



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Studies in Exodus: A non-consuming flame

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Exodus 3:1-15

1 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. 3 So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight--why the bush does not burn up." 4 When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." 5 "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." 6 Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. 7 The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. 8 So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey--the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. 9 And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. 10 So now, go. I am sending 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 And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." 13 Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" 15 God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, '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, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.

This evening I begin a series of six addresses which take us to the heart of one of the crucial sections of the Old Testament. The overriding theme of Exodus is defined by its name and concerns deliverance from bondage.

The nature of God is of One who sets his people free—and he sends his prophets to announce the people's approaching freedom. When we turn to the New Testament, we see a clear link between Moses, the great prophet, and Jesus Christ, the Saviour. The gospel sees the completion of God's intent, as we too are called to bring a message of freedom and hope to the world.

In the opening chapter of Exodus and the early part of Chapter 2, we note how the Israelites had multiplied and, as such, became what we would describe today as 'a security risk'. The Hebrews were greatly burdened and the Pharaoh ordered the midwives to destroy the infant boys. This is certainly an adult story of the Old Testament, which brings us face to face with the harshness of life inflicted upon God's people.

We have the familiar account of how the infant Moses was placed in a sealed basket which was floated on the river by his mother. He was found by the Pharaoh's daughter, nursed by his natural mother, but adopted by the Egyptian princess.

The survival of Moses is an indication of the failure of the slaughter of the innocents; much as in the similar account of the escape to Egypt at the beginning of Matthew's gospel.

The following chapters transport us from the birth of Moses to the Exodus and the momentous wilderness wanderings. It is one of the most significant narratives ever recorded.

Exodus recalls that God had aroused his people to seek his help in removing them from slavery. God was clearly at work in the life of Moses, preparing him for the enormous task that lay ahead—a task of deliverance.

When we turn to Chapter 3, we see how God calls Moses in a quite specific way and allows him to see something of his glory and willingness to fulfil his promises.

Without question, Moses is the supreme figure of the Old Testament. Indeed Moses is one of the greatest figures of world history. He is revered in many cultures and, in three major religions, Moses has a very special place.

To capture his importance, we would need to see him as a liberator, a law-giver, the leader of a people, the prophet of a nation and the one who will help to shape those who will be known as the People of God.

There is a real sense of romance about the story of Moses, but chiefly when we see the calling of the prophet. We must ask questions about what this has to say to those of us who are seeking to follow Jesus Christ today.

Moses has a unique place in the Christian tradition. We only have to examine the account of the Transfiguration in the gospels to confirm this—and also to recognise that so much of the teaching of Jesus is built upon the law handed down to Moses. There is much to be gained from examining the call of God in Moses and to further consider what this can help us to understand in terms of our own lives.

Because of his place in Pharaoh's palace, Moses was raised, as some might say, with 'a silver spoon in his mouth'. All he had to do was to play things smart and he would have been set for life.

But Moses slew an Egyptian—and, as a result of that one action, the days in the palace were gone for ever. His life was set on an entirely different path. Moses fled for his life to Midian and looked after his father-in-law's sheep. He went from the palace to the fields, and then on to the remote desert for forty years. His life was changed irrevocably. It was during this time that God spoke to him—and the rest is history—and, for a people, national history.

We can learn much if we are prepared to closely examine the nature of the call of Moses.

MOSES WAS ABOUT HIS EVERYDAY BUSINESS – v.1

Moses was carrying on his everyday work as a shepherd. One day, while he was tending the flocks of his father-in-law, he received an awe-inspiring call he would never forget.

I find it helpful to know that Moses was doing the ordinary, when the extraordinary sense of God's presence came to him. It is important to recognise that you don't have to be involved in super-religious activities to be called by God.

Perhaps the one overriding thought is that Moses was faithful to what he was doing at that time. Moses' encounter with God takes place when he was far removed from the sights and sounds of any religious community. There is no priest or prophet on hand. However, it is worth noting that this will not be the last time that God speaks with clarity to shepherds in the fields.

One aspect of the calling is that nature and the presence of God combine and are not seen as over and against each other for God speaks "out of a burning bush".

Moses turned aside in these moments to look at the wonder of a bush that burned but was not consumed. God was speaking—calling Moses to be a leader of his people. God is often represented as fire, light or a great source of energy, but the theme that I want to address is that this was a 'non-consuming fire'.

Jewish rabbinic teachers have talked about these events and referred to 'divine condescension' which in turn points to the presence of God made real to the lowly.

I am more likely to be drawn to a person who hears the call of God in the ordinary, rather than to those who are quick to tell the most remarkable stories of extraordinariness.

Moses' life had many aspects of failure about it. Just consider some:

- His attempts to deliver the Hebrew slaves
- The fact that Moses didn't enter the Promised Land
- Moses' disobedience over smiting a rock
- The need for another kind of leader for Canaan

So Moses was about his everyday life when God called him to a specific and historic mission. The glory of God was to be found in the ordinary. The fatal fascination for the fabulous has caught on in religious circles. Some Christians are even conditioned to expect the unusual, to stand in awe of the spectacular, but if we are inclined in this way, we will somehow miss the glory of God in the ordinary.

Edmund Burke, the noted eighteenth century political philosopher, turned a phrase into a profound truth: "History is full of momentous trifles." This wonderful insight suggests we may find the most extraordinary meaning and purpose in life in the ordinary events of life.

Methodist devotional writer, Neville Ward, concluded, "The present moment is the only moment in which any kind of action is possible. If I want to do the will of God, I must recognise that the divine will is always something I must do now—I cannot receive now what God will offer me tomorrow. But I can receive now what he is offering me now. And each moment God is offering me some grace for my acceptance of some command for my obedience."

From the pen of Catherine Marshall, we read, "The purpose of all prayer is to find God's will and to make that will our prayer."

MOSES WAS WILLING TO LOOK CLOSER – v.3

Moses could have chosen to ignore both what was happening and what God was saying to him.

As many have observed, it was probably early summer and, just as happens in Australia, fires can occur spontaneously. The heat in the desert would have been considerable. I have no doubt in my own mind that Moses would have been used to seeing dry thorn bushes set alight by the sun. However, it is important for us to notice that it was not the fire itself that caught his attention, but the fact that the bush was not being consumed.

It would not be the only time that God would speak to Moses in fire (Exodus 19:18) and God would lead his people by both cloud and fire (13:21).

So Moses' attention is drawn by the fact that the fire continued to burn, even though the bush was not consumed. His sense of inquisitiveness called him closer. God was seeking the attention of Moses and, as he approached the bush, he heard the voice of God.

It may seem obvious, but one of the powerful messages is that God cannot really speak to us until he has gained our attention. Just like Moses, we need to be a people who are ready to look much more closely and to listen more attentively for the voice of God in our everyday living.

Here, and in other places, fire is a symbol of the holy presence of God. People were expected to remove their shoes or sandals in the presence of God. This helps us to understand the importance of the response of Moses to God's instruction: "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." (v.5)

God is always contemporaneous in our experience. It is not helpful to put God in the past tense and so it is inappropriate to talk about 'once knowing God' or saying he 'once helped us'. There is also a sense in which we cannot put God into the future and talk about 'one day I will come to him' or 'one day he will be near'. The truth is that God is always near and with us now! This is holy ground.

The practice of taking off one's shoes could be said to be helpful in two ways:

- It reminds us that we must not become 'chummy' with God. We must never seek to domesticate God and reduce the Almighty to the friend next door.
- It reminds us of the mystery of faith. Surely that theme is important in a world where we continually seek to push the mysterious to the edge. When we stand in the presence of a holy God, we discover that the imminent and the transcendent meet together.

Many people are drawn close to God by way of a specific happening in their lives – as someone brought a powerful influence to bear, but more often than not this takes place in difficult circumstances.

Whilst it is true that from time to time God speaks in and out of our strengths, frequently it is through the testing times in life that he calls out to us. Many can testify to the fact that God spoke to them at times that were tough and when they experienced life's challenges.

Walter Brueggemann described the first fifteen chapters of Exodus as "the narrative of liberation" and warns that "the narrative concerns no ordinary happening, and we must not expect to understand it through our usual categories." With this in mind, I find it not only interesting but also helpful that one writer draws on the link between "curiosity and calling".

We cannot hide from God. A preacher who had a significant influence upon my own life frequently used to recite the words of Francis Thompson from his outstanding *The Hound of Heaven* :

“I fled him down the nights and down the years,
I fled him, down the arches of the years;
I fled him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from him, and under running laughter.”

THE PRESENCE OF GOD LEADS MOSES TO A CLEAR PERSONAL CALLING – v.10

The voice of God seems to make it plain why this appearance to Moses is taking place. This is the same God who had made promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (v.6) and the contention is that those promises are now to be fulfilled in a great act of rescue (v.v. 8 and 9).

A consistent theme presented to us is that the God of the Bible opens up a sense of calling and invites us to share in his purposes through our own lives. God would save his people and Moses would be used in the process.

As we consider this, we stand as those God has called in Jesus Christ and he invites us humbly to take our part in his mission today. The distinctive nature of God’s calling is that he equips us for whatever lies ahead.

What does it mean for us to have a ‘distinct calling’?—for there are clearly ways in which people are called to unique and distinguishable tasks. God singles out Moses for a quite specific calling, but God has always been about this work—and he continues to call people today.

As we consider Moses’ life, we recognise how his life was preserved by his parents’ faith. We need to identify the fact that he chose not to be captivated by the attractions of the royal court; his turning point came as he identified with the slaves and turned his back on Egypt. One writer coined Moses’ vocation as being a ‘Maker of History—and Friend of God’.

Without question, the experience of the bush that burned and yet was not consumed is a formative moment in Moses’ life. Perhaps there will be an ongoing dialogue for Moses that will include moments of speechlessness.

Towards the end of the passage, we see a radical and decisive break which, as one writer put it, must have “stunned Moses when he heard it, and must have stunned Israel each time it was reiterated.”

Brueggemann suggested, “What has been all pious promise now becomes rigorous demand.” In just one sentence, the purposes of God issue forth in a specific human responsibility.

It might surprise us that, in the following section in Exodus, Moses voices a series of doubts and a growing resistance to the call of God. This can be our experience too. Moses might well have considered that his chances of success and survival in relation to Egypt to be modest at best. However, God’s calling is far greater in his—and in all our lives. When we face the most stupendous challenges, we know that God can bring his liberating power to bear, even amidst our weakness.

Every person needs formative experiences, which will help to give shape, confirm meaning and bring dynamic purpose. Out of the burning bush came a voice that would change Moses' life—and the bush itself remained unsinged.

In his study of Exodus, Brevard Childs observed that God gave Moses an awesome new vocation and that each of Moses' objections which looked back was met by God showing him he has a new future, but it is born out of a real present experience.