

Moses, the Burning Bush & the God Who Is

(SHOES OFF) If you are just joining us today, we are three weeks into an extended study in the Exodus story – the foundational story of God's revelation and saving action in the Old Testament.

And today, we come to **one of the most significant events** in the Exodus story – if not in the Old Testament – if not in the whole of God's revelation in Scripture.

In truth, this is why I'm **preaching barefoot** today – because this is truly a story – an event in the story of God's revelation – **so holy** that all we can do is take off our shoes and bow.

In truth, that's what I'm praying will be the response that arises within all of us – in the light of God's revelation in Exodus 3.

Not that we'd all take off our shoes this morning, but that we would become **barefoot before God – barefoot Christians – barefoot worshippers** – in the light of what God reveals of Himself in Exodus 3. And I hope that will become evident as I speak...

Now, if you've spent any real time with this portion of the Exodus story, you'll know that Exodus 3 actually contains **two** very significant events: **1. The revelation of** God's Name. And **2. the calling of Moses** to be the means of God's deliverance of Israel.

And **both** of these are **so significant** that they each deserve their own Sunday. So that's what we're going to do. **Next Sunday**, we'll have a guest speaker take us into the calling of Moses and how it relates to God's call in our lives.

But this morning, we need to give our full attention **to the revelation of** God's Name.

And I'm aware as I say that – that for all of our songs about the beauty of God's Name – we don't often think of God having a name, do we? At least not until **Jesus**. Right? In Jesus, God now has a name.

But in Exodus ch. 3, we are invited to realize that God has **always** had a name – and **we need to know it**.

That's why we have this story – this account of Exodus 3 – because God **wanted** Moses (and Israel, and Egypt) to know His name...

And, *through this story*, that **we too** would know God's name.

So, let's start by just reading the story – **Exodus 3:1-15**

(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 wilderness and came to Horeb [Sinai], 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(s), 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 a sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you [plural] will worship God on this mountain."

(13) Moses said to God, "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?"

(14) God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

(15) God also said 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 forever,
The name you shall call me
From generation to generation.*

Let's pray...

So, what does the Bible mean when it refers to God's **Name**?

What are we saying when we say that God has a name?

Well, the most important thing for us to recognize is that in the Ancient Near East (as is the case in many places these days) someone's name refers to more than just the title by which they are to be addressed.

Deeper than this, someone's name represents **who they are** – their character, their nature and reputation. In the ANE, someone's name told you something integral about who they were...

Truth is, we use and experience names this way as well.

Honestly, if someone was running for local office yesterday and their name was **Trump** or **Kavanaugh**, **Kanye** or **Kardashian** – that would automatically influence our perception of them (for better or for worse).

Because these names now embody something. Those names bear **a reputation. A character...**

I'm sure every teacher in the room knows there are certain names you'd never give to your own child or want for a niece or nephew. The list of possible names is small for you because you have strong associations with many names – **right?!**

All the more so in ancient times, someone's name told you who they were – who they could be **expected** to be.

Which wasn't a new idea in Exodus 3.

Already in the Exodus narrative, we've learned that Moses name means "one who is drawn out", and his son, Gershom, means "a foreigner there" – an outsider.

As an aside: my daughter's name – Olivia – means bearer of peace – which is very true of her. But her name also means "elf army". Which we clearly didn't know till after we'd named her. But we'll see where it takes her!

But the significant of names also applied **to the gods**.

The simple fact that, in the midst of this story, Moses **says to God,**

(v.13) "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?"

This question itself alerts us to **two things**.

One, that Moses and the Israelites did not live in an irreligious, secular world – but a very religious, albeit, **pagan, polytheistic world**. Life in the Ancient Near East – life in Egypt – was **filled** with the worship of the gods.

Which leads to the **second** insight from this question – that these gods **all** had names... Names like Ra, Geb and Nut, Shu, Osiris, **Isis (who is depicted here)**, Set, Horus, Anubis, Khonsu... Gods who were known by name – who's character and reputation was known.

We'll get into this much more in a few weeks. But for now, we simply need to acknowledge that the thought of God having a name was no surprise to Moses.

Moses knew the names of **many** gods – and this knowledge **oppressed** him.

And I say that because it would have been a common belief that Israel was in slavery to the Egyptians because **their gods** – the gods of the Egyptians (Ra, Geb, Nut, Shu, Osiris, Isis and others) – **their gods** were more powerful than Israel's God. This is what the Egyptians would have proclaimed often and loudly. Understandably then, the names of the gods – Egypt's gods – would have **repulsed** Moses. Because **their names meant oppression for multitudes** (the Israelites and many others).

Ok, so **back to the story** -----

It would be easy to simply dive in at **v.7** – where God speaks and reveals His Name – but we need to start where the story starts – with the manifestation of God in the burning bush itself. For here, as one commentator has said, "**before God told** Moses who he was, he **showed him who he was.**" (Ryken, 70)

On the mountain – in the burning bush!

Now the funny thing is that though it's known as *the burning bush*, the one thing the text explicitly tells us is that *the bush wasn't actually burning!* That though the fire was in the bush – the bush was not in any way the fuel of the fire. *Do you understand what I'm saying?*

Though the fire *engulfed* the bush, it did not *consume* it... It was not the fuel of the fire.

Because of this, some suggest that we should stop calling it the burning bush, and instead, refer to it as the *fuelless fire!*

Which, could feel just like *semantics* – but I think this actually gets at something core here. Something core to what God is revealing about Himself to Moses – and to us.

Because this *fuelless fire* is more than just God's way of getting Moses' attention... It is itself a manifestation – a revelation – *of God*... of God's character... of God's nature... of God's Name.

This God is *a fuelless fire!*

In other words, He is utterly and completely self-sufficient and self-existent. He needs nothing and no one to give Him Life. Rather, God is the Source of all life for *everything and everyone else*... The Fire that sets *others ablaze*.

v.4 – "When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

Note right here that **this God knows Moses by name**. This God knows the name, not just of Pharaohs, but of a man who's made nothing of his life. A man forgotten by many others. A man who at times hasn't even known himself.

"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."

*(v. 5) "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is **holy ground**."*

This is the first time the word "holy" is used in the Old Testament in reference to God.

"Do not come any closer – Moses."

With these words – and this command – and maybe the heat of the **fuelless fire** – God reveals himself to Moses as **a holy God**. A God who cannot be touched. A God who stands apart – above – over – Moses – and us – and all...

The biblical word "holy" means exactly that – *set apart, distinct, in a different category that everything and everyone else*.

And we see this in the reality that although **God** has come near to Moses – he instructs Moses to **not come any closer**.

Because **His holiness is too much for Moses**. *As it is for us*.

Over the years, some Christians have made much of **the flames of hell** (as something fierce and not to be trifled with) – but I think it's even

more appropriate to speak of **the flames of God**... the flames of God's Holiness which burn against and burn up all that is unholy.

Moses had reason to stop where he was – **and take off his shoes.**

He was standing in the presence of a Holy God.

I love how one commentator says that **God was too holy for his shoes!**

Maybe. But more likely, Moses needed to take off his shoes because this was a sign of respect and honor.

To take of his shoes meant that Moses recognized that he was not the one in charge here. That he was just a **recipient** of God's gracious holy revelation and presence.

Moses had reason to stop where he was and take off his shoes.

But the story doesn't end there.

(v.6) Then God said, "I am the God of your father(s), the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."

Which, for us as readers, probably seems **obvious**. But not to Moses. In a polytheistic world like that of Moses – where every mountain and valley, city and river had its own god – *this was startling news*. A profound revelation of its own.

Though the Egyptian gods changed at times with the changing of the Pharaoh, this God speaking to Moses was **the same God** who met with, walked with, and spoke to his ancestors.

So, Moses had **a reference point** for this God – but still not **a name!**

At this, we're told, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

As Moses listened, **God continued...**

*(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. **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. And now **the cry of the Israelites has reached me**, and **I have seen** the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."*

(skip down to v.13) Moses said to God, "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?"

(v.14) God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: '**I AM** has sent me to you.'"

"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 forever,
The name you shall call me
From generation to generation.*

The LORD = YAHWEH.

In Hebrew, this word – God's Name – is spelled – "Yod-heh-vav-heh" - YHVH. But in ancient times, the **vav** was pronounced 'W'.

YAHWEH.

Most of our English Bibles render this name as **the LORD** – ALL CAPS – following the tradition of Jews down through the centuries who, in a desire to reverence this name, actually **replaced it** with *adonay* – another Hebrew word that means, "my Lord".

In truth, there is a long history to how this name has been used and misused, pronounced, mispronounced – which is interesting, but not worth our time right now. Except to note that whenever our English Bibles have LORD in all caps, this is the personal Name of God revealed in Ex. 3 –

YAHWEH.

And as many of our translations present – the word literally means:

"I AM WHO I AM".

God, what is your Name?

"I AM WHO I AM" or "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE".

Which, if we're honest, is, at first glance, kind of frustrating – if not ***very frustrating.***

As many have said, "I AM WHO I AM" is the kind of statement that raises more questions than it answers." (Ryken, 85)

And yet that seems to be the point.

Just like the burning bush wasn't actually a burning bush – but a fire that needed nothing outside of itself to fuel it – by saying that God's Name is YAHWEH – "I AM WHO I AM" – God is making ***forcefully clear*** that He is not defined by anything outside of Himself... by any comparisons we could make, or constraints we could propose.

He is not the son of Ra, or the consort of Osiris. He is not the sum of all of our highest aspirations, wishes or wants.

Which is what many of the gods of the Egyptians seemed to have been
– just the expression of the Pharaoh's *flawed* character – projected into the heavens. A god of **his own** making – made in his **own** image – and consequently, powerless to save him.

No, this God – the God who meets Moses in a fuelless fire on the mountain – is **YAHWEH – "I AM WHO I AM"**.

The God who **IS**. The God *who is* ***who He reveals Himself to be***.

A God who cannot and will not be contained or confined by any of our constructs. A God who is not in any way of our making.

No, He is **YAHWEH** – the God **IS** who He reveals Himself to be...

Which is to say that ***He does not ever have to take off His shoes before us***, and *our* wishes or projections of what we think He should be like.

No, YAHWEH is the One before whom **we** must take off **our** shoes – and bow.

And not only because He is holy – a fire that could burn us up – but because, as He reveals to Moses, because He is ***the God who saves!***

A God who **sees** the misery of his people... who **hears** their cries... who **cares** about their suffering... And not only that, but He is – **YAHWEH is** – a God whose care moves Him to **action**. He is a God who **comes down to rescue** his people... And who **draws and empowers people** to join Him in His rescuing work.

And if that wasn't enough, YAHWEH concludes this self-revelation with these words... (v. 15b)

*"This is my name forever,
The name you shall call me
From generation to generation.*

In other words, *this is who I am and who I will **always** be.*

For all eternity – this is who you can count on Me to be.

*As I was with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – so I will be with and for you
Moses – so I shall be **forever**...*

Holy and intimate. Sovereignly set apart over all, and intimately attentive and responsive to all... A God who doesn't need us to be satisfied – but who **wants** us. Who **loves** us. Who **knows** us by name and wants us to know His Name... A Holy God **who comes to save**...

A Fuelless Fire that burns for us.

No wondering Moses took off his sandals and fell to the ground in holy fear and worship!

And yet, if we are honest, don't we often want or expect God to take off His shoes and bow to us – to **conform to** our shifting convictions, values and wants? Don't we often want to and attempt to **name God**?

Truth is, we all do.

And we see the evidence of this when we look at God and find **little** that **stands out** – little that sets Him apart – **from us**.

He wants what we want.

He hates what we hate.

He doesn't make a big deal about things we don't care about.

He votes our way.

*He doesn't **like** our sin, but what He really hates is **that** sin – which is always the sin of someone else.*

If when we think of God, he doesn't seem that holy – and by that I mean: **not that different to us** – then it's likely **we've named God** – and in so doing, have subtly or not so subtly declared ourselves as Lord... and God as our subject...

But, if Exodus 3 tells us anything, it is that **God will not be named by us**. For **the One who names is the One who saves**.

Tim Chester, a contemporary British pastor and theologian, says it well. He writes,

"Today, people like to define God for themselves. Think about people who say, "I'm not religious, but I'm spiritual" or, "I think God is like..." What they're saying is, "I don't want anyone to tell me what to think about God. I'll decide for myself what God is like. I'll imagine him or her or it whatever way I choose"."

And before any of us cheer with an "Amen, go get em", he continues:

"Christians are not immune to this. Of some aspect of God's character or Christian truth we might say, 'I don't like the sound of that.. I just don't think God is like that.' It might be his judgment, or his sovereignty, or his standards... [whether too strict or too forgiving]... We make a god **in our image** and he becomes a fluffy god—a god who suits **our** desires but cannot help us when we are in need." (28)

A God who may take off His shoes for us – but who cannot save us.

Because any God of our making is **no God at all**.

At least not a god who can save.

Again, to quote Tim Chester, "What you or I or anyone wants to think about God doesn't change who God is. God is not a concept that we can shape as we choose. God **IS**."

He is who He reveals Himself to be.

Before whom, all we can do is take off our shoes and bow in reverent fear and worship.

And thank God **He IS** – thank God **God is Who God is...**

YAHWEH – the God who doesn't need us to be satisfied – but who **wants** us. Who **loves** us. Who **knows** us by name and wants us to know His Name – **the Name that is above every name**.

→ **The Name by which we can be saved...**

How? How does God's Name save us?

Because, as Exodus reveals to us – this God – YAHWEH – is the God who saves... It's in God's character... it is integral to who He is.

And we see this most clearly – **in Jesus** – whose life and death is the perfect and complete revelation of YAHWEH.

As the author of the NT letter to the Hebrews says – (Heb 1:3)

"The Son [Jesus] is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."

Jesus – the Fuelless Fire – who's word sustains us. Who is the Face of the God who has a Name.

Once again – as we attend to God in Exodus, we find the story pointing **beyond itself – to Jesus** – *the Name that is above all Names...*

*"that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is **Lord**, to the glory of God the Father..."* (Philippians 2:10-11)

That Jesus Christ is **Lord**.

Before whom, all we can do is take off our shoes and bow – **and be saved.**

Will we?

Let's pray -----

O LORD, forgive us for the ways we so often treat you as a God we can name – who will take off His shoes for us and bow to our finite and, at times, distorted perceptions.

O LORD – save us.

Save us from any and every thought or desire that leads us to remake you in our image.

O LORD, open us up to receive Your revelation – that we might know You as You are – and bow in worship...

*In the **name** of Jesus, we pray.*

Amen.

Invitation to the Table --> **let us come to Christ – barefoot.**