

The Divine Encounter

Exodus 3:1–4:26

June 10, 2012 — New Baptist Church, Huntington, West Virginia
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The Story Begins

We return this morning to the book of Exodus, and we come to a passage that is possibly one of the most important, most central, and most difficult passages in the entire Bible. Just as Genesis 3 is the pivotal text for understanding the human condition — the entrance of sin and its devastating consequences — Exodus 3 and 4 is the pivotal text for understanding God himself. It is a passage upon which enormous stretches of Scripture, and centuries of religious practice, are built.

Rather than reading through the text verse by verse, I want to tell you this story. I want us to see it as a whole — this divine encounter — without getting sidetracked, as is very easy to do, by individual words or phrases. The passage is worthy of much deeper study, and I encourage you to return to it on your own. But this morning, let us follow the narrative.

The Encounter at the Bush

Our story begins with Moses at roughly eighty years of age. If you know your Bible, you know the broad outline of how he got there. Born among the Israelite slaves in Egypt, Moses was placed in a wicker basket by his mother in an act of desperate, radical faith after Pharaoh ordered the death of all Hebrew male infants. Pharaoh's own daughter discovers the child and adopts him, and so Moses spends the first forty years of his life in the household of Pharaoh. He knows himself to be an Israelite — likely through the influence of his own mother, who was hired as a wet nurse — and that identity eventually costs him everything. He kills an Egyptian he finds beating an Israelite slave, the act becomes known, and he flees. He ends up in Midian, in the household of a Midianite priest, marries into that family, and spends the next forty years of his life shepherding flocks on the back side of a mountain.

That is where we pick up the story. Moses is eighty years old, tending goats, when he sees something extraordinary: a bush that is burning but is not consumed. He turns aside to investigate, and it is there that the conversation begins.

The Lord calls out: *Moses, Moses.*

And Moses answers: *Here I am.*

The Lord speaks again: *Do not come near. Take your sandals off, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.*

At this, Moses hides his face. He is afraid.

Then the Lord lays out his plan. He has seen the affliction of his people. He has heard their cry. He knows their suffering. He has come down to deliver them and bring them to a good and spacious land. And — *I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring my people out of Egypt.*

Moses responds with a question that is really a protest: *Who am I?* Here is an eighty-year-old goat herder on a mountainside. Are you certain you have the right person?

The Lord answers simply: *I will be with you.* That is all. Do not worry about who you are. I will be with you.

So Moses asks another question, and this one is more searching: *Who are you?*

And the Lord speaks one of the most extraordinary lines in all of Scripture: *I AM WHO I AM.* He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is the I AM. And this is the name Moses is to carry back to the people of Israel: the I AM has heard your cry and will bring you to a good land.

The Lord then lays out the plan in greater detail. Moses is to gather the elders of Israel, go together to Pharaoh, and request that the people be permitted to go and worship the Lord their God. And the Lord tells Moses plainly: Pharaoh will say no. But that refusal will become the occasion for great wonders — signs so unmistakable that all of Egypt will know that the I AM is the Lord God. When it is over, Pharaoh will release the people, and the Egyptians themselves will send them away with gold and silver.

Moses pushes back again: *They are not going to believe me.*

So the Lord gives him three signs. Moses' staff can be thrown down and become a serpent, then picked up and become a staff again. He can put his hand inside his cloak and draw it out leprous as snow, then repeat the motion and restore it. And if he pours water from the Nile onto dry ground, it will turn to blood. Three signs, given as evidence of the one who sends him.

Moses tries again: *I am not a good speaker. I am slow of speech and tongue.*

The Lord responds: *I will be with you and teach you what to say.*

And then Moses simply says: *Please, Lord, send someone else.*

At this point, the text tells us, the Lord's anger is kindled. But even in his anger, he makes a provision. Moses has a brother, Aaron, a Levite who is a capable speaker. Aaron will go with Moses and do the talking. Moses will remain the one in authority, the staff will be in his hand, and now it is time to go.

A Hesitant Departure

Notice what is absent at the close of this encounter. There is no covenant formalized between Moses and God, as there was with Abraham. There is no meal shared, no altar of stones erected, no outburst of praise or blessing or thanksgiving. There is no clear, heartfelt *yes* from Moses at all. In fact, the very next verse hints that Moses is still making up his mind. He goes back to his father-in-law Jethro and says only this: *Please let me go back to my brothers in Egypt to see whether they are still alive* (Exodus 4:18). It reads almost like fact-checking — as though Moses is gathering one more piece of information before he commits. He has not left for Egypt yet. He needs another push.

And God gives it. He comes to Moses again — we are not told how — and tells him simply: the men who were seeking your life are dead. The coast is clear. Go.

So Moses packs up his wife and sons and sets out on the road toward Egypt. And while he is on the road, the Lord speaks to him again, recapping the plan and adding one new and striking element: *Israel is my firstborn son. Let my son go that he may serve me. If you refuse to let him go, I will kill your firstborn son.*

Then we come to one of the strangest episodes in all of Scripture — one I want to return to at the close of this message.

The Bad News: A Theology Shaped by the Wrong Gods

Before we get there, however, I want to step back and observe something important about Moses in this story. We have not seen great faith from him — not yet. Great faith will come, but not here, not yet. And rather than criticize Moses, I think we need to understand him.

At this moment in the narrative, Moses is, theologically speaking, a mess. The reason he could not simply say *yes, Lord* — the reason his acceptance of God's call is so halting and reluctant — is that his encounter with the God of his fathers did not fit the understanding of God that had been shaped by his experience and his environment.

Think about what Moses actually knew, and where he had learned it. There was no written Scripture, no Bible in his hands. Whatever he understood about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been passed down orally, primarily through his mother, across a gap of four hundred years of silence. That foundation was thin and fragile. And against it, Moses had spent forty years immersed in the religious world of Pharaoh's court — surrounded by the gods of Egypt — and then another forty years in the household of a Midianite priest, shaped by yet another religious tradition.

His understanding of God was not simply limited. It had been actively formed by the cultures he lived in. And here is the point I want to press: despite all their differences, the religions of Egypt and Midian shared something in common — something, in fact, that is shared by virtually every man-made religious system the world has ever produced, from the Greeks and Romans to the Babylonians, from the Incas to the Maya.

Every human-made religion, at its core, is an attempt to use religious ritual as a means of manipulating God for one's own purposes.

From the earliest moments of recorded history, human beings have searched for the right combination of words, sacrifices, sacred objects, and specialized ritual that will move a deity to act on their behalf. Sacrifice a bull on the field before planting season, and the harvest will be good. Burn incense before your god, and your business will prosper. Carry the right token into battle, and victory will follow. Offer the right thing, perform the right ceremony, and you will get what you want from the divine.

This is the logic of man-made religion: if I do this, God will do that. I arrange my religious practice around my own goals, my own desires, my own agenda. The god exists to serve me.

This is not an ancient problem. In our own day, we see it dressed in Christian language and marketed as the prosperity gospel: do the right things, give the right amount, pray the right prayer, and God will give you health and wealth. We see it in a religion of works that amounts to keeping God pleased so that nothing bad will happen to us. We see it in the way some people treat faith as a kind of good-luck charm — as if the right spiritual practice will unlock divine favor for whatever we are already pursuing.

Not long ago, I confronted someone about a pattern of sin that was destroying that person and causing serious harm to everyone connected to them. The person listened. They acknowledged what they were doing and admitted the damage it was causing. I expected repentance. I was wrong. Instead, they said: *But God will forgive me — so I'm going to keep doing it.*

I could not speak.

What that person was practicing was a form of religious paganism dressed in Christian vocabulary. God was simply a tool in service of their own desires. It is wrong. It is evil. It is not the God revealed in this passage.

The Good News: God Reveals Himself

Here is what makes Exodus 3 and 4 such a world-altering passage. Moses' encounter with God turns this entire understanding upside down.

Within this divine encounter, God reveals a remarkable collection of things about himself. He is present — not distant, not dormant. He sees, he hears, he knows. He has come down. He is personal — he has given Moses his name. He seeks to reveal himself rather than conceal himself. He does not coerce or override human will, but he leaves open a genuine window of choice. And he is holy — utterly, categorically unlike anything in the world of human religion.

But the single most important theological shift in this passage — the thing that changes everything — is this: it is not Moses who summons God to do his bidding. It is God who reveals himself and calls Moses to be about *God's* bidding.

And what is God's bidding? To redeem his people and lead them into freedom. To bring them out of bondage and into the good land he has promised them. That is God's plan. That is God's purpose. Moses is not the initiator. He is the responder.

And that plan and that purpose have not changed. The God who spoke from the burning bush is still speaking. He is still inviting — inviting you into his purposes, into his plan. He wants you to be part of the work of redeeming people and leading them into true freedom: freedom from the power and consequence of sin. And he wants to begin with you. He calls you to lead others toward the good land — what Jesus called life eternal in the Kingdom of Heaven. And it begins with you.

Moses asked two questions that I think we ask as well.

Who am I to be part of God's purposes? God's answer is the same answer he gave Moses: you are defined not by your own credentials or your own record, but by my presence with you. I am with you.

Who are you, God? I am who I am. I am the God of the fathers. And in the fullness of time, I am fully known and fully revealed in the person of Jesus Christ — the image of the invisible God. What we see in Jesus is a God of love and mercy, compassion and grace, who invites us not only to participate in his purposes but to bring every prayer and petition to him, because he loves.

Moses also voiced our fear: *No one will believe this.* Nobody is going to accept this news about the Kingdom of Heaven and freedom from sin and life eternal. Who would take me seriously?

And to us, as to Moses, God provides signs. Not the same signs — the serpent-staff and the leprous hand were signs suited to that moment, that place, those people. The signs God has

given us to demonstrate to this world that our Redeemer lives, that God is present and God is holy, are these: our love for one another (*by this they will know*), the presence and power of the Holy Spirit evidenced in the fruit he produces in our lives, and our own changed lives — the visible freedom we are actually living. These are the signs we carry as evidence of the one who has sent us.

Will you go? Will you be part of God's purposes?

The Road to Egypt: A Final Reckoning

Let us return now to the road. Moses has finally set out for Egypt with his wife Zipporah and his sons. And then we read this, in verses 4:24–26:

At a lodging place on the way the LORD met him and sought to put him to death. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" So he let him alone. It was then that she said, "A bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision.

That is a strange passage to end a sermon on. There are many theories about what is happening here, and I will not pretend otherwise. But this is how I understand it.

The Bible contains a number of stories where God does something that defies our expectations — something that makes you stop and scratch your head. C. S. Lewis captured it well in his description of Aslan: he is a good lion, but he is not a tame one. God is good, but he is not tame. He told Abraham to sacrifice his son. He wrestled Jacob in the dark. He struck down a priest who reached out to steady the ark of God when it began to tip. These are not stories we would have written. But they belong to the same category.

I believe the Lord's move against Moses at the lodging place belongs with those stories. It is a test. If God truly intended to kill Moses, I think we can be confident God would not have failed. The question being pressed, as in each of those other stories, is simply this: *Are you serious about your walk with God, or are you just playing a game?*

That was the question for Abraham. That was the question behind the death of the priest at the ark — his death was the consequence of disobedience in the way God commanded himself to be worshiped. And here, with Moses, the only clear, established command God had given his people at that point was the covenant of circumcision. Moses, about to be commissioned as the leader and redeemer of that very people, had not circumcised his own son. He was already disobedient about the one concrete thing God had asked of them.

Ziporah understands immediately what is happening. She acts without hesitation. She does what Moses has failed to do. And the threat passes.

What God is saying to Moses in this moment — and what he says to us — is this: if you are going to be about my plans and my purposes, I require all of you. I do not accept half-heartedness. I do not accept lukewarmness. I will spit it out. Walking with me is a one hundred percent venture.

Come, and die, and follow me.

That is the same call that comes to you and to me. God invites you — into his kingdom, into his plan, into his purposes. But it is not a hobby. It is not something to dabble in or sample alongside everything else you are already doing. God's call on your life is a call for all of you.

Will you respond?