

## **I Am Who I Am - Exodus 3-4**

Series: Out of Egypt - Exodus

Date: 14 June 2026, 2nd Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Exodus 3-4

A question that people often ask me is, "Why doesn't God show himself to me? If he did that then I would believe." It's a question I've asked and still sometimes ask myself. We all want to experience God directly in our lives in a way that takes away doubts and difficulties and makes believing in God and doing what he says easy.

Today we're looking at one of the most famous encounters with God in the whole of the Bible: Moses meeting God at the burning bush. God reveals who he is and he gives Moses a job to do. Through Moses God will save his people and speak to them. God's call to Moses becomes the model for his call to the prophets through the Bible. And we see it in Jesus' call to his disciples and to us. Jesus meets them and says, "Come, follow me." Today we'll look at those two themes in the text - Who God is and God's call. And we'll see that even with the extraordinary display of God's power, trust and obedience is not easy! Let's dive in.

### **The Burning Bush 3. 1-6**

We pick up the story with Moses tending the flock of his father in law Jethro. He comes to Mt Horeb which is elsewhere called Mt Sinai. In verse 2 we read,

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. <sup>3</sup> So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up.'

There's lots of cool things here that are referenced elsewhere in the Bible. The guys on the Bible Project call these hyperlinks, like when you read a wikipedia article and there are links to websites for more information. Here's one.

Fire. Genesis 3 ends with a flaming sword guarding the entrance to Eden now that humanity has been alienated from God's presence. Then when God cuts a covenant with Abraham, a mysterious smoking fire pot glides in between the pieces of the animals Abraham has cut in half. It's a sign of God's presence. Later in Exodus God will come down again on Mt Sinai in fire and smoke, and will then go before Israel in a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day.

Throughout the rest of the Bible God is described as a consuming fire.<sup>1</sup> But strangely the bush is not consumed. And this becomes a picture for God's presence among his people. The prophet Jeremiah says "[God's] word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in, indeed I cannot."<sup>2</sup> So too on the day of Pentecost tongues of fire rested upon the disciples and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. I remember seeing an Orthodox icon of Mary where she is painted red, called the Fiery Mother of God. It's a joining of this scene of the Burning Bush with Mary, who like the bush carried the presence of God inside her and yet was not consumed. It's an extraordinary picture of us who believe in Christ, because God promises the fiery presence of the Holy Spirit lives in us!

Let's return to the text. God calls to Moses from within the bush. Moses says, "Here I am."

<sup>5</sup>'Do not come any closer,' God said. 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.' <sup>6</sup>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.

It's not so much that this particular place is holy, so much as Moses is encountering the holy God in this place. Moses' hiding his face is something we'll see again in chapter 33.

God's introduction of himself as the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob reminds us again where we are in the Biblical story. Back in Genesis 12 God made a covenant with Abraham and promised that through his family all the families on earth would be blessed. That covenant was repeated with Isaac and with Jacob, and Moses and his father are part of this same covenant family, the children of Israel. God is the God who keeps his covenant promises.

### **The God who sees 3.7-9**

The words from the end of chapter 2 are repeated.

<sup>7</sup>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.

God is not uncaring, unaffected by the suffering of his people. He does stand at a distance. What does he say?

<sup>8</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 24.17, Deuteronomy 4.24, Judges 6.21, 2 Samuel 22.9, Psalm 18.8, Isaiah 30.27, 30, 33.14, Hebrews 12.29

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 20.9

Last week we saw that Exodus is about God's Rescue of his people, his Covenant with his people and his Presence with his people. All three themes are present here. This encounter with God is the beginning of God's movement to act on behalf of his people, to rescue them and to fulfil his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to bring his people to the land he had promised.<sup>3</sup>

### **Moses commissioned 3.10-12**

But how will he rescue his people? Through Moses. God says to him, verse 10:

So now, go. I am sending *you* to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.'

Moses is understandably somewhat taken aback. He fled Egypt after a failed attempt to intervene on behalf of his people. His response to God is the first of 5 where his surprise and reluctance escalates as he desperately tries to avoid God's call. His first response is to doubt himself.

<sup>11</sup> But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'

But actually who Moses is doesn't matter. What matters is who God is. And God responds with one of the sweetest promises that is repeated throughout the Bible: "And God said, "I will be with you."" This is a promise that Moses will hold on to throughout his life, even to the point of reminding God even when his people sin against him. It's a promise Jesus himself gives us at the end of Matthew's Gospel: "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."<sup>4</sup>

God calls Moses to trust him. God promises a sign, but one in the future. "When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

### **The Name 3.13-16**

But Moses asks God a second time.

'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?'

Moses is not just asking what is God called? He's asking, who is God? What is he like? His character, his reputation shown by what he has done? It's a question of who are you God and why should I trust you? And fair enough after generations of slavery.

Now we come to the heart of the chapter and the heart of God's revelation of himself in this text.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Genesis 12.1-3, 17.8, 26.3, 28.13-15

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 28.20

<sup>4</sup>God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’<sup>[c]</sup> This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

This phrase is notoriously difficult to translate. It could also be rendered, “I will be who I will be”. It is also related to the word which most English translations render L-O-R-D. This is God’s personal name. The Hebrew is four consonants Y-H-W-H, and most scholars think this was pronounced as Yahweh. But because of the third commandment, “You shall not take the Name of the LORD your God in vain” the Jews didn’t ever say the Name. Instead they said *Adonai*, which is Hebrew for Lord. Our Bibles follow that convention.

So how does this Name reveal who God is? Jewish commentator Nahum Sarna writes that this means God can only be known with reference to Himself, not by analogy to something else. Like the fire in the burning bush, he is self generating and self sustaining. We cannot name God. He names himself. We only speak about him in the way he has given us.<sup>5</sup> Although many contemporary commentators downplay the idea that the Name, “I AM” conveys the philosophical notion of Being as opposed to nonbeing, I think this can be helpful. The Name, “I AM”, tells us that God is the source of his own being, dependent upon nothing external from himself. He is the source of all existence and reality. Everything that exists is dependent upon him.

The Name, “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE” also tells us that Who God was in the past is who he will be in the future. He is absolute and unchanging. What he has promised he will do. Therefore we can trust him now and into the future. We can look to him for hope. So God says 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 for ever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.

The New Testament picks up the Name and applies it to Jesus. The extraordinary claim of the Gospel, is that the man Jesus of Nazareth shares in the being and identity of this God, the God of Israel, who alone is the source of life. So Hebrews 13 says, “Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever.” Mark’s Gospel opens with a quote from Isaiah that there will be a voice in the wilderness crying, “Prepare the way for the Lord”.<sup>6</sup> L-O-R-D. Mark says that Lord is Jesus. St Paul in Philippians likewise says that “every knee will bow

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<sup>5</sup> Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, Schocken Books, New York, 1996: 52

<sup>6</sup> Mark 1.3, cf. Isaiah 40.3

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps most clear are Jesus’ seven “I am” statements in John’s Gospel. You’ll know some of them. Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” “I am the bread of life.” “I am the good shepherd.” “I am the way, the truth and the life.” And, most clearly, “Before Abraham was, I am.”<sup>8</sup> As God revealed himself to Moses as the “I AM”, so he has now come down and revealed himself to us in the person of his Son Jesus, that we may know him and find life in his Name.

### **The God who promises 16-22**

Let’s return to the story. In verses 16-22 God tells Moses to repeat what he has told Moses to the elders of Israel. The elders will listen to him. Then with the elders he is to go to the king of Egypt and say that God has met with them and that they need to go into the wilderness and make sacrifices to the LORD.

But, [he says], I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him. <sup>20</sup> So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go.

And God promises that the Egyptians will give them silver, gold and clothing so they will not leave empty handed. It is as though this were a payment for all their years of hard labour. The stage is set for God’s rescue of his people.

Except for one thing. Moses.

### **A reluctant prophet 4.1-17**

After the burning bush and God revealing his Name, I AM, and promising to be with Moses, Moses still isn’t convinced. He asks God a third time:

‘What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, “The LORD did not appear to you”?’

And so God gives him two signs to show the people. First his staff turns into a snake and then back into a staff. Next he puts his hand into his cloak and it becomes diseased. Then God heals his hand. Both of these prefigure what is coming in Exodus and beyond. God will send snakes and disease to call his people to repentance, to listen to him. Moses’ staff will feature again and again. In the short term there will be a contest between the gods and magic arts of the Egyptians, and Moses and the God of Israel. And that will begin with the third sign God promises, turning the Nile to blood.

But Moses has still further objections. He says to God a fourth time:

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<sup>7</sup> Philippians 2.11, cf. Isaiah 45.23

<sup>8</sup> John 9.5, 6.35, 10.11, 14.6, 8.58

‘Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.’

The eloquence of Moses’ request undermines what he is saying. And God is having none of it.

Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the LORD?<sup>12</sup> Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.’

Whatever Moses’ own shortcomings, that doesn’t matter. God will be with him. The Hebrew literally reads, “I will be with your mouth.”

And now we discover what has really been going on for Moses. God is calling him, but he doesn’t want to go. He says to God a fifth time, ‘Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else.’

Then God’s anger burns against Moses (note that picture). But rather than consuming him, God graciously sends his older brother Aaron to join him in this mission. He will be Moses’ mouthpiece, even as Moses will be God’s mouthpiece.

Just as an aside, there’s a beautiful interplay between God’s sovereignty and human frailty. The text presents God giving Aaron as a response to Moses’ reluctance to accept God’s call. And yet, at the same time, Aaron is already on his way as part of God’s plan.

As we look back over these chapters we see that Moses’ questions to God were not just for Israel, they were for himself. He is having trouble believing God, despite the incredible signs that God has shown him, and despite what God has revealed about himself. I think that’s because the problem for Moses, and for Israel, and for us, is not in the end an intellectual one. It’s that Moses knows God’s call requires commitment. It means shouldering responsibility. It means leaving his old life behind and following where God leads. It means surrender. It means trust and obedience. It means, in Jesus’ words, denying yourself, taking up your cross and following him.

The problem for Moses and for us is that you’ve got to die to follow God’s call. But what does God promise? I will be with you.

What is God calling you to do? Maybe it’s to come and follow Jesus, and become his disciple. To trust him and obey him. Will you hear his call? Let your excuses go and surrender to him. Maybe it’s to lead in your family, to not be a passenger, but to take responsibility and step up as a husband, as a wife, as a father, as a mother, a grandparent, a brother or sister. Will you hear his call?

Maybe it's to lead in your workplace, at uni or at school. To stand up and be counted for Jesus. To serve those around you. To take responsibility and do the good God has given you to do. Will you hear his call?

God called Moses to go. Maybe he is calling you also, to lead God's people, to serve in his mission. Will you hear his call?

The God who is Life itself, he will be with you. The God who sees and hears and has compassion on his children, has come down to be with you. Jesus, is the same yesterday, today and forever, and he will be with you. The God of fire and power he is dwelling in you by the Holy Spirit and you are not consumed. The God who made you and has given you gifts will help you do what he is calling you to do, because his power is made perfect in your weakness.