1-29-12
Sermon follow-up
Exodus 3:1-4:17
"Moses Meets God: The Story of a Sinner Finding Grace on Holy Ground"
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"Burning but not consumed" is a phrase with a lot of currency in church history, especially Reformed Christians. "Yet it was not consumed" is the motto of the Church of Scotland, while the Irish Presbyterian Church uses "Burning but flourishing." The symbol of the Reformed Church of France is a burning bush with a Huguenot cross. Various Presbyterian churches throughout the world (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, etc.) have used the burning bush as a symbol.

The great Christian mathematician and apologist Pascal knew what it meant to meet the God of fire (http://www.mathpages.com/home/kmath558/kmath558.htm):

> Shortly after the death of Blaise Pascal in 1662 at the age of 39, a servant was sorting through Pascal's clothes and noticed something sewn into a coat that Pascal had often worn. Out of curiosity the servant cut open the cloth and found a parchment, inside of which was a faded piece of paper. The parchment and the paper both contained, in Pascal's handwriting, nearly the same words. Evidently the paper was the original draft and the parchment was a carefully prepared copy. In addition to the text, both the paper copy and the parchment contained hand-drawn crosses. The words written on the original piece of paper (from an English translation given in Marvin O'Connell's book "Blaise Pascal, Reasons of the Heart") were
>
> The year of grace 1654.
> Monday, 23 November, feast of St. Clement,
> pope and martyr and others in the martyrology.
> The eve of Saint Chrysogonus martyr and others.
> From about half-past ten in the evening
> until about half-past midnight.
> Fire.
> The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.
> Not of the philosophers and intellectuals.
> Certitude, certitude, feeling, joy, peace.
> The God of Jesus Christ.
> My God and your God [in Latin, accusative case].
> Your God will be my God.
> Forgetfulness of the world and of everything except God.

One finds oneself only by way of the directions taught
in the gospel.
The grandeur of the human soul.
Oh just Father, the world has not known you,
but I have known you.
Joy, joy,,, joy, tears of joy.
I have separated myself from him._____
They have abandoned me, the fountain of living water [in Latin].
My God, will you leave me?
May I not be separated from him eternally.
This is eternal life, that they know you the one true God
and J.C. whom you have sent.
Jesus Christ._____
Jesus Christ._____
I have separated myself from him. I have run away from him,
renounced him, crucified him.
May I never be separated from him._____
One preserves oneself only by way of the lessons taught
in the gospel.
Renunciation total and sweet.
And so forth.

In the parchment, the concluding phrase "and so forth" was replaced with the lines

Total submission to Jesus Christ and to my director.
Eternally in bliss, in exchange for a day of hard training
in this world.
May I never forget your words [in Latin].

The parchment contained several other changes as well, and also noted biblical references for most of the lines. For example, the line "My God and your God" refers to John 20:17

Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father, but go to my brethren and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.

The next line in the paper version of Pascal's memorial is "Your God will be my God", and beside this he wrote simply "Ruth", presumably referring to the passage in the book of Ruth (1:16) where, following the death of her husband, Ruth tells her mother in law

Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: they people shall be my people, and thy God my God.

> In any case, November of 1654 was certainly a turning point in Pascal's life, because this is when he finally renounced his "self-serving" activities (including mathematics and physics) and resolved to devote the remainder of his life to the worship and service of God. He retired to the monastery at Port Royal and employed his talents in writing polemics supporting the Jansenists against the Jesuits. On the subject of his former pass-times he wrote
>
> Reason has its own sphere, mathematics and the natural sciences… but the truths which it is really important for man to know, his nature and his supernatural destiny, these cannot be discovered by the philosopher or the scientist. I passed a long time in the study of the abstract sciences, but the scant communication which one can have in them (that is, the comparative fewness of the people with whom one shares these studies and with whom one can communicate) disgusted me. When I began the study of man, I saw that these abstract sciences are not proper to man....
>
> Despite the significance of his conversion, according to most accounts he never once mentioned his "night of fire" to anyone, which is remarkable considering all his passionate devotional writing. He kept those scraps of paper next to his heart for the rest of his life to remind him of his experience on the night of November 23, 1654, and yet he never breathed a word of it.

In Exodus 3, God appears to Moses to announce that the time for the promised rescue of Israel has arrived. Everything that happens in exodus was foretold and pre-promised to Abraham. Indeed, God identifies himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (3:6, 15). The Lord has seen the suffering of his people and has compassion on them (3:7-8). God is not some distant, aloof, uncaring God, asleep at the wheel of the universe and immune to the pain of his people. He is not only sovereign over his creation; he is immanent, deeply involved in his creation. He is a God who loves his people, and who shows care, concern, and compassion. He hears the cries of his people and acts to rescue them in their hour of greatest need.

Further, this God is not just some generic deity, a non-descript "higher power" or "energy" or "life force." He is the personal God, the God with a story – a story to live and a story to tell. Indeed, God defines himself in terms of his story and identifies himself to his people in terms of his story. When he says he is the God of the patriarchs, he is identifying himself with those narratives, recorded in Genesis. He made promises to the patriarchs and now the time has come to fulfill those promises. In other words, God's story takes the shape of a promise-and-fulfillment narrative. God has promised to redeem his rebellious creatures, and he is about to show his word is his deed. And he's going to use lowly Moses as his agent. The one

time prince of Egypt, now a shepherd of Midian, is about to become the deliverer of God's people.

God naming himself with a narrative reminds me of Treebeard, an Ent (talking, walking tree) in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Like God, Treebeard's name is his story. He says, "My name is growing all the time, and I've lived a very long, long time; so my name is like a story. Real names tell you the story of the things they belong to." God "belongs" to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and they belong to him, so he names himself as their God.

(This is all the more important when we remember that the name "I am that I am" is not a new name for the Lord, but the explanation of a name that was already in use from the era of the patriarchs, YHWH. See Ex. 6:3. In Gen. 32, Jacob asked the Lord his name, but did not get an answer. Moses does.)

YHWH is called God's memorial name in 3:15, that is, the name we use when calling on God to keep the promises he has made. In the new covenant, Jesus has replaced YHWH as the memorial name. We memorialize the covenant before God by praying to the Father in Jesus' name.

The name "I am who I am" means that God is both transcendent and immanent. He is who he is – exalted above us, sovereign over us, unchangeable no matter what we do. But because he is who he is, he is also immanent, near to his people, acting to redeem them according to the promises he has made. Because he is who he is, his covenantal commitment to his creation will not change.

"I am who I am" is obviously a mysterious name for God. We should connect this name with passages like Mt. 11:27, 1 Cor. 2:11, and Col. 2:9. God is incomprehensible and inexhaustible. We can know him truly, but never fully.

God is fire. Like Lewis's Aslan, he is good but dangerous; trustworthy, but not safe.

We need protection from this God, for he is holy. But he provides that protection, for he is gracious.

The repetition of Moses' name in 3:4 is characteristic of call narratives, e.g., Saul's call in Acts 9; see also Gen. 22:11, 46:2, 1 Sam. 3:10, etc.

On the "plunder" the Israelites will receive on their way out of Egypt, see Deut. 15:13-14, Ex. 21:2, 26. According to God's law, slaves are to be given capital as "back wages" for slave labor when they are set free. It's restitution. The fact that the Israelites will ask for and receive parting gifts from the Egyptians proves that God's law is superior to Pharaoh's law. The Israelites really belong to YHWH and are under his law.

God gives Moses signs, perhaps in part for his own faith, but also to prove to the elders of Israel that he has been sent by God. Briefly look at each sign:

1. The serpent is a symbol of Egypt (e.g., Pharaoh wore a cobra headdress; Egyptians were known for snake charming). When Moses takes hold of the snake – by the tail no less! – it shows God stronger than Pharaoh (cf. 3:18-20, which only make sense on the basis of a very strong doctrine of divine omniscience and sovereignty). God will defeat Pharaoh, even if (or even as) he hardens his heart.

2. Moses' leprous hand is a sign that he is unclean and unworthy. Indeed, it is a sign that the people of Israel are unclean and idolatrous. But God promises to cleanse them. This sign reveals God's grace.

3. Turning the Nile to blood will be the first of the plagues on Egypt. Because the Egyptians ascribed divine properties to the Nile, this sign shows that God is greater than their gods (several other plagues are similarly targeted at Egyptian deities, so that the series of plagues can perhaps best be understand as divine warfare against the idols).

The signs show God will deal with every problem confronting Moses – the problem of Pharaoh's power, the problem of Israel's sin, the problem of Egypt's gods.

(Note there is a prior sign mentioned in 3:12. But it's very odd: The sign comes after exodus, when the nation as a whole returns to Horeb/Sinai to worship! What's going on here? It seems this is an indication that God wants Moses to live by faith; he doesn't need all the answers on the front end, he should simply trust the sheer promise of God to be with him and to fulfill the Abrahamic promise of deliverance. He shouldn't need a sign; the bare word of God should be enough to sustain him. It's as if God says, "You will the battle. The sign will be when you lift up the trophy in the victor's circle." Well, of course – by the time the trophy is lifted, you know you have won! But there may be something else here: The work of Moses will not be exhausted by the exodus. The people must ultimately enter the promised land, as God says in 3:8. So the sign fulfilled at Sinai will be a sign that God's program is indeed on track and the conquest of the land is just as sure as the release from Egypt. As it turns out, Moses needs signs even before he goes to confront to Pharaoh, which God provides in ch. 4.)

In 3:16, God says he has "visited" his people. The same verb is used for David inspecting troops (2 Sam. 18:1), a shepherd watching over his flock (Job 5:24), the Lord rescuing Sarah from barrenness (Gen. 21:1), etc. As Motyer says, "The present verse matches the expectations of Gen. 50:24 and represents the Lord as the God who comes to the aid of his people, who is aware of and sensitive to individual and national needs, inspecting, caring, and providing" (p. 72).

Moses is told to be God's mouthpiece precisely because his mouth is the weakest part of his body. He is told to proclaim the gospel to the Israelite elders, the good news that the time of rescue has come, even though the elders will be slow to believe. Pharaoh will resist God's demand to "let my people go!" The whole story of the exodus is a story of God overcoming one obstacle after another to accomplish his gracious purposes.

Moses expected the Israelite elders to have their doubts because the Israelites did not accept Moses as deliverer 40 years earlier. See Stephen's speech in Acts 7 for a proper interpretation of Moses' attempted act of deliverance.

When Moses stands before the burning bush, it's as if he in the most holy place. He is told to take off his shoes because he is on holy ground. The priests' uniforms did not include shoes when ministering in the tabernacle/temple. Moses is acting as a high priest in this passage; he is a holy one (a saint, or priest) with access to holy space.

Moses appropriately covers his face when he realizes he is on sacred ground. There is a kind of jubilant reverence appropriate to God's presence. American Christians tend to be entirely too familiar, breezy, and casual in the presence of God. We don't think we should ever how to bow, kneel, or cover our faces. But those types of postures can have their place, if we really understand the One with whom we have to do.

Of course, Moses could get close to God in the bush, but not as close as he might have wanted (3:5). Full drawing near to God is reserved for the new covenant (cf. Hebrews).

What does it mean for the ground to be holy? After the fall, the ground is cursed – but not in the sense that it becomes evil. The ground is good as part of God's good creation. But man is bad, and the ground is on God's side, prosecuting the curse against humanity. Thus, dust on the sandals and feet take on a symbol dimension – a

sign of the curse (cf. shaking the dust off sandals, footwashing, etc.). In the new covenant, the ground is in principle blessed, and should be an instrument of blessing to the godly.

The passage ends with Moses being told to take his staff. That staff will play a prominent role in the rest of Moses' career. While he will no longer be a shepherd of sheep, he will shepherd people.

Moses will request the Israelites be allowed to take a three day (!) journey into the wilderness to worship God. Moses doesn't need to request full release; this request will be enough to see if Pharaoh will acknowledge God's ownership of his people. It is, at very least, an initial "negotiating stance" – but it's clear from the passage as a whole that the ultimate goal of confrontation with Pharaoh is full and permanent release from Egyptian slavery.

By going to Pharaoh with God's demands, Moses is setting up a showdown between the Lord and the gods of Egypt. Whose slaves are the Hebrews, anyway? Assuming the Hebrews built houses (pyramids) for Pharaoh, the pattern of the book of Exodus as a whole is clear: they move from building pagan temples, to building the true temple for the true God; they move from slavery to Sabbath rest; they move from oppression to liberation. (Note: The book of Exodus also shows us how to build a civilization. Religious/Spiritual freedom must precede cultural, political, and economic freedom. The freedom of the gospel is the basis and foundation of every other kind of freedom….which is why societies that depart from God's word and God's ways always slip into dreadful forms of slavery and tyranny.)

Another way to look at this: Moses and Pharaoh will engage in "hand to hand" combat. Just look at the use of the word "hand" in this passage and throughout the book, and keep in mind that the hand is a symbol of power and authority.

Yet another way to look at this: It's not only a military battle, but a legal battle. Moses is God's attorney, pleading his case in Pharaoh's court.

We know the Israelites had fallen into idolatry in Egypt from Josh.24:15.

What are we to make of God conceding Moses' final request by allowing Aaron to accompany him? This is a sign of God's tender mercy to a weak servant. But it's also "plan B' in the sense that Aaron will be a second mediator, thus putting another

layer of mediation between God and his people. Moses will be a God to Aaron, which means Aaron will be a second mediator between God and the people, in addition to Moses. There is only supposed to be one mediator between God and his people, so this points to a "flaw" in the Mosaic covenant that will have to remedied. Likewise, later in Israel's history, we see that while God desired all his people to be priests, the Levites had to be set aside as a "veil" or layer of protection as the priestly tribe, and thus put more distance between God and the nation. God also had to put his law-word in a box (the ark of the covenant) to protect the people. The tabernacle had veils/curtains between God's holy presence and the people. Etc.

Moses moves from doubting himself to doubting his reception to doubting God. Moses moves from humility and legitimate concerns, to stubborn resistance, to outright disobedience. He makes excuses, he whines, he complains. He tries as hard as he can to skirt his assignment and escape God's call. He is the reluctant prophet. It's highly ironic: He's willing to defy God, but not stand up to Pharaoh! But how often do we do the same thing, foolishly fearing mere men more than God? How often do we resist God's call and God's vision for our lives, not realizing that standing up to God is far more risky than standing up to mere mortals?!

For parallels between this call story and other call stories, particularly Gideon, see Peter Enns' commentary, 114ff.

The Angel of the Lord is typically a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God. Note the pattern: The "first angel," Lucifer falls, so the Son takes his place in the old creation as an Angel. The first man, Adam, fell, and in the new covenant, Jesus takes his place, as the new and last Adam.

It's a bit of a stretch, but perhaps there is an analogy between the burning bush and what happens in Daniel 3, where Daniel's 3 friends are saved in the fiery furnace because of a "fourth man" (the angel of the Lord) in the furnace with them. Just as God was with the three young men in their afflictions, so he was with the Israelites in the furnace of Egypt. (Note that the period of Egyptian slavery is referred to as a furnace in several places in the OT.)

Moses' insecurity, self-doubt, and deep sense of personal inadequacy are all obvious. But where Moses is weak, God will be strong. Moses says "I can't do it," but God says,

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These notes are, among other things, “footnotes” to the sermon. There are several sources I’d like to thank for helping me craft Sunday’s sermon. First, James Jordan is the master of exegeting the Hebrew Bible, and helped me understand the riches of this text. If only I could have worked in more of Jordan’s exegetical gems! Second, thanks to Rich Bledsoe who provided insight into modern “believe in yourself” religion. Finally, thanks to Craig Higgins whose sermon on this text helped me better preach the mystery and majesty of the name “YHWH.”