it have made more sense to have shown up 40 years earlier when Moses was young, strong, and confident, when he had a network of influential Egyptians and a direct line of communication to Pharaoh? Two things that this forty year "delay" shows about our God: first, his timing is never our timing, and that's by design; second, God doesn't "need" any of our gifts or the accomplishments on our resumes to accomplish his will.

God knew that once Moses had come to the end of himself and felt utterly useless, it was then he would have the humility to rely solely and fully on God. God chooses to accomplish His purposes through His people because relationship has always been at the heart of His story. He is fully able to do all things in His own power, but He desires to work *with* us and *through* us, so that we might know Him more deeply — all the while shaping our hearts to trust and love Him as we join in His kingdom-work here on earth.

As Moses is in the middle of another ordinary day completing the routine tasks of tending sheep, God shows up and Moses has a life-changing encounter with the true and living God. We read in verses 2 and 3:

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."

When I was in college, I spent my summers working with children at a Christian camp. One of the camp's beloved traditions was "Sunday Skits." At lunch time on Sundays, each age group was assigned a favorite Bible story and would spend the rest of the afternoon producing and rehearsing their Sunday Skit, which would be performed for each other after supper. On one of these Sundays, my group was assigned Exodus 3 and I was tasked as the counselor who would advise the kids that were writing the script. This is how we scripted verses 2 and 3: on one side of the stage we had our cardboard bush with the orange crepe paper stapled to the top, and on the other side Moses in his bathrobe with a couple of kids crawling around him bleating and baaa-ing. After the audience's laughter died down, he was to turn, look at the bush, shrug his shoulders and say, "Huh, that's weird, let's go check that out." Humbly, I admit that was the extent of our exegesis, and we spent way more time that Sunday afternoon debating whether Moses should wear flip flops or birkenstocks than we did pondering the significance of God appearing as fire — fire that doesn't consume the bush.

A fire blazing in the bush, yet not consuming it, is weird; but it's more than a curious spectacle to get Moses' attention. Fire is a sign of God's holy presence with his people, and Moses is having a life-changing encounter with the God of the universe. Think of that... the true God comes to be with his people. God is holy, and so he comes in fire. But God does not remain distant, or transcendent, from his people — instead, he is immanent, drawing near to them. We will see fire as a sign of God's holy presence recur throughout the book of Exodus: the towering flames and smoke on Mt. Sinai in chapter 19; the pillar of cloud and fire that was the people's guide and protection in the wilderness; and the visible sign of the Lord's presence in the tabernacle. In all of these instances, we are reminded that God comes to his people. And, thinking even more broadly for a moment, we see fire elsewhere in scripture, where it consistently signals the nearness and intensity of God's presence; sometimes this fire comes in judgment, often the fire illustrates purifications or protection, as in the wilderness, but always in relationship.

The fact that the bush wasn't being consumed is what piqued Moses' curiosity, and it points to one of God's attributes that is significant to Moses' calling: God's absolute self-sufficiency. Besides playwriting, another skill I picked up during my childhood and young adult years spent in Christian camping programs was fire building. What do you need for a good camp fire? Fuel, kindling, sticks, logs, and so on. Then you set it all up, allowing for optimal air flow in order to fan the flames. You light the fire, poking at it and adding more logs as the first ones are consumed. And when it's time to extinguish the fire, you have to cut off the fuel source. No fuel, no fire. The fire in Exodus 3 isn't consuming the bush because this is a fire that does not depend on a fuel source. It is a

fire with its own infinite source of being and power: Yahweh, the God with no beginning and no end. Like the Exodus 3 fire, there is nothing that God depends on to sustain Him, and yet everything depends on Him. In John 15, Jesus explained this mind-bending concept in very practical terms: “I am the vine; you are the branches...apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

God is a God of absolute self-sufficiency, he is the source of all being and power, and yet He is a God who draws near to his people and calls them by name:

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. (Ex. 3:4-6)

Yahweh, the self-sufficient God takes the initiative to call Moses into relationship, but He does so in a deeply personal way. He knows Moses. He sees Moses and He calls him by name. Up until now, Moses may have had mental belief in the Hebrew God, but here on the mountain of the LORD Moses has a life-changing personal encounter with the true and living God and begins his new life as a servant of the LORD. In his love and provision, the first thing God tells Moses is to STOP! “Don’t come near.” Now, that doesn’t sound very inviting, but God knows that for Moses to be in His presence God would have to supply a provision to protect Moses.

The fire in the bush not only points us to the truths of God's infinite source of being and power, but it is also a picture of God's holiness. In his commentary, Moyter points out that the LORD's holiness is not a passive attribute, but an active force — unassisted humankind cannot approach. Think of other Old Testament accounts of people encountering the holy God. In Isaiah 6, Isaiah sees the Lord high and lifted up, and what's the first thing out of his mouth? "Woe is me! I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips." The presence of God exposes his sin, and Isaiah assumes he's finished. In Judges 6, Gideon realizes he's seen the angel of the Lord and cries out, "Alas, Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!" He's terrified because he knows that to see God means death. In 1 Samuel, Uzzuh simply touches the Ark of the Covenant, God's holy presence resting among His people, and he falls down dead. In Psalm 24, David ponders, "Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?" The trepidation and fear we see in these and other Old Testament examples is more than just the nervousness and respect that lowly servants show when approaching their mighty leader. This is the fear of sinners who are endangered by holiness.

There is nothing to Moses' credit that enables him to stand in the presence of God's fiery holiness. The question as to why this fire wasn't consuming the bush is now quickly diminished by the bigger question of why Moses isn't burned up! God's desire is for Moses to be in His presence, to ascend the hill of the LORD, to stand before Him. And He provides a way for Moses to approach Him: "Take off your sandals." A simple, accessible instruction, yet a necessary condition. It is a principle that remains constant throughout the Bible. Here it is removing the shoes as a symbol of what has been in

contact with the earth, or a confession of defilement and unworthiness. Later, under the Law, we see an extensive sacrificial system instituted by God himself. Ultimately, it is Christ's blood that opens the way into the Most Holy Place. We are like Moses — there is nothing in us that makes us worthy to be in the presence of the Holy God, nor do we decide the terms on how we will stand in His presence. Instead, He shows us how to come, in humble repentance. That's true for Moses, and it's true for us, too.

As I was studying this passage, I was struck by the fact that Moses hears a voice speaking clearly from the bush — in comprehensible language, it is revealed to Moses what he must do in order to be in God's presence. But, who, exactly, is the one speaking? Did you notice in verse 2, it says, "the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of the bush"? But, then, in verse 4, it shifts: "When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush." For the remainder of the passage, the text identifies the speaker from the fire as the LORD, Yahweh, I AM. What we are seeing here is a theophany; that's a theological term for a visible or tangible appearance of God to human beings, where He reveals Himself in a form people can perceive and respond to, without seeing His full, unmediated glory that no one could survive. Moyter puts it this way, "the angel suffers no reduction or adjustment of his full deity, yet he is in that mode of deity whereby the holy God can keep company with sinners."

This Angel, or Messenger, of the LORD also appears throughout the Old Testament: to Hagar in the wilderness (Genesis 16); to Abraham on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22); to Jacob, whom he wrestles (Genesis 32); blocking Balaam on the road (Numbers 22); calling Gideon to lead Israel (Judges 6); announcing Samson's birth (Judges 13); and

other passages. In each case, when the angel of the LORD is present and speaks, we are to read that as the voice and words of God Himself. In fact, many theologians believe that sometimes when the angel of the LORD appears it is actually Jesus in a pre-incarnate state, what is called a Christophany. We could say, then, that Moses encounters Jesus in the burning bush. But, Theophany, Christophany, the unsearchable mysteries of the Trinity aside, what is the real point here? God desires for us to approach him and stand in his presence, and he makes the provision to make it possible. It's the heart of the Gospel: He has made the provision through the death and resurrection of his son Jesus so that we can approach him. Paul writes about this in Ephesians 3:11-12, "This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and *access with confidence* through our faith in him."

Let's think now about how God identifies Himself to Moses. In verse 6, he says, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." It's clear. This is not just *any* messenger. This is the covenant God Himself, meeting Moses in a form that allows him to stand in His presence. This is the same God who called Abraham out of his homeland into the unknown, the same God who provided for Isaac, and the same God who wrestled with Jacob. By identifying himself this way, God is reminding Moses that He has a history of making promises and keeping them. He is the unchanging, faithful, covenantal God. Moses' mountain-top encounter with God represents the beginning of the greatest redemption arc in the Old Testament.

Then the LORD said “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 Canaanite, the Hittites and Amorite, 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.” (Ex. 3:7-10)

In these verses we see the compassion of a loving Father who wants the best for His children. God has seen the misery of His people, He has heard their cries, and He is drawing near to rescue them. Our God is not a god who watches suffering from afar. He is the covenant-keeping God who is deeply moved by His people's pain, who personally steps in to deliver them. He doesn't just promise deliverance, He reminds Moses of a covenant already in motion. When God says, “I will bring you up out of Egypt, into a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey,” He is echoing the promise first made to Abraham generations earlier. This is a review of the Abrahamic covenant, the land promise that symbolized God's intent to bless His people and establish them as His own people. By naming the land, God is reaffirming His faithfulness and continuity. He's saying, “Moses, don't worry. I haven't forgotten what I promised your fathers.” The land is more than territory; it's a tangible expression of covenant relationship, a sign of belonging, provision, and purpose. It reminds us that God's promises are not erased by time or circumstance; they are fulfilled in His perfect way and in His perfect time.

And that brings us to the end of the passage. In coming weeks, we'll learn about the implications of this event, for Moses, Aaron, the people of Israel, even you and me. But let's end by considering some of the ways Moses' mountaintop experience — an extraordinary day after many, many years of ordinary days — brought new life to him, and how we can experience the same in our lives today.

At the burning bush, God graciously drew Moses into the story of redemption; God changed his focus, his calling, his life. How? By inviting Moses into a covenant relationship with Himself in order to lead the people out of Egypt. This encounter is actually a pattern throughout scripture, where mountains become places of divine revelation and transformation. In a few weeks, we will read how, on this same mountain, Moses receives the Law, once again encountering God in fire and cloud. Other examples include 1 Kings 19, where the prophet Elijah flees to Horeb and hears God speak to him in a still small voice. The Temple itself was built on a mountain, or hill: Psalm 24:3 reads, "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" Or consider Psalm 121, "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." These mountaintop experiences are real, and they are significant.

There is one other time in scripture where we see Moses on a different mountain in the presence of God. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses stands with Elijah and Jesus, the Word of God incarnate. This time, instead of fire in a bush, the face of Jesus, Emmanuel, shines like the sun and his clothes shine white as light. Moses' presence there connects Moses' Exodus redemption story — leading God's people out of Egypt to the Promised Land — to God's even bigger redemption story wherein Jesus leads us

from sin and separation into life and wholeness. Just as God came down in the fire of the bush to rescue Israel from slavery, He came down again in the person of Jesus to rescue us from sin and death. Jesus is Emmanuel God with us, the word incarnate, the final provision. God's presence, dwelling not in a bush, but in human flesh. He shone with perfect love, and perfect holiness. The God who came to live among his people, not to judge, but to redeem.

So what does it mean for me today in my quieter, less busy "What now?" season? Where everyday seems really really ordinary. This is what I have been thinking about for the last few weeks as I meditated on this passage. I got fixated on the "Mountain Top Experience" — that Moses' dynamic encounter with the living God broke through and changed his life forever — and it was making me lament the ordinary, dare I say, boring days I spend toiling away down in this "what now?" valley. "When will my next dynamic mountain top happen?" But what am I really looking for? On that mountain in Exodus 3 Moses was in God's presence and heard His voice. His presence and His voice. This side of the cross, those two things are accessible to me all the time.

First, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit will be with us. The Spirit, who descended in fire on the Day of Pentecost, now dwells in me. Second, the God who revealed Himself to Moses by speaking through the burning bush is the same God who has given us the Bible, the written revelation of his Word. When we read the Bible, the Holy Spirit illuminates the scriptures for us, causing our eyes to see and our hearts to know its truths. That is the mountaintop experience, a relational encounter with Jesus himself, as he speaks to us through his Word. The same God who called Moses into his presence

on an ordinary day is calling me daily. My prayer is that I respond like Moses with, "Here I am," and faithfully open His word and dwell in His extraordinary truth.