

*Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c, Exodus 3:1-15*  
*Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway*  
*September 3, 2023*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 19th century poet.

Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God,  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

### God, Who Knows Our Name

Moses and the burning bush. It is one of those seminal moments in our scripture, one of those stories, one of those events in our faith history, on which so much of the rest of our story is built. Here we get the story of an encounter with God! Not only that, but it is an account of a direct, no-doubt-about-it call. How awe-some in the best sense of the word, take-our-breath-away, life-changing, awe-some is that?

Before we approach this holy ground on which Moses is standing let me set the scene just a bit.

You may recall the story of Joseph that we find in the end of the book of Genesis. That was the story of how God's chosen people came to be in Egypt. In Genesis remember, we have the stories of beginnings, the story of God's establishment of the covenant with the people through Abraham - the establishment of relationship between God and human kind, and then the stories of how God's people, the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, grew and related to one another and to the people around them.

At the end of Genesis we learn of Joseph, one of Jacob/Israel's sons who came to a position of great power in the land of Egypt and brought his parents and his brothers and their families into Egypt in order to provide for them and protect them from famine in the land.

When the book of Exodus begins several generations have passed since Joseph and his family came to Egypt and now the decedents of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are many in number in the land. They were, as it states in Exodus 1:7, “fruitful and prolific.”

Because of their number and strength however, they threatened those in power in Egypt. And so the Israelite people were enslaved. Chapter 1, verse 8 and following of Exodus explains, “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” The enslavement was, as enslavement is, oppressive, unjust and cruel.

Now Moses was born a slave in Egypt during a time when boy slave babies were killed outright to keep the slave population in check. Moses however escaped this fate through the shrewd work of his mother and sister, and instead Moses grows up as the adopted son of the Pharaoh, in a position of privilege and protection. He does not forget his birthright though and one day, in a fit of fury as he witnesses the beating of a slave by an Egyptian, he kills the Egyptian. With this he is wanted for murder in the land and so must flee.

Here a new chapter begins in Moses’ life. There are a grand total of seven verses in the second chapter of Exodus that cover this period in Moses’ life. He settles in the land of Midian. He marries, settles down, becomes a shepherd, has a child. Has a life - but only seven verses worth.

There will however, be another chapter in Moses’ life. Several in fact. We get an inkling of what those might be in the last few verses of Exodus, chapter two. Despite how it appears, Moses is feeling restless, unsettled out of place. He names his son Gershom which means alien, and says, “I have been and alien residing in a foreign land.” Moses had not forgotten who he is.

Then we come to the verses that link Moses’ story up to this point to the story we read this morning, and what is to come in the book of Exodus. *Here* is the reason for the burning bush.

We read, “After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cries for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac,

and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.” (Exodus 2:23-25)

Think about this for a moment. The exodus story, the *first* story of God’s salvation, God’s saving intervention in the lives of people, happened because the people called out of their hurt and rage, gave voice to their insistent hope. And God responded. Think about what this says about our relationship with God. Think about what this says about God’s relationship with us. As theologian Walter Brueggemann put it, “It is voiced grief that mobilizes God to act in saving ways.”<sup>1</sup> “God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.”

With this we come to the story of Moses and the burning bush - this story of the holy ground, of hearing the call of God in one’s life. It is an incredible story. One that reminds us again of how God works in *our* lives and in our world, and what a difference that can make. In the midst of the larger story - this story of power and injustice, of persecution, of the generations of the history of people’s choices, we find this incredible story of one person’s choices, one person’s life and one person’s encounter with God. And, when we read on in the book of Exodus, how the world changes because of that encounter.

The thing about this call story, as incredible and life changing as it turns out to be for so many, as *big* as it is, is that it has a familiar ring to it when we listen.

There are probably not too many among us who have actually heard an angel speak from a bush burning, but not consumed. There may be a few more of us who could tell of a time when we truly did hear God speak to us, felt the holy ground under our feet.

But even if the details don’t match precisely, the feeling we get when we read the story probably hit home at least to some extent.

First there was the nudging. I imagine the restlessness Moses was feeling was churning in his heart when he was out in the field, with one eye on his sheep and the other on the horizon as he wondered about his life and his future. Have you ever been in that place? Maybe not out with sheep but, you know what I mean.

In that moment he saw it: a angel in a bush aflame but not consumed! And he heard God’s call. He listened and he looked and paid attention to what was happening inside of him and around him and he understood that God was calling him.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, pg. 706

“Moses, Moses.” “Here I am.” The story notes with, no doubt, a great deal of authenticity, that Moses was afraid in this moment. Aren’t we often, when we sense God is calling us to do the work of God?

But Moses paid attention and he listened and heard the call. Sometimes it is clear, like Moses’. “I have heard the cry of my people. They are oppressed and suffering. You are the one I want to go to and speak to the powers. Call for change. Bring my people out.”

Sometimes our calls are just that clear. And we know it in our hearts. Sometimes they are not. We seek clarification. But we still know we are on holy ground. And we can not turn away. What have your calls been through your life? What are you hearing now?

The story continues. We read that Moses did what often seems to make it most clear in my mind that it is a call from God when I have my holy ground experiences: Moses resists. “No, no God, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? No, you can’t mean me.”

Walter Brueggemann says this well in his commentary on this passage. “We may imagine that we have an autonomous existence, that no one knows our name until we announce it, and no one requires anything of us except that for which we *volunteer*. The life of Moses in this narrative, as the lives of all people who live a narrative of faith, *is not autonomous*. There is this One who knows and calls us by name, even when we imagine we are unknown and unsummoned.”<sup>2</sup>

It is scary. We don’t want to do it. But we are not unknown or unsummoned. God does know us and call us.

The response Moses receives when he tries to argue with God is oh so very familiar too. “I will be with you.” You are not alone in this call. That is it.

So often when a call comes from God we want so badly to have the assurance that things will all work out, don’t we? That we could have a play book, a script, a road map, God’s name on the dotted line to assure us, and to show anyone else who might question us.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, pg. 719.

But this is what we get. “I will be with you.” For us as Christians this response takes human form in the person of Jesus Christ. “I will be with you.”

There is no better response.

As Elizabeth Barrette Browning reminds us, Earth is crammed with heaven and every bush afire with God.

May we see the burning bushes in our lives, hear the voice of God, take off our sandals and listen to God in our lives. And know that whatever the call may be, the ‘I will be with you’ is there as well.