



Sunday 7th January 2018

Exodus 3: Moses and the Burning Bush

¹ Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² 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. ³ So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight-why the bush does not burn up." ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." ⁵ "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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-the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁹ And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. ¹⁰ So now, go. I am sending 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 And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

This morning we are kicking off the year with a new sermon series that has been on my heart for ages but actually feels so right that we are starting it today. God's timing is perfect so I'm excited to see where God is going to take us over these next few months together. The series is called *1-2-1 with God* because we are looking at the life of Moses and how he himself - and subsequently the entire nation of Israel - was shaped by his personal encounters with the presence of the living God. At the start of the New Year my prayer above all for us as a church is that this year would be shaped by God's presence.

Craig Groschell wrote a great book some years back which was simply called *IT: Why some churches have it, and some don't*. He describes churches which have vibrant life and vitality, where people find hope and vision, but he also describes those where life is dull, boring and structured to maintain the status quo. Now whilst he makes some practical suggestions on ways to avoid settling into uniformity, what he's actually talking about of course is the presence of God and the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. It's the same for us personally - unless we are regularly stirred up by the Holy Spirit and are on the look-out for encounters with his presence, we will eventually fall into a dry slumber with hardened hearts and parched souls. We find ourselves in the wilderness of weariness and the desert of disphoria.



And this is where we meet Moses in Chapter 3 of Exodus. Do turn with me to read it if you have your Bibles with you. Can I encourage you to bring them and look at the words as we read them. I promise you you'll get more out of it when you Verse 1 says he led his flock to the far side of the desert - the King James translates it the *backside* of the desert. Our story starts with Moses at rock bottom. He's working as a lowly shepherd, an exiled foreigner tending another man's sheep. A far cry from his former glory as a royal Prince and potential heir to the throne of all Egypt. It's worth reading chapters one and two of Exodus to pick up the remarkable background story - how Pharaoh's daughter rescued a Hebrew baby from a basket floating in the Nile, raising him as a Royal prince in the Palace of Egypt. But when Moses grew up and chose to stand up against the oppression of his own people he ends up murdering an Egyptian and fleeing for his life to Midian. There he married the daughter of a foreign priest and lived in exile for 40 years as a stateless nomad.

As Bob Saffrin puts it:

He was the child of a slave, but son of a queen

He was born in a hut but raised in a palace

He inherited poverty but grew up in wealth

He was a leader of armies who tended the flocks

A hot-headed murderer who became the meekest of men.

So we meet Moses in the desert place, a confused broken has-been, eeking out an existence with only the memories of hopes and dreams to keep him company with the sheep. I wonder how you are doing in your spiritual journey today? Are you excited by 2018 and all the promise it holds? Or are you washed out, dried up and clinging on just hoping that you'll meet God again one day? Well listen up because this story gives hope for all of us, because it's in the desert place that Moses encountered God's presence in a remarkable way and received a call that would change his life forever. Moses went up to Horeb the mountain of God - possibly located in modern day Jordan near Petra – and there he saw flames of fire in a bush that did not burn up.



Now fire is so crucial for human flourishing that it's one of the essentials on any survival course, but it can be a mysterious danger to us too. Whilst thankfully no-one was hurt, the huge fire at Bristol University yesterday has caused millions of pounds worth of damage.

Back when I was living in Cheltenham my friend and former colleague Keith Hitchman moved into a house where a section of the back garden was rather overgrown. He pondered what to do about it and then decided that the best course of action was to burn it. Now under different circumstances the plan might have worked but Keith thought he would get the fire off to a good start by dousing everything in petrol first. Don't try this at home kids! It was when Keith arrived at Church the next day with singed hair and eyebrows that we realised he had experienced what you'd call 'an all consuming fire'!

Fire destroys, but it also transforms and purifies. It is wild and unpredictable but it also brings warmth and comfort. We need fire but it cannot be taken for granted. Hebrews 12:29 says 'Our God is an all consuming fire'

Moses was intrigued by the amazing sight of the burning bush not burned up and crucially he went over to investigate. Being a follower of God requires searching and enquiry – if we are never willing to ponder and wrestle with the bigger questions of life then maybe faith can never flourish. The image of the bush burning but not being consumed is a metaphor for the paradox of the judgment and mercy of God. Lamentations 3:22 says: 'Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. His mercies are new every morning.' Jesus, who died for us to defeat sin and bring forgiveness is the one who also said 'I have come to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled!' God is a good, good Father but woe to us if we treat him as our servant.

When the Lord saw that Moses had gone over to look God called to him from within the bush: 'Moses, Moses!' And like Abraham, Jacob, the boy Samuel and Isaiah a little later in history, Moses replied 'Here I am' – He used the word *Hineni* which is more like 'At your service!'

'Do not come any closer,' God said 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground'



Shoes are personal to us. They protect our feet and allow us to go places, they become part of our identity. To be in God's presence requires reverence, respect and recognition. Taking off your shoes puts you in a place of present vulnerability – you can't just run away. It is a way of connecting with the moment, with our full senses alert to the presence and holiness of God. It's not about us. God told Moses 'I am the God of your fathers' and Moses hid his face. In that moment of vulnerability, without his shoes and with his face hidden he humbled himself before God

Louis Giglio put it this way: It's where Moses realised 'I am not, but I know I am'.

By asking Moses to take off his shoes, God is instructing Moses for in the art of humility. By highlighting the centrality of humility, God is establishing a pattern for future generations.

Humility and faith are inseparable.

In that moment of humility Moses began the journey of transition from a pauper-prince to priestly-prophet. Thomas Merton said this "In perfect humility all selfishness disappears and your soul no longer lives for itself or in itself for God: and it is lost and submerged in Him and transformed into Him." Perhaps you could try taking off your shoes when we pray for the spirit of God to come later in the service. Maybe that sense of vulnerability will make us more aware of his presence.



Once Moses was fully tuned in to the gravity of God's presence, he was ready to receive his calling: 'Go! I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.' Jesus gave a similar call to His disciples in Luke 10:3: Go! I am sending you out like lambs amongst wolves. He extended that call to all believers at the Great commission: Go! And make disciples of all nations

Are we up to the job? Do you feel capable of influencing the nations? Did Moses? Look at his response in verse 11. Moses said to God 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' And God replied 'You've got to search for the hero inside yourself!' NO! God's reply was this 'I will be with you' If we feel skilled and capable then maybe that is a warning sign that we might be trying to do things in our own strength. An empty vessel can be filled. God wants to fill us with his Spirit. When Paul felt weak and asked God to take away his weakness, it says in 2 Cor 2:19. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. It is his presence that changes everything. It is his power that transforms lives. It is him who can do it.