

GOD CALLS MOSES

Exodus 3:1-22

Today's reading from Exodus chapter 3 is apparently a simple story about God's call of Moses to go and lead the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt, but when we look at in more detail we'll see that it has much to teach us – so please open your Bibles at page [***] so that you can follow it along with me as we study it together.

Over the last two weeks we've been hearing about the background to this story, but I think it might be helpful if I give you a brief summary. Moses was an Israelite, but he had been brought up and educated as one of the Egyptian ruling elite. He had seen the suffering of his people in slavery in Egypt and had always known that he would be involved in their deliverance, but he was impulsive. He got ahead of God and developed his own plan and his own timetable. The result had been that he killed an Egyptian overseer and was forced to flee for his life. Moses' life was divided into three periods each of 40 years, the first 40 he spent in Pharaoh's court, the second 40 in the desert and the third 40 as leader of the Israelites. Where our reading commences he has just spent the last 40 years in God's school of the desert – he must have felt totally abandoned by God and totally useless to him. In Egypt Moses had learned about worldly leadership, in the desert he has learned about spiritual leadership. So his time in the desert has not been wasted and God is now about to call him back to his deliverance ministry. Let that be a lesson and a comfort to us all. God can use us even after we've failed him and He can even make use of our failures in His plans. So we mustn't give up when we fail, but repent and remain open to God's leading

Verse 1 tells us that Moses was now so closely identified with his own ethnic people, that he was willing to serve as a shepherd, a position that no Egyptian would ever have agreed to serve in because shepherding was loathsome to the Egyptians. The fact that he was tending his father in law's flock suggests that he had not come into substantial means of his own. In verse 1 we also see that Moses was

in a very remote place – the far side of the desert. Apparently he had gone West from Midianite territory, many days away from home to enable his sheep to take advantage of the high grassy slopes on Mount Horeb. This was very unusual for Arab shepherds in those times, but Moses was a good shepherd and God had led him to his Holy mountain.

God loves to appear to us in unexpected places and in unexpected ways and he often appears when we're engaged in the ordinary things of life. There's no indication that God had ever previously spoken to Moses during the 14,000 days he'd already spent in the desert, but now verse 2 tells us that an angel of God appeared to Moses whilst he was tending his sheep in this remote place. The angel appeared in flames of fire from within a bush – although the second part of verse 2 and verse 3 tell us that Moses didn't immediately realize what was happening. He knew it was something unusual because the bush, which the Hebrew word tells us was a very small thornbush, didn't burn up, ordinarily it would have burnt up in a minute or so, but Moses didn't yet know that this was an appearance of God.

Fire is a common and useful image of our God, it's frequently a sign of God's presence. God wants to set His church on fire. His Holy Spirit came in tongues of fire at the first Pentecost which started off the church. Fire brings light, a light that enables us to see God. But fire does more than that. Malachi 3:2 says that "[God] will come like a refiners fire". In Biblical times a refiner put metal into a furnace and heated until it melted and all the dross and impurities came to the surface and the refiner would skim these off. The refiner would do this again and again, up to seven times, until the metal was clean and pure. He would know it was pure when he could see his face reflected in the molten metal. In the same way God refines us in his fire until he can see his image in us. Moses was refined in the fire of the desert and alienation from everything he had known. God will use the trials in our lives to refine us too.

Now God's call is a call to turn aside, to turn aside from our complacency and past failings, and here Moses decided to turn aside

and go closer to see what was happening. As he made this very initial response to God's call, God revealed himself further. That's the way God works, as we respond to his call he draws us further in to his plans and purposes. In verse 4 God called out to Moses in what was apparently an audible voice "Moses, Moses" and Moses replied "here I am". Notice that repetition of Moses' name by God. In ancient Semitic culture that repetition of the name was a way of expressing affection and friendship, so Moses realised he was being addressed by someone who loved him and cared about him. But God then teaches Moses something about the Holy nature of his presence in verse 5 even before God reveals exactly who he is. Moses has to take off his sandals, which in Semitic culture was done as an acknowledgement of a superior person when you entered their dwelling. In Eastern cultures, the removal of shoes to enter a Temple is also an admission of personal defilement and conscious unworthiness to stand in the presence of a Holy God. God knows that the Israelites will have to learn about his Holy nature from Moses in due course and he's also marking out Sinai and Horeb as "his place", so the very ground is Holy. We need to remember that our God is a Holy God and he wants us to honour that.

In verse 6 God finally tells Moses who he is – the mighty Yahweh, God of Moses' people and Moses hides his face. Later, God would allow Moses to see him in part – but not yet.

God then turns to matters which had been very much on Moses' heart in Egypt – the bondage and slavery of his people. In verse 7 God says that he has seen their misery, heard their cries and is concerned about their suffering. God is reassuring Moses that he has been watching this situation and that he is very much aware of what is happening. In this present fallen broken world, God does allow evil and suffering. But, God does care about the bad things happening in our lives, he does care about our suffering, even if he doesn't always act immediately – remember at this point the Israelites have been suffering in slavery for hundreds of years. We should never doubt God's steadfast love for us even in the darkest days. Corrie Ten Boom's sister Betsie never doubted God's love even when she was

starving and being beaten, beaten literally to death, in a German concentration camp. Corrie writes “May God grant you never to doubt his victorious love – whatever the circumstances.” Returning to verse 7, at this point Moses is probably thinking that’s wonderful, God knows what’s happening – maybe God will finally do something!

Then in verse 8 God tells Moses that he is going to rescue the Israelites and deliver them into a wonderful place – the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey – in fulfilment of God’s covenant promises to Abraham. A land flowing with milk and honey speaks of God’s provision for his people, because in those times animal products like milk and honey were seen as “free gifts” of animal and insect as opposed to grain which was seen much more as a product of human labour. At this point Moses is probably thinking “That’s wonderful, thank you Lord! But, now comes the sting in the tail as Moses gets his marching orders, look at verse 10:

“So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:10 NIV)

Moses himself has to bring about the release of the Israelites. No doubt Moses had been thinking about the situation of the Israelites for years, probably he had been praying for his people. This tells us something important about prayer, sometimes God may use US to provide the answer, or at least to be part of the answer to our prayers.

Verse 11 is often misinterpreted, because the sense of it doesn’t really come across in English. But in Hebrew, Moses’ “Who am I” (*mi anōki in the Hebrew*) is really a polite acceptance of an honour rather than an attempt to decline it. There is a parallel with the call of Gideon in Judges 6. God’s reply in verse 12 both promises help and guidance (I will be with you) and also promises success (when you have brought these people out). The “you will worship God” at the end of verse 12 is also important because in the Hebrew the “you” is in the plural – so God is saying that all the people will worship him, all will come to faith in the great I AM. There’s also a bit of a play on words here between the “am I” of Moses and the “I am” of God that we turn to next – the “am I” of Moses can achieve

nothing, but the “I am” can do everything. As Giles has been telling us the OT is full of plays on words and double meanings.

Moses does now start to protest a little bit and asks God what he should tell the Israelites God’s name is. He’s actually saying “who are you really” and “by what authority do I go”. In verse 14 God responds tell them I AM WHO I AM. In fact the Hebrew here could also be translated “I will be who or what I will be” – God is a dynamic God – and the I AM of the Hebrew could also be rendered “I cause to be”. God’s saying I am the one true God who can be whatever he wills, your authority is that of the one true God, the one who caused everything to be. In verse 15 God states his full name – Yahweh – that’s always rendered as LORD in small capitals in our modern Bibles. It’s not completely clear from scripture whether this name of God had been known to previous generations of the Patriarchs – but God is leaving Moses in no doubt here. Now names were of huge significance to the Egyptians who believed that the name of a God encapsulated his essential nature. Egyptian magical texts talk about the significance of knowing a God’s secret name which conferred power on the user, but our God is not constrained by pagan myths – his name is no secret, he freely reveals it.

In verses 16 and 17 God tells Moses how to summarise his mission for the Israelites and predicts their acceptance in verse 18. Verse 18 appears to recommend a rather devious way of presenting their request to Pharaoh, because they don’t really want to go on a three day retreat, they want to leave permanently. But, people of Eastern cultures use suggestive, gentle, restrained, and limited ways of making requests as opposed to simply coming right out and asking for what they want. We sometimes do that in English. So, “How much money do you have on you?” is actually a way of indicating, “I’m planning to borrow some money from you.” and we do it a lot with requests for time; “Have you got a second?” is not literal at all but really is a way of saying, “I’d like to take an indefinite amount of your time.” This is how “Let us take a three-day journey” functions in the speech Moses and the elders of Israel were to make to Pharaoh. The time they’re told to request is tiny compared to the time actually

expected. “Three-day journey” was an idiom in the ancient world for “a major trip with formal consequences.” Pharaoh would have heard it that way and would also have heard it as meaning “We want to leave Egypt for however long we choose.”

So, we have to understand Pharaoh’s refusal of their request later in the Exodus story in that light. He knew full well that they were asking to leave permanently with all their possessions. Thus, it’s no surprise that in verse 19, God predicts that Pharaoh will not accept the departure of the Israelites without compulsion and that God promises in verse 20 to strike the Egyptians through Moses so as to eventually cause Pharaoh to accept. Finally in verses 21 and 22 God tells Moses that he will make the Egyptian people favourably inclined towards the Israelites and that they will leave Egypt with many riches that the Egyptian people will give them.

Here we leave Moses in his encounter with God. He hasn’t yet accepted God’s call, but we know that he will eventually accept it and lead his people to the gates of the Promised Land. We don’t know why God chooses to work with and through people in this way, but we do know that he does. God has also called us. Just before his ascension Christ commanded his disciples to go out and bear his message as Luke records in Acts 1:8:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 NIV)

we are Christ’s disciples so this command applies to us. Just as God commanded Moses “now go” he commands us to go now and tell the world who he is, the one true mighty God who made everything in the universe, and that this God hears and sees and above all cares and wants to lead us out of our slavery and bondage to sin and into the Promised Land of eternal life with him.

Sometimes we act as if we expect God to wave a magic wand to solve the problems of the world and rescue the perishing, but he wants us to be his magic wand and go out in the power of His name to bring help

to the needy and to save the lost. Let's all do this more and more from this day forth. Amen.