

Exodus 3:1-15

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. 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. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." 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." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 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.

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, 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. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" 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." 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 his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, 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.

I cannot think of another time when our nation has been being shaken by so many natural and human-made disasters at the same time. Our hearts and prayers this morning must certainly be with those dealing with the devastation of Hurricane Laura, an event the size of which Louisiana has never experienced. The people will be digging out and rebuilding literally for years and the region will never be the same. At the same time, complicating the lives of these poor people is the specter of Covid-19 and all the potential for killing infections and permanent health damage.

We cannot forget that some of the intensity of this storm must be attributed to the phenomenon of global warming — unquestionably also intensifying the wildfires in California and both droughts and floods around the world. Furthermore, all of us have friends and family, perhaps even ourselves, who are out of work during this pandemic and are worried about where their next meal is coming from or if they can stay in their homes. On top of all this is the strife generated by our nation's ongoing dance with systemic racism, which breaks people's spirits and claims the lives of fathers who are shot dead by police in front of their own children.

And yes, friends, adding to the misery is an American government seemingly incapable of or disinterested in responding to any of this, denying that pandemics, climate change, unemployment, and race relations are even things to worry about. After all, this is what happens to losers, isn't it? America is a nation of winners, especially if you happen to be white, male, and wealthy.

The world is a very confusing and troubled place right now and it appears that one solution to the mess we are in is to live in fear. Some leaders call us to retreat from our many troubles and put our trust in those who say they will save us by simply making it all go away — make it go away, apparently, by just ignoring it all. If testing people reveals more Covid cases, stop testing them! If people are refusing to go back to work to the supposed tons of jobs out there, stop giving them unemployment benefits! If the planet is melting before our eyes, stop participating in organizations working to reverse the environmental damage that require us to make hard decisions on how to do it! If people of color and immigrants are protesting their treatment, shoot them, lock them up, and kick them out! Yes, if we give into our fears, our present leaders will indeed make it all go away — but in our heart of hearts, we know that ignoring what is going on will not make it go away.

I said that I personally cannot think of a time in our nation when so much was going wrong and the official solution was to ignore it all and surrender to our fear. Certainly someone also acquainted with

everything going wrong was Moses, the subject of our scripture this morning. Today we discuss God's call to Moses. But friends, God's call to Moses is not just a call to him — it is a call to us.

Consider the world in which Moses lived. Now at the time of his encounter with God, Moses himself was in pretty good shape — perhaps like some of us are. Moses really had a nice life. He lived peacefully far away from Egypt in the land of Midian. He was married and had a son. He worked as a shepherd overseeing a huge flock. There was very little in Moses' world to trouble him and as far as he was concerned, he was quite happy and content.

However outside of his world, back in Egypt where he came from, such was not the case. Moses, you see, was a Hebrew, a man whose ethnic group was enslaved by the Egyptians to build their cities and so much else. I should not need to tell you what a life of slavery is like. Imagine all the disasters happening in our nation right now and doubling them and tripling them. Moses himself was a survivor because when he was born, the Pharaoh ordered all the male children born the same time as Moses to be killed. Only God's intervention and Moses' mother and sister hearing the voice of God saved him. Moses went on to be raised like a son of Pharaoh, who apparently was unaware that Moses was actually a slave. Moses was well educated, a natural leader, and trained to be very comfortable in the halls of power.

But young Moses, prince of Egypt, never forgot who he was — a Hebrew slave. And when he personally witnessed one of his fellow slaves being abused at the hands of an Egyptian, Moses killed the Egyptian and fled Egypt, winding up in Midian, leaving it all behind, and forgetting about the terrible reality his people faced every day. Sometimes we forget that Moses was a murderer and a fugitive from justice. Not good things to have on your resumé!

But somehow, Moses could not run away from himself. Somehow, in some way, there was a hunger inside him, a desire to figure out his life and why he was in Midian, far from his people, safe and secure when they were not.

I wonder if there are times when we — you and I — have similar thoughts. One of the greatest poisons gripping us these days is the evil lie that we are self-made individuals — that we are where we are in life solely through our own efforts. None of us, none of us, none of us is, was, or ever will be self made. I don't recall any human being asking to be born. Therefore none of us had a choice in who our parents were, or where we were born, or our genders, or our races, or the physical condition of our bodies, or our intellectual ability. We did not control our early education. We had little control of the teachers, leaders, relatives, and other adults who helped and encouraged us with good words and examples — and yes, sadly, those adults who may have hurt or damaged us in some way.

In short, we are no different from Moses in the sense that our lives are mostly not the product of our choices and actions — quite the opposite, our choices and actions are the product of the many, many circumstances and influences and experiences we have had over the years. The question we should be asking is whether the people who we are today are merely the product of random events and interactions. Is it possible, all along the course of our lives, whether we were aware or not, something, someone much greater than ourselves has been at work. A something ceaselessly presenting us with choices and opportunities to fully utilize the vast array of our life situations to become whatever it is we are here on this earth to do.

It should be clear by now that Moses was uniquely qualified by his life experiences to be the one whom God would choose to lead the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. Who else but a man who was born a slave, but raised in the halls of power could operate in both worlds? Who else could speak to Pharaoh in his own language? Who else had a brother, Aaron, who was well acquainted with Hebrews, having lived his life exclusively among them, who could speak for Moses and advise Moses. And yes, once the slaves were freed, who else but Moses was familiar with the land outside of Egypt and could navigate the newly freed slaves to the Promised Land?

I AM Who I AM. When Moses met God on Mt. Horeb (or Sinai), it was the culmination of everything Moses had done and experienced throughout his life. For all those years, God had been preparing Moses, from the moment he was born. All the people he met, his education, his family, his ethnicity, his running away to Midian, and yes, even his murdering another human being — all of these things, over which he had only partial control — all of these things led him to go up the mountain for his encounter with God.

My friends, we are no different from Moses. If you are here today, you must at least partially believe that the course of your life, wherever you find yourself today, was not exclusively established by you. You might faintly acknowledge that whatever characteristics, physical, mental, and spiritual, that make you you, these were mostly out of your control. If you are here watching me today, you might be willing to consider, as difficult as it may sound, that there might be a being called God who is in fact responsible for the many twists and turns of your life and has guided you to where you are right now, sitting in front of your computer screen, listening to this message, whether you have known it or not.

This service of worship is no less an encounter with God than Moses hiding his face from God in the burning bush. God is calling us all the time. We may each have a burning bush experience, just like Moses, at any time in our lives. I have no doubt that all of us have had burning bush moments in our lives — we however, may not have been ready to recognize them or were too afraid to act on them.

Nevertheless, God will persist in encountering us. When God met Moses and told him that the time had come for Moses to return to Egypt and make God's will to free the Hebrew slaves a reality, Moses said, "No, not me." Of course he would. Of course any sane human being would. God was asking Moses to do something that was impossible for human beings — impossible for human beings, but not impossible for God. Moses was afraid and full of self doubt. In this day and age in our nation we are certainly afraid and full of self doubt. With all that is happening in our country and our world, our instinct is to be just like Moses and run away and be safe and avoid the mess surrounding us right now. That's all Moses wanted to do, wasn't it?

But God's reply is simple. God told Moses that God would be with Moses as he attempted the impossible. God called him, God knew him, God would not abandon him.

Hear the good news! God is also with you! God has a mission for you just as he had a mission for Moses. I have no idea what it is but I do know that everything in your life has been building toward this moment. This very moment. God will not ask you to free the Hebrew slaves, but I tell you that whatever God asks you to do will be as every bit as significant.

Moses knew the truth. Even as he was telling God he could not free the slaves, Moses knew, look back on his life, that indeed God had been preparing him for this moment all his life. Friends, God has been preparing you to do something — something great, something wonderful, something that you are also be best qualified person in the universe to accomplish. How do we know?

Because God reveals Godself to us in just two words: I AM. Indeed, what else can God be except I AM. Jesus repeatedly used I AM to describe himself: I AM the way, I AM the good shepherd, I AM the bread of life. I AM with you. I AM the light of the world. And "Before Abraham was, I AM."

The only question in life that truly matters is whether we believe God is I AM. When we accept that God is I AM and I AM states that I AM is with us and sends us into the world and never abandons us — then friends, everything else in life falls into place and everything else in life makes sense.

When Moses finally believed that God would be with him in his task to liberate the Hebrew slaves, he did not have a plan, he did not foresee how it would happen. He just trusted I AM to show him the way. As we in 2020 struggle to make sense of the chaos happening around us, we can believe that the same I AM who was with Moses is the same I AM who is with us right now. Trust, trust, trust. Where we are going, I don't know. What the answers are, I don't know. What the result will be, I don't know. But because I AM is with us, we have nothing to fear.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.