

Exodus 3:1-15
A Flame that Reveals
Rev. Jonathan Cornell
3-1-15

During this season of Lent, we are looking at the stories of the book of Exodus. In them we find that God has given us 6 markers to help us make sense of our lives. In Exodus, the Israelites are on a journey together from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land with God. The Apostle Paul says of these Old Testament texts, these things were written *for you*, for the New Testament church, for us as well to help us along our journey.

Last week, we looked at the River to Carry. Even before we think our first thought about God, he is leading us through the circumstances of our lives. But it's not enough for us just to get from point A to point B. As a parent, sometimes I think my whole purpose is just that. Just get them from A to B, from dinner time to bed time. Is that my job? But God wants to show us more. He wants to invite us into relationship with him. And so we have a second marker, a Flame that Reveals God's inner being and invites us in.

So let's open now and see what this flame intends to reveal.

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. 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 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.

God gets our attention to reveal God's intention. God gets our attention to reveal God's intention.

When our text begins, Moses is in a desolate place. You see, the circumstances of his life caused Moses to flee his home in Egypt. Earlier, the text tells us that Moses is on the run. After seeing an Egyptian taskmaster abusing a Hebrew Slave—one of his countrymen—Moses let his anger get the best of him and killed the Egyptian taskmaster. So for the last 40 years, he has been on the run in Midian, east of Egypt (modern day Saudi Arabia). Moses is in a desolate place.

Keith Blackburn probably believed that he would forever remain in a desolate place. In 1992, as a troubled and misguided young man, he walked up to a young woman named Misty Wallace who was using a pay phone in a Burger King parking lot and pulled the

trigger, leaving his victim near dead. Blackburn was confused, addicted, and hopeless, and committing a severe crime was his last resort, and he needed a get away car.

A month later, after being apprehended and expecting to receive a lifetime sentence, Blackburn was miraculously only given 20 years in prison. Regardless, Keith Blackburn was thrust into a desolate place, a place for which he deserved.

On the other hand, while Moses was on the run from Pharaoh in a desolate place, it was there that he met his wife Zipporah and his father-in-law Jethro, a Midianite priest. And it's in Midian that he takes up shepherding, something a Hebrew would conceivably do in a situation like this.

In our text today, Moses is keeping the flocks of Jethro in a far away land. It says that he is several weeks away from Midian, probably looking for green pastures for his sheep to graze, when God brings Moses to Horeb to get his attention.

God got Keith Blackburn's attention, as well. You see, it was, miraculously, the words of a prison chaplain as well as the extreme courage and compassion of his would-be victim Misty Wallace that changed his life. What he heard was that there was another way, and his life was about to take a dramatic turn. But it took something drastic to get Keith's attention.

There are times in life when God leads us into difficult situations to get our attention. Maybe you've spent some time in tending your sheep, doing your job, in the wilderness of Midian, in a place like this, where it doesn't seem to have any value or mean much of anything to you or anyone else. Maybe you've journeyed through this place, maybe you've pitched your tent in this place. Interestingly, there's another translation for this place: Ohio.

God brings Moses to Horeb, to the mountain of God, and God gets Moses' attention. I don't know about you, but there times in my life when I've been lonely, I've been disoriented, I've been confused and I've cried out, "God, would you get my attention, would you light something on fire and speak to me?" So far, it's never happened. But here's the thing to notice: it's just a bush. Just an ordinary bush like any other until God gets hold of it. It's just ordinary water and ordinary wine until Jesus touches it. But then it becomes something unmistakable.

I wonder what God is doing in your life to try and get your attention. Something bright, something burning, something a little out of the ordinary? What is it? Because sometimes those markers and the lessons they signify are not immediately apparent. You and I can look at this scene and know that God is giving Moses a sign, but I imagine Moses looking at this and saying to himself, "Ok, it's a burning bush...but what does it mean?"

You see, Moses has drifted from God, and from the burning bush God says to him, "I am the God of your Father. You remember your father, Moses? He trusted me, just like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob trusted me. Now do I have your attention, Moses?"

You see, once God has our attention, that's when it gets interesting. It's then when we begin to interpret the events of our life in light of God's purposes. We see in the mundane encounters, divine opportunity. There is nothing too small, too insignificant, too commonplace that God cannot show up and set it ablaze with Holy purpose. Now that God has Moses' attention, he can begin to show Moses God's intention.

“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 Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, 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.” But Moses said to God, **“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?”** He said, **“But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”**

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, **“I am who I am.”** And he said, **“Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I am has sent me to you.’”** God also said to Moses, **“Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.**

God has uniquely qualified Moses to be used for God's purposes. If you know a little of Moses' background and the stories that precede this one, you know that Moses has a passion for justice. When the Hebrew slave was being abused, Moses intervened. When a woman at the well was being taken advantage of by some shepherds, Moses said, “Here, let me go with you to water your sheep.” In a way that Moses doesn't yet realize, God is using Moses' skills and passion, to make him God's instrument to do great things for Israel.

But this isn't what God points out to Moses once he has his attention. See, the answer that Moses needs to hear is not “you are qualified.” The answer Moses needs to hear is “I will be with you.”

It's about the relationship with God: “I want to draw you into relationship with me so that we can draw the people into relationship with me, so that we together can draw the whole world into relationship with me.”

But who is this me? I mean, I can imagine Moses standing in front of the bush saying to himself, “Ok, but who are you? With whom am I'm speaking, exactly?” And at this moment, we see one of the most profound experiences of biblical revelation. This is the

moment when God reveals to Israel God's name. In the English translation of the Hebrew Bible, when we see the word Lord spelled in all caps or small caps, what it is referring to is this four consonant spelling YHWH, the holy name of God. We don't even know how it's really pronounced, no one dared speak it, it was so sacred.

But right here, Moses hears God speak and God says "I am." After telling him what he is going to do for his people the Israelites, I can imagine Moses is feeling pretty ill equipped. So he says, "How do I know? How can I be sure that this thing will happen that you're talking about? Have you seen Pharaoh's army? Can you see the grip they have on us? Who am I supposed to tell them is saying this, anyway?" And God says, "Tell them *I am* is sending you." I will be.

What I think this means is that "I am who I am, in the midst of this crisis, and you are going to see." In the context of our relationship with God, when God invites us to follow where he leads, and it would appear that we do not have the capacity to do what is asked of us, **that is where God shows up.**

"Moses, when you go back to your people and you say to Pharaoh let my people go, and you deliver them with mighty signs and wonders, then you're going to know what it means that 'I am' is with you."

You see, it's in the context of relationship. This entire story is about helping Moses to see clearly that *I am* is with him. That through his sufferings, through the sufferings of Israel, *I am* is with them and *I am* is about to do something amazing. It might be something that calls you to make a drastic change in your life, or it might be something as simple as allowing God to give you comfort when you are anxious. In the midst of whatever you're facing, *I am* is with you.

In the story I shared with you of Keith Blackburn and Misty Wallace, perhaps the most incredible aspect is not that Keith was given a shortened sentence, or that he turned his life around with the help of a prison chaplain. The most incredible part of this story isn't even about him. It's what Misty did. You see, after hearing that he had been up for parole, and that he had changed his life, she faced the struggle of what to do about this horrific event from her past—one that so dramatically altered her future. It was Misty who looked into God's face and said, "How do I make sense of this?" And the only answer that came from it was forgiveness. "And as I sat in the auditorium listening to these two talk together I could see her saying, 'I am incapable of doing this on my own, but I am is with me. I am will enable me to face a future of reconciliation, not bitterness. I am is sending you.'"

So I ask again, where might God be trying to get your attention? Where might God be inviting you not to assess your own strengths, your own gifts, your own passions and then determine to do something with them. But where is God inviting you to trust in his presence with you, so that he might reveal his good intentions in you? I know what you're going through, I know the hopes and struggles, and I have a name to go with you as well, "I am."