

August 30th, 2020

Exodus 3:1-15 “What’s In a Name?”

We’re going to be in the Book of Exodus for the next two months both in the lectionary and in Bible study starting this week, which I think is timely, because this is where we get to see how the children of Israel solidified their relationship with God to become a nation. We spent a lot of time in the spring and early summer talking about the differences between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdoms of the World. I think Exodus is a good starting point to see God’s first attempt to set the children of Israel apart from the rest of the world. Or as the Apostle Paul later explained, to “be in the world, but not of the world.” Exodus is the story of how God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and united them in the Sinai Wilderness so they could lay the foundations of being the “great nation” that God promised their forefather Abraham. As I said last week, this is the first power encounter between God and one of the most powerful earthly Empires in history.

The hero of this story is Moses, but as we saw last week, there were so many other people who took part in bringing him into the spotlight. There’s a bit of a gap between what happened last week and this week. Last week, we left off with Moses being raised as a “Prince of Egypt” by Pharaoh’s daughter. What happened in between chapters is that as an adult, Moses found out that biologically speaking, he was a child of the Hebrew slaves. He saw one of the Egyptian slave-drivers mistreating a Hebrew slave, so Moses killed him. Not wanting to face murder charges, he fled to the wilderness, got married and settled down as a Midianite shepherd. This week we find him tending his father-in-law’s flock where he encounters something incredible: A bush that’s burning but not consumed by the fire.

Now, before we get too far into this story, I want to stop for a minute and talk about something that we’re going to see a lot in Exodus. Exodus isn’t just the story of God’s people escaping from Egypt. It’s part of a bigger story that we find in the first five books of the Bible.

This is the story about how the Children of Israel went from being a scattered group of clans in Canaan, to slaves in Egypt, to being the fulfillment of God's promise to make them a great nation. The first five books of the Bible make it abundantly clear that Israel is different than *any* other nation in the ancient Middle East, especially in the way that God communicates with them and how they communicate with God. Every other nation in the Ancient Middle East received decrees and executive orders from their gods, and they went something like this – “Do as we say, or we’ll destroy you.” The way God communicates with Israel is by covenant rather than decree. Instead of, “Do this or I’ll *destroy* you,” it’s “If you do this, I will *ble*ss you.” This happened in God’s covenant with Noah and Abraham back in Genesis, and we’re about to see it again here in Exodus. But let’s deal with what we have in front of us today.

A covenant cannot exist until both parties have been properly introduced. Covenants in the Bible always start out with God making an appearance and issuing a call to a potentially interested party. According to the scripture that Georgia read, Moses is the one being invited into relationship with God. How and where does this happen? Out of the middle of a wasteland. Not in a vision. Not in a temple or any other traditional setting where people have divine encounters. The God of Israel meets Moses in the desert. And this isn’t the first time nor would it be the last time when God calls someone out in the wilderness in a nonreligious, nontraditional setting. God meets us where we are.

Here’s another thing to take note of – God does not call out to Moses until Moses investigates the burning bush. “When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’” And then it’s revealed that this fire isn’t just a vision. Moses is awake, conscious and aware of what’s going on. God has Moses take off his sandals because the place he’s standing on is Holy Ground. Moses has got to feel the ground under his feet to reaffirm that this is real. That’s when God is revealed: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” This isn’t a

messenger. This isn't an angel. This is God. And the ground where Moses stood is made holy because of God's *presence*.

So now it's time for introductions. Clearly God knew who Moses was, because God called Moses by his name from the bush. Moses, from the time he discovered he was a Hebrew, knew about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So when God identified as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. That's when God gave Moses a mission: "I've heard the cries of my people. I want to bring them out of slavery so they can go fulfill their destiny to be a great nation in a land that I will provide. By the way, Moses, *you're* the one I want to send to Pharaoh to persuade him to let my people go." Moses response? "Who the heck am I to persuade a Pharaoh to set the slaves that he depends on to build his empire free? And I'm not exactly in good standing with Egypt either!" God says, "Don't worry. I'll be with you. And once they're free, bring them back here to this mountain to worship." Then Moses asked God something that no one else had ever asked God. He said, "When I tell these Israelites that the God of our ancestors has sent me, they're going to ask me 'What is His name?' What am I supposed to tell them?" And for the first time, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob reveals the divine name. "Yahweh."

Now ... I say, "Yahweh," because that's how you pronounce the word in Hebrew. Folks in the Jewish faith will not say that name out loud out of respect. If a Rabbi or a Cantor or a worship leader is reading scripture out loud in public, when the word "Yahweh" comes up, they say, "Adonai," which means "Lord" in place of that word. Thirty years ago, when I could actually read Hebrew, if I were invited to read something from the Torah out loud in a synagogue, I would be tempted to say, "Yahweh" because that's the word right in front of my on paper. But I don't want to get kicked out of the synagogue, so I would say, "Adonai" instead. In most English translations of the Bible, anytime the word "Yahweh" comes up in the text, translators will insert the word, "LORD" in all caps, just so you know, "This isn't just plain old 'Lord'

as in ‘Sir,’ this is LORD as in the divine name that we will not write or speak out of respect.” Even in the Christian tradition. Everywhere else, we get LORD, *except* here in this story of Moses and the burning bush. This is where we get to see God’s name and know what it means. So most English translators interpret the Hebrew word “Yahweh” as, “I am that I am.” The problem with the Hebrew language, is that verb tenses are kind of ambiguous, which is fun if you’re learning Hebrew because there aren’t as many to memorize. Learning tons of verb tenses is what kills you in Greek. Not so much in Hebrew. So, “I am that I am” can also legitimately be translated as, “I will be who I am,” or “I will cause to be what I will be” or “I will be what I will be,” and my favorite, “I am who I will be.” So what does this say? Why is God’s divine name so important?

The Hebrews believed that the name of someone revealed the power of that individual. So to know one’s name is to know one’s source of power. Moses is saying, “You want me to do this impossible-sounding task, but I want to know what to tell the people when they ask who sent me. Where’s the power in your name?” God says, “You tell them ‘Yahweh’ sent you.” As I said, I like the translation “I am who I will be.” Because the “will be” in this case is, “I will be the one who frees my people from slavery in Egypt. I will be the one who delivers you to the Promise Land. I will be the one who fulfills your destiny to be a great nation. That’s who I am and who I will continue to be.”

Here we are in a VUCA world, which we learned last week means a Vulnerable, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous world. But ... we are standing on Holy Ground. How do we know this? Because the presence of God is what makes the ground holy. And God is present in all places. We are all standing on Holy Ground. And we all have a mission. To communicate the message, “I am going to free you from the shackles of that which enslaves you. I am going to deliver you from the power of the Empires of the Earth and the Pharaohs who keep you in bondage. I will lead you to a place where you will thrive, prosper and live a life of abundance.” Okay, but whose going to be *our* Moses? Who is *our*

deliverer? Well ... what's *our* name? Where does *our* power come from? First *Christian* Church. Emphasis on the "Christ" in "Christian." Jesus is our deliverer. Jesus is our salvation. But remember, all Christians are the bearers of Jesus' good news. We are the hands and feet of Jesus here on earth. We are the ones who carry out his ministry and mission. We, because of Christ, all get to play the role of Moses.

And sometimes ... okay, most of the time we're thinking, "Are you kidding?! Who am I to take on something like this? Who am I to take on the Pharaohs of this world?" God answers - "Again. You are standing on Holy Ground. Always. That means I am *with* you always, and I will be who you need me to be. In fact, that's my name. "I will be who I will be." Now and forever ... for all generations. Trust me. And set my people free."