

Exodus 3:1-15

August 30, 2020 Sermon

"The God Who Is & Who Will Be"

Randy Smith

When I lead a Bible study, and we come to a passage of Scripture like today's OT reading, I tell the group to **mark** the passage in their Bibles in such a way that they can easily *find* and *return* to it in the future, because finding and returning to it will be something they will *want*, and actually *need* to do, on multiple occasions. **Why?**

Because it is a "**touchstone**" passage of Scripture. The term "touchstone" has to do with testing, and revealing the **genuineness** -- the **authenticity** -- of something, originally the presence of gold in an alloy. But, in this case, it has to do with testing and revealing the **genuineness** -- the **authenticity** -- of our **perspectives** on God, and **so** on ourselves and other people, and of our **lives** in relationship to God, ourselves and other people -- how we actually **live**, actually spend our time, our money, our energies. A "**touchstone**" passage of Scripture helps us determine if our perspectives and moral practices are in **greater**, or **lesser conformity to**, and **congruence with** what God wants, for us, and for the life of the world?

The story told here in Ex. 3:1-15 will always help you answer these centrally important questions.

Now, of course, we will have to deal with the large "**stumbling block**" that is here in the story, for all of us, and it's **not** the **burning bush**, the bush which "**blazes**" but is not "**consumed**" (v. 2). That is certainly "miraculous".

But the **real** stumbling block here for us **modern** types is the very notion of a God such as the one presented here, a God who is Creator of everything and everyone that exists, but is **distinct** from -- **other** than -- that creation; a God who inhabits what we humans call the "eternal", but who, at the same time, **sees**, **hears**, **knows** about the **unjust** sufferings of human beings on the earth -- a **particular** people in a **particular** time and place; and then, **finally**, a God who "**comes down**" -- **into** human history -- in order to **intervene**, to **change** the course of that history.

We moderns struggle with a God such as this because, in our culture, we have all been **so well trained** now, for the past 200 or more years, to understand that the world we can know through our five senses is -- **really** -- all the world there is. (You're still free to hang on to a God who doesn't fit these parameters, but only for purely **sentimental** reasons.) There is, i.e., no God **beyond** us, or **outside** of us, therefore, to "come down" and **help** us. Such that the best that we humans can hope for in this life is the best we humans can do in this life.

We, **ourselves**, are -- i.e. -- our **only hope**.

What this now deeply embedded conviction has led people to is, **one, frank denial** that there is a God (*usually* accompanied by a **strong, noble-sounding appeal** to their fellow human beings to therefore try *harder* to do *better*); or **two**, the ever popular "**agnostic**" view that, well, we really just *can't know for sure* if there is a God or not; or, **three**, the conviction that there **is some sort of God**, but only in some very vague "spiritual" sense, a God who, in any case, ever has anything to do, *really*, with the world; or, **four**, the conviction that there **is indeed** a God, who "loves us and has a plan for our **individual** lives", and who is available (always "on call", 24/7) to help us achieve this life plan ("God is my **co-pilot**" or "business partner"), which in **every** case means I become more successful and prosperous.

This is especially popular nowadays.

This morning's story from the Bible, needless to say, **entirely contradicts** all of these notions about **who** God is, and **how** God is, perhaps **most** of all in this last case, which in truth represents a **profound trivialization** of the God the Bible, the God who is actually **not** available to be **commandeered** for what are actually **our purposes** in life, but whose **enduring call** to us human beings is rather for us to make ourselves **available** to be **commandeered** for **God's** purposes in this life.

As Moses **stumbles** one day into discovering.

With no thought but to **find** good pasture for his flocks, Moses is **found** one day by God, and -- very suddenly and unexpectedly -- he discovers the *ground* he just happened to be standing on is "**holy ground**" (v. 5), *viz.*, is **God's** ground, **set apart** by God's **presence** for God's **purposes**, such that Moses is now **caught up in** that holiness -- entirely **encompassed, enveloped** by it.

And the first thing he must now do is recognize and submit to this holiness created by the presence of the God who is other than, and beyond us. And it's really a matter of "Do this, or else!" He must take off his sandals, the feet being long considered in Middle Eastern culture to be the dirtiest part of the body (cf. President George W. Bush having to dodge the Iraqi journalist's shoe in 2008).

Having gained Moses' full attention, the Lord now unfolds his **full credentials**: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." ***This is may be the most important part of the text.*** Here, in Ex. 3, we are taken **far** back in time, to Gen. 12, and God's call to Abraham, and covenant with Abraham, to make of *him*, and what God promises will be his **innumerable offspring**, a new and special family whose **sole reason for being** will be to bring **blessing** to all the other families of the earth. "And **you**," the Lord tells Moses, "are the man I choose to revive that Covenant by **reviving** the Covenant People of God, to **continue** their mission -- **beginning** with persuading Pharaoh to let God's "people go" (v. 10).

But Moses **immediately protests** his assignment, his **first** protest being one I suspect **all** of us can easily understand and identify with. "**Who am I** that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Isn't this the way **all of us** feel? Whether through sermons, or Bible study, or the compelling Christian witness of others, we come to learn of **God's design and desire** for the life of the world, and we come to hear God's **summons** to **us** to be a **part** of **restoring** that design to the life of the world or, i.e., making the world a **place of blessing** instead of a **place of curse**. But then we think of the **enormity** of the task. And then we think of the kinds of **sacrifices** we would have to make. And then we ask God -- in our own ways -- "Who am I?" Who am I to do this? And why **right now**? Or we look at the **congregation** we are a part of, and we think: who are **we** to try to do this? Shouldn't God expect that only the churches with more members and more money will be able to respond to such a summons?

It's important at this point to **consider** that Moses -- whose name means "drawn out of the water" -- was given this name by his adoptive mother, the daughter of Pharaoh, when she found him in his basket, floating on the river Nile. *Viz.*, he is a **very special person**, one for whom God has **provided** in **extraordinary** ways. **That's** who Moses is. **That's** the answer to his question of the Lord, "Who am I?" And *then* it's important to consider how **we** have been provided for in **extraordinary** ways to this point in life, have been **brought** through -- as the famous hymn puts it -- "**many** dangers, toils and snares".

Which is all to say that, should we be inclined to protest God's call to **us**, by asking "Who are **we**?", we need to remember this. That is who you -- and I -- and we are. **So, why not us?**

The only **consolation** the Lord offers Moses, as he sends him on this **fearsome** mission, is the promise that "**I will be with you**" (v. 12). But note that the Lord makes no promises -- *viz.*, gives no details -- about **just how** he will be with Moses. *Is it the case*, then, that working with the God of the Bible demands that we first just **trust** God to keep this promise -- of being with us -- and then go forward, in the conviction that the **needed** help **will** be supplied, **as and when** it is *needed*, but not before?

This -- what you might call an **uncertain certainty** -- when it comes to working with God in this life, is intimately related to **the name** God reveals here to Moses: "**I am who I am**". The name revealed here is, of course, *profoundly inexact*. But the God of the Bible is, nonetheless, telling the truth, because the name God reveals here is *fundamentally* a **verb** and not a noun. "I am who I **am**" can also be translated, "**I will be** what I **will be**." So, the God of the Bible is essentially an **action word** -- *viz.*, is always **happening**, and **causing** things to *happen*, to **change**, and to change in ways **previously** thought to be **impossible**, **always** causing things which are as yet **incomplete** to move toward some **completion** which God has in view.

Which is **critically important** if you are Pharaoh's **slaves**. Because, you see, Pharaoh represents **the power of oldness**, the *unchanging* -- and *unchangeable* -- "**conservative**" status quo: *Pharaoh* is in charge, and *you* are not, and this is the way the gods which validate Pharaoh's rule **want** it to be. Forever and ever. Amen. If you're Pharaoh, or a member of the Pharaonic Party, this *perspective* on things, and this *arrangement* of things, is more than satisfactory. But, for the **slaves** of Pharaoh, "*This God*," as the brilliant OT scholar, Walter Brueggemann, says, "is **the very power of newness** that will make available new life for Israel outside the deathliness of Egypt" (*Exodus, NIBC*, p. 714).

This "**power of newness**" -- as you **may** have long ago already discerned -- is what is so sorely lacking in our world, our world which -- as I said at the start of the sermon -- has for so long now discounted the possibility of a God **other** and **beyond** us, and so a God **who** -- when we are at **the end** of all our human wisdom about how to *live*, and live together with others, and are on the verge of being **consumed** by the consequences of our **unwise** choices -- has **further** wisdom to give, and **unimagined "newness"** to introduce.

Because we discount this possibility, we turn to political parties and their figureheads to save us, even though -- most of us, I have to think -- **know** down deep that it's **a fool's game**, especially those of us who have been around a while. Those of us who lived through the **police brutality** on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, or the **wanton destruction** of the Watts community in Los Angeles, just months apart, in 1965, are profoundly **saddened**, but *can't* be profoundly **alarmed** by the **police brutality** and **wanton destruction** in the news over the last six months. Those who lived through Richard Nixon's "law and order" campaign in 1968 can, again, be *saddened* by, but not *surprised* at Donald Trump's "law and order" campaign in 2020. Across a span of 50 plus years, i.e., both the **diagnoses of**, and **prescriptions for** our society's problems on the part of our political leaders have not led us very far, it seems, toward national unity and collective prosperity.

And approaching half of all eligible voters (42% in 2016) have figured this out, and have just dropped out of the process.

One of the most **persistent prescriptions** I've heard, over many years now, for our nation's particular **ailments** goes something like this: "America needs to get back to God". And this is correct -- but likely not the way most of these prescribers mean it. **The God America needs to get back to is the God who is "I am" -- "the very power of newness"**. All the other gods we have, as a society, chosen to worship and serve instead -- *including* our **political ideologies** and **those who voice them** -- are just so many **idols**, the worship and service of which will **always** prove -- as the Bible makes utterly clear -- to be **finally** and **only**, destructive and self-destructive.