

November 10, 2019 – Exodus 3:1-15 & Luke 20:27-40

When you look at me and look at my personal history, you might think it was obvious that I should become a pastor. I mean, it's written all over my life.

I was baptized and confirmed in the Lutheran church. My parents were Lutheran school teachers. They were both extremely active in the church, as were we as their children. I attended worship every single week, whether I wanted to or not.

I went to a Lutheran parochial grade school and a conservative Christian high school. I attended a university with a strong campus religious community. Became active in all sorts of campus ministries. Served as a paid member of the chapel staff. And got a degree in English Literature, one of the best pre-semester degrees you can get. Everything in my life pointed towards full-time church work.

But until my very last year college, the thought of being a pastor had never even crossed my mind. And even when the idea of going to seminary did occur to me, I wasn't interested in being a parish pastor.

No, I was going to be a professor. To teach religion at a college or theology at a seminary or write exegetical books about the Bible. But being the called and ordained shepherd of a midwest Lutheran church like Immanuel? No, that wasn't me at all.

Why was I so resistant to this idea? Well, there were a lot of reasons. But they really came down to this question: Who am I? I'm not a people person. I'm not an evangelist. I've been a nerd and a socially awkward wallflower for my entire life.

Sure, I can probably write a decent sermon, but who's going to want to hear me preach it? Sure, I know lots about the Bible, but the thought of actually talking to people about the love of God one on one was terrifying. Who am I to be a pastor?

And in that I identify with Moses. A lot. In fact, more than a few of us in here could probably identify with Moses. He's one of those great men of faith who is surprisingly relatable. And in the story of the burning bush, we see a lot that makes sense to us.

Take for instance, the beginning of this story. Moses is out tending the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro. He began his life under rather extraordinary circumstances as the adopted son of a princess. But now? Now he's back to a rather ordinary life as an ordinary shepherd watching someone else's sheep.

But in the midst of this ordinary life, he sees something unusual. A bush burning... but not burning. It's covered in flames, but the wood isn't actually on fire. It's a curious sight. Something worth investigating.

And he quickly discovers that this is no natural phenomenon. This is what theologians call a "theophany". Theophany literally means "God appearance." It's a time in the Bible when God visibly appears to someone in some way.

This fire is described as the "Angel of the Lord," but then it speaks with the voice of God himself. Which is actually pretty common. You see, the Angel of the Lord is the Lord. "Angel" just means "messenger." This is the messenger of the Lord. This is the Word of the Lord.

This is Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, before he was born of Mary. The pre-incarnate Christ, we like to say. Christ, but before the incarnation. Before he was made flesh. And he is speaking the Word of God to Moses. Just as he will one day speak the Word of God to his disciples.

The Word of God that Moses hears is both good news and bad news, from his perspective at least. It's good news in that the Lord has heard the cries of his people. He has not forgotten his covenant to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He has not abandoned the children of Israel.

And he has a plan to rescue them from slavery, bring them out of Egypt, across the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. Where they will live in a new kingdom of God. A land flowing with milk and honey.

All of this is amazingly good news. Because even though Moses himself may not be suffering under the hand of Pharaoh at this exact moment, he's felt plenty of suffering because of Egypt. He was banished from Egypt for defending his own kinsmen from the cruelty of the slave drivers. This is great news for everyone.

There's just one problem: God wants Moses to be the one who confronts Pharaoh. God wants Moses to be the one who speaks to the people. God wants Moses to be his chosen instrument. His chosen leader. His chosen prophet.

And that is what makes Moses say, "Hold on God. Wait just a minute. I'm just here to look at a weird burning bush. I'm just here to listen to a strange voice speak from this bush. I just here to satisfy my curiosity. I'm not here to actually do something. Who am I to do these great things?"

You see, like most of us, Moses is fine with watching what God does from the sidelines. That's what I wanted to do. I wanted to sit in an office reading the Bible and writing books about it. I wanted to stand in a classroom talking about what other prophets and apostles and church fathers and theologians had said and done. I wanted to stand on the sidelines and satisfy my curiosity. I did NOT want to be in a pulpit.

And that is a common sentiment among Christians. We're happy to study the Word. We're happy to sit in a pew on Sunday morning hearing a sermon. We're happy to give money to a missionary or a church plant or a ministry and see what God does with it. We're happy to satisfy our curiosity.

But actually doing something? Actually telling others about the grace of God in Jesus Christ? Actually leading them out of darkness into his wonderful light? Actually bringing them into the promised land of God's kingdom? That is NOT what we signed up for. We just wanted to see a burning bush. Nothing more.

But then God turns the tables on Moses. You see, Moses has spent this whole time asking, "Who am I?" He's been asking that to God. He's been asking that to himself. He's been wondering what the people will think of him when he brings this message of salvation to them. But the question really isn't who Moses is. The important question is who God is:

*"God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: '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, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.""*

"I am who I am." Another way to say that would be, "I am the one who is." I'm not one of those God's who isn't. I'm not a fake. I'm not a fraud. I'm not a lump of wood or stone or metal. I am the one true God. The one who is. In a world of gods who aren't.

That alone is a comforting message. He's telling Moses, "Out of pure curiosity, you came to look at this bush that burned but wasn't consumed because it was amazing. Because it was extraordinary. Because it was a theophany: the appearance of God himself.

“And you're right. I am here. None of the gods of Egypt are here. None of the gods who you pray to for rain or sun or healthy children or victory in battle are here. Because they're not real. I'm real. I'm talking to you right now. Doesn't that make me more trustworthy than anything else in the whole world.

“But beyond even that, look at how I desire to be remembered: I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. Not, “I WAS the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” I AM their God. Because they are alive.

“By faith, they live eternally. By faith that in my covenant. By faith in my love. By faith in my power to give them new life. By faith in the coming Messiah. They live. And I am still their God.”

That's what Jesus tried to tell the Sadducees in our Gospel lesson. And with that response, they didn't dare ask him any more questions. For he himself was a theophany. The visible appearance of God. The incarnation of the Word who spoke to Moses from the burning bush.

Jesus was the fullest fulfillment of God's covenant to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus was the fullest fulfillment of God's promise to Moses. For in Jesus, we are brought out of the slavery of sin into the promised land of the resurrection. He is living, breathing, resurrected proof that God is the one who is, in a world of gods who are not.

And so to simply look at him in curiosity and then stand on the sidelines is kind of absurd. “The God who is” stands beside you. In a battle against lumps of wood and stone and metal. In a battle against a world deceived by darkness and captive to their own sinful desires. How can they possibly stand against the servants of the living God? Our deliverance over them is as sure as Israel's deliverance from Egypt.

What made me finally decide to become a pastor? It was a seminary professor, a former pastor himself, who looked me in the eye and said, “Theology is for proclamation. Theology is nothing if it's not proclaimed to the ends of the earth. Because true, Biblical theology is the good news that God has saved sinners by his Son. And that is a message that you can't keep to yourself. It needs to be proclaimed.” Amen.