

EXODUS 3:1-15

New Revised Standard Version

Let's listen to and for God's Word for us this morning.

3 *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 [God] 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 [this god's] name?' what shall I say to them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I am who I am."^[a] [God] 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.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

Let us pray.

Lord God Almighty,
May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, O LORD, our rock and our redeemer. Let Your Spirit fill this place, and prepare our hearts as we hear your message through your humble servant. May the words I speak be not my own but yours alone. Amen.

Who wants a s'more right now? Why do I continue to write my sermons when I'm hungry.

Who knows what a s'more is?

What do you need for a s'more? Call them out.

That's right. What else do you need?

A fire. Unless you're doing them in the kitchen, which there are many ways to do that now. Microwave s'mores, s'mores on the cooktop, s'mores desserts, s'mores cereal.

I love s'mores.

Goey, crunchy, chocolatey. What's not to like?

I like creating funny new ways of making s'mores, too. Like S'MOREOS.

Yes, S'MOREOS. You roast a marshmallow like normal. You twist the two sides of an Oreo apart and put the marshmallow between them.

We developed that one out of necessity one time on a camping trip.

You can make s'mores between cookies of various other kinds, too, like Fudge Stripe or even Windmill cookies.

No matter how you want to make a s'more though, you need a campfire or heat of some kind.

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What do s'mores have to do with our passage for today though?

Let's take a closer look at Exodus first. And set the scene for an incredible encounter.

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This is a very familiar story from the Old Testament. Many of us have heard this story as kids, it's very popular in Sunday School curriculums and in Bible story books.

Moses sees a bush on fire. The bush isn't burning up. Moses is interested.

Then God talks to Moses from the bush.

Pretty simple. Then Moses saves the Israelites (with God's help of course) from slavery in Egypt and everyone goes home happy to Canaan. With a few detours and delays along the way.

Okay, great story, but what does it have to do with us today?

Well - we could go to the classic interpretation here and draw a lot of similarities to God calling Moses to God calling people to ministry, say calling people to go to seminary.

Seems like a very appropriate time to talk about that.

But what does this story tell us about Moses? What does this story tell us about ourselves? We could easily explore those ways of looking at this famous passage in Exodus.

But we're going to do things a little differently this morning.

We're going to look closer at this
to see how God talking to Moses in the burning bush
tells us something about God.

To really understand the context of this situation, we need to talk about what comes before this chapter. A little crash course in Moses and the Israelites. Let's set the stage.

Moses was born to Hebrew slaves in Egypt, but was born during the time when Pharaoh had declared that Israelite males were not to be accepted for fear of them rising up against him. So Moses was hidden in the reeds in the Nile and famously found and adopted by the daughter of the Pharaoh.

As an adult, Moses witnessed a Hebrew slave being beaten by an Egyptian guard. This so incensed him that he killed the guard and hid the body. Upon realizing he was found out, he fled to the land of Midian, married to one of the daughters of Jethro the priest and had spent about 40 years there.

Meanwhile, the Israelites are still slaves in Egypt during this time, and things keep getting worse.

From Exodus 2, verses 23 to 25.

23 After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. **24** God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. **25** God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

These are the three verses before our story begins. And it opens up the first of our Burning Questions.

We see lots of action words here for God that are a little perplexing. God HEARD their groaning. God REMEMBERED the covenant. God LOOKED upon the Israelites. God TOOK NOTICE of them.

Burning Question #1:
Didn't God already know all of that?

We believe of course that God did. Yet God is always in a conversation with people. God is

seeking out a relationship with us. So God **heard** what the Israelites were saying, and God **remembered** the covenant with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob. And God **noticed** how the Israelites were suffering.

And God decided to do something about it.

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This brings us to our story. Moses is working for his father-in-law, doing his duty as a good son-in-law and shepherding the flock of sheep. Yet it's interesting where Moses takes the sheep. It says he went "beyond the wilderness" with them. Why did Moses travel so far from Midian?

Sounds like a Burning Question again.

Why was Moses in Midian so long (40 Years) and why did he lead the sheep beyond the wilderness?

There are some interesting things that come to mind. Of course, our first thoughts go to God leading Moses to do these things. And while that's likely true, Moses chose to stay in Midian as long as he did, the fear of returning to Egypt and being punished for the murder of the guard was strong.

So Moses spent 40 years in the desert, in the wilderness, before the Israelites were ever freed from Pharaoh's hand.

Moses was in preparation for his future role as the leader of the Chosen People. He doesn't know it or realize it. Yet.

So Moses is doing his normal thing, watching over and leading these sheep, but this time he ends up on Mount Horeb.

Now I'm not quite sure if Moses is just kind of daydreaming his way across this wilderness or if he's a bit bored by the work or if he's being intentional about it. The text doesn't really tell us all that.

But what we know is he ends up in this place called Horeb, noted in our text in Exodus as the "mountain of God." Horeb is a name based off a Hebrew word meaning "wasteland." So Moses is truly out in the middle of nowhere here.

God's mountain is in the middle of nowhere. In the wasteland, in the desert, far from any temple. Far from any tabernacle. A natural place where God connects with the people.

And God does just that. Verse 2.

2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him [Moses] 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."

Moses in the wasteland, watching the sheep. He's been doing this for 40 years. He sees a bush burning. He doesn't react strongly at first. He's in the desert, it's dry, Moses may have seen a bush or two catch fire from the heat in the past.

But this bush is different. It does NOT burn up, it is NOT consumed.

Moses isn't drawn to the ordinary, he's drawn to the extraordinary. He wouldn't have given a second thought to a burning bush that was on its way to destruction. But he is quite curious about this bush. This one has something going with it.

Moses turns aside to investigate and God begins the conversation. Verse 4.

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."

God has heard Israel. God has decided to do something about it. Moses is the first part of that something.

God could have easily appeared out of nowhere to Moses. Thundered down from heaven or spoken aloud from the clouds.

But God chooses to be **within** the bush. God chooses to speak **through** creation, through nature.

Another Burning Question:

Why would God choose to speak through the bush?

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Have you ever gone camping? Or on a hike? Or spent a day at the beach?

There's always moments of quiet, aren't there?

Moments where you can just feel more attuned to the world, less distracted by the bills and the

noise and the demands and the arguments of everyday life.

Moments to get away.

Moments when you can sometimes feel God more closely.

God still speaks to us through nature. Maybe not as explicitly as to Moses here in this passage. But there is something real about the way God uses creation, uses nature as a conduit for communication between the divine nature of God and the human nature of all of us.

God spoke to Moses through the bush to make the connection more REAL.

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There's another part of this story that is often retold. The holy ground bit. Verse 5.

5 Then [God] said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 [God] 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.

We often think of this as telling us that the actual place where Moses met God was holy. The mountain of God is a physical space with more significance of holiness than other places.

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As I dug into the text in preparation for today, I had the privilege of being on the campus of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Preparing a sermon with those kinds of resources is a bit like having a lot of options for making s'mores.

Graham crackers of various kinds are available, maybe some cookies, or even Oreos.

Marshmallows of many sizes and flavors.

Chocolate of every size and shape. Milk or dark. With nuts or caramel.

Too many choices really. But the beauty is that you are given the chance to see what so many scholars thought of the passage we are talking about today.

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When studying the Old Testament, it's interesting to get the take of Jewish scholars. I consulted a Jewish Publication Society commentary of Exodus and found something interesting about holy

ground.

Throughout Genesis, God emphasizes a sacred TIME with the people, the Sabbath day. This passage in Exodus gives us the first instance of a sacred SPACE.

Moses is in a wilderness, a wasteland, and God calls the ground holy?

Burning Question time:

What makes this holy ground?

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One of the cool things about this congregation is its commitment to providing opportunities for work groups to be involved in community restoration through mission trips to Benton Harbor.

A key part of this ministry is helping people from other places see the community in a new way from what they were told. To experience it, to feel it.

Pastor Laurie has talked about the Preposition Test. Now I can't recall if she coined that, or learned it from her mentors or previous pastors here. But that sticks with me a lot.

The Preposition Test essentially checks on our mindset when we minister in our community or any community really.

Are you here to mission TO the community?
Or are you here to mission WITH the community?

Are you here to do something FOR the community?
Or are you here to do something WITH the community?

Are you here to bring Jesus TO Benton Harbor?
Or are you here to see how Jesus is already IN Benton Harbor?

Being a part of a team, a group and not just an outside force is powerful in doing community work together. And learning to see Jesus in everyone you meet is a big part of that collaboration and connection with the community.

The ground here isn't holy...unless God is speaking with us.

The ground here isn't holy...unless God is working with us.

The ground here isn't holy...unless God is here.

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The ground on Mount Horeb isn't inherently holy. It's a desert, a wasteland, the edge of the wilderness. No, God's presence is what makes it holy.

God is speaking with the people, with Moses.

God is speaking through creation, through the bush.

God is making that ground holy just by being God.

And Moses is afraid. He looks away.

I think we'd all feel that way.

Yet Moses is also ashamed. He is hiding from his people, hiding from the guilt of the murder of the Egyptian guard. And now he is confronted by God out of a burning bush.

Moses is already thinking about how he's not worthy to be in God's presence.

This is holy ground!

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We've all been there. We've all had days, or weeks, or years where we've felt unworthy. Where we've felt ashamed. Where we've felt guilty.

We are afraid to look to God in those times.

We feel that God cannot and will not accept us because we are so broken.

We are Moses at those moments. Some of us are feeling that right now.

We identify with Moses because he knows both the awesome power of God and the shame of his own choices. Moses laments his past and what he's done.

But he also hasn't really had to confront it much. His choices made sure of it.

Moses has been in Midian for 40 years. He has a good job, tending the sheep of his father-in-law, working the family business. He has a wife, Zipporah, and at least one son we learn about in the previous chapter.

Moses hasn't really had to have that daily reminder of either his own Hebrew heritage or his run-ins with the Egyptians.

Moses has had the privilege to not really have to think about the struggles of his fellow Israelites in slavery or even about the oppression the Egyptians have placed upon them. He has been able to "just not think about it" for a very long time.

And now here's God, literally lighting a fire under (or at least near) Moses.

God looks at the fear, the mistakes and the shame of Moses and still chooses him to be God's instrument in the deliverance of the Israelites.

God chooses Moses not just in spite of his past.
God perhaps chooses Moses **because** of his past.

That sounds like a Burning Question:
How could God choose someone like Moses?

But let's keep going first. There are a couple more questions we need to ask before we look at the answers.

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Moses is afraid and God speaks again and issues a bit of exposition. We, as the readers of Exodus, we know what's been going on in Egypt, because the end of chapter two told us.

But Moses isn't up to speed yet. He's been in Midian, in the middle of nowhere, without cell phone coverage. So God fills him in. Verse 7.

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.

We can kind of identify with Moses again here, right? Okay, Moses thinks, this is all well and good. I'm glad that God is going to help out these poor Israelites and that God is hearing their cry and will deliver them. It's pretty cool to think how God will do all of this for them and save them and bring them to a promised land, a land of milk and honey.

Moses might have his own Burning Question:

But what does this have to do with me?

God continues, however, as if anticipating Moses' inner monologue. God then makes it very clear what this has to do with Moses. Verse 9.

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."

Uh...

Moses isn't ready to hear this yet. He's not going to do that. He doesn't feel he's the person for this job.

So he questions God!

Moses questions what he is told. By God.

He doesn't cower in fear as he did before, he calls God out. Moses says that God may have the wrong guy here. Verse 11.

11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

Again, we identify with Moses here. He wants to let God clearly know that he's just not good enough for this. He's a fugitive for murder, he's just a shepherd, he's not even a "real" Hebrew. By blood yes, but he grew up Egyptian. God can't be right about this.

Right, God?

12 [God] 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."

Moses takes a brief moment here and may even be thinking that God is still not quite right. I mean God is talking to him like Moses doing this is a foregone conclusion. God's "sign" for Moses is that he will eventually bring the people back to this place. Back to the future? That's the proof?

It's like a time travel scenario now and Moses' head is spinning. There's no Delorean here.

So he goes back to the questioning. He deliver another Burning Question to God. Verse 13.

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 [this god's] name?' what shall I say to them?"

Moses may have lived in a few different worlds, that of the Egyptians, that of his heritage as a Hebrew and also with the Midianites, but he knows a thing or two about each of them. Moses knows about the multiple gods of Egypt and the God of the Israelites.

Moses knows that God identifies as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and he is looking to offer up a question that doesn't have an easy answer.

Moses is hoping he can get God off his back. He's asking God if they (the Israelites) will even believe him IF (and that's still a big IF for Moses) he goes back to Egypt to do this.

To Moses' surprise, God answers. Verse 14.

14 God said to Moses, "I am who I am."^[a] [God] 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.

That's where our passage ends for today. Kind of in the middle of the action. But there's enough here to think about.

God is pretty convinced this is the end of the questioning as God then goes on to explain the entire plan to Moses over the next few verses in chapter three.

But Moses still objects even more in chapter four.

But that's a topic for another sermon.

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For now, there are a few important things we can learn from this conversation between God and Moses here. And it's not just about hearing God's call and following it. Though that can be

important too.

Because as we've seen, Moses didn't just obey, he objected and gave excuses and challenged God to prove that this was the right thing to do.

As we said earlier, we learn a lot about God from this text.

We learn that God can do anything. And we learn that God chooses to act in a variety of ways. Even if at first it only makes sense to God.

First, we learn that God is intimately aware of the human condition and the human experience.

Look again at Verse 7 -

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,

I KNOW their sufferings. God hears the cry of the people. This cry is repeated four times from the end of chapter two into chapter three, over just 17 verses. God hears the cry.

God doesn't just HEAR about their sufferings through the cries, though. God KNOWS the sufferings. God FEELS the sufferings.

We learn that Israel is hopeless, the people cannot save themselves. They need God.

We know that God could simply save them. It's like the burning bush again. God could've just appeared to Moses and done this whole calling thing a lot more simply.

God chose to appear within the bush to Moses, to suspend the rules of nature so the bush wouldn't burn up, to connect the God experience with the creation experience.

Speaking WITH nature, remember our Preposition Test, intensifies the Real Experience that God is having with Moses right here.

God chooses to deliver the children of Israel from the oppression of Egypt collaboratively with Moses. It's an event that is meant to be collaborative and participatory. It's what God chooses to do because God knows and feels the sufferings of the people. God is that close to them.

The interconnection between God and human is a theme here with Moses. But it also foretells the life of Jesus as fully God and fully human. And shows us the love of that connection.

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Second, we learn that these Burning Questions are good things. We learn that doubt and concern and questions to God aren't forbidden, they are encouraged. By God.

The way God answers Moses isn't at all in a tone of "because I said so, that's why!" My kids really enjoy when that's my answer to anything. Right?

No, God wants collaboration and participation and God also wants Response.

God may call us and reveal a small piece of the plan. We can then choose to take that call and go and do. Or we can question it, and probe it, and learn more about it.

Many of us may have been taught not to question what we find in the Word of God. Or to not question what we think God is telling us or calling us to do.

The conversation between God and Moses at the burning bush tells us something different.

Human questioning in this text in Scripture leads not to doubt or discouragement or to less clarity or desire about the call.

Human questioning here in Exodus leads to MORE divine revelation.

Every question from Moses leads to God revealing more about the plan, more about Moses, more about God.

Even the big reveal of the name of God, YHWH, I am who I am, or translated even more literally as some scholars prefer, I am who I will be / I will be who I am. This reveal only comes from Moses questioning the call of God.

And God answered. And God revealed. And God chose Moses.

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Before we close, let's talk about one of the questions Moses had for God and apply it to ourselves.

What does all of this have to do with me?

Let's bring back one of the Burning Questions from before to answer that, they work together.

Why would God choose someone like Moses?

God could've easily chosen a leader from among the current Israelite slaves in Egypt and had that person help alleviate the oppression and make things easier there within that life. God wanted someone more bold and more impulsive. Even with the baggage that comes with it. Someone who could do more than reform the life of Hebrew slaves, but someone who could do the transformative work God was calling him to.

God sees the struggles and suffering of the people and takes compassion on them in a radical way. God wants the people removed from the situation, a revolution of sociopolitical change. God wants to remove the people of God from the only system they've ever known and begin a new divine event that transforms the lives of the chosen people.

God doesn't just want them out of something bad, God also promises them something good in exchange, a land flowing with milk and honey. The promised land is not just Canaan to the Israelites or only our promised eternal life, it's also the lives of the people in this life. As Jesus says in the Lord's Prayer "thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." It is right therefore for us to exercise God's deliverance in this life AND in the life to come. We are called to love today and forever.

The short answer to this Burning Question isn't short. In fact, it's really another question, another Burning Question:

Why would God choose any of us?

We all have been fugitives, murderers (in one way or another), not really "fitting" with any one group or another. We are all flawed in major ways. We are Moses.

And God chooses each one of us for something special.

We should listen for that call. Turn aside when we see the burning bush during our own everyday activities.

And then we should question God about it. Learn more about God's plan for our lives.

So that's what this has to do with us!

Just as God took compassion on the people,
and sought out a partner in Moses to deliver them from their oppression,
so God seeks us as partners to deliver the people
of our community, our nation, our world
from their oppression.

To work WITH God and WITH each other in a deliverance
from what this world is putting upon the least of our brothers and sisters.

To not just bring love TO the people we meet every day but to share in God's love WITH them.

God is calling you from the burning bush.
God is calling you to question the plan,
to use your past to enlighten your future,
to deliver the people from oppression,
to be active participants in the life of God's church,
to seek a better tomorrow
WITH your community, WITH your family, WITH your church
and WITH your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.

PRAYER: Dear God, let us hear your call and challenge it. Let us read your word and examine it. Let us see the suffering of your people and soothe it. Let us feel the need of our community and embrace it. Let us look inside ourselves and recognize your will. Push us to do more, to love more, to love stronger, to love wider, to love all as we free your people from the bonds of oppression we see around us. Let us see your love as the love we should emulate. Your love alone. Amen.

Our song of response is HERE I AM, LORD - Glory to God #69

BENEDICTION:

May the Lord bless you and keep you
May the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you
May the Lord turn his face to you and give you peace

God promised to be with Moses, and we are witness to the fulfillment of that promise. From generation to generation, the God of Israel is also the God of Benton Harbor. The God of the burning bush is waiting even now to encounter us, call us, challenge us, and change us. Go out to be sustained and surprised by the love of God. And to share that love WITH all. Amen.