

Fifth Sunday in Lent; March 26, 2023

Exodus 3:1-15

“He Is – And So Are You”

Now Moses was shepherding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, a priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The Angel of the LORD appeared to him in blazing fire from within a bush. Moses saw that the bush was on fire, but the bush was not burning up. So he said, “I will go over and look at this amazing sight – to find out why the bush is not burning up.”

When the LORD saw that Moses had gone over to take a look, God called to him from the middle of the bush and said, “Moses! Moses!”

Moses said, “I am here.”

The LORD said, “Do not come any closer. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” He then said, “I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

The LORD said, “I have certainly seen the misery of my people in Egypt, and I have heard their cry for help because of their slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. So I have come down to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Now indeed, the Israelites’ cry for help has come to me. Yes, I have seen how the Egyptians are oppressing them. Come now, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

So he said, “I will certainly be with you. This will be the sign that I have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain.”

But Moses said to God, “If I go to Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what should I say to them?”

So God replied to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He also said, “You will say this to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.”

God also said to Moses, “Say this 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, and this is how I am to be remembered from generation to generation.’”

We all know that the past two or three years have been difficult. But the full picture of just how difficult is just beginning to show itself. To research for this sermon, I read a good number of surveys and studies about the growth of anxiety and depression since 2020. To summarize them all: the growth has been astronomical. And to summarize a few more surveys and studies about the growth of anxiety and depression since 2020 among those who call themselves followers of Jesus Christ: it has grown just as astronomically as it has among the general population, if not even faster.

These conditions have many causes. And I am under no delusion of being a doctor or psychologist, least of all *your* doctor or psychologist. It would be astronomically foolish of me to address any medical or psychological cause or remedy for these problems. It would also be silly to assume that everyone here has struggled heavily with these issues.

But there are some things I know. Everyone worries sometimes. Everyone is anxious sometimes. Everyone gets very sad, if not clinically depressed, sometimes. And one cause of these problems can be spiritual. And I am qualified to talk to you about the spiritual causes of these problems, and to tell you about one remedy for them. And to tell you that this one remedy, for all who believe it, is the most effective remedy in existence. But we do need to know it, understand it, believe it, and remember it.

Moses was minding his own business in exile, tending flocks, like he did every day. And suddenly, the Lord gave him something to worry about. Something to be very anxious about. Unless. Unless he listens carefully. We become worried and anxious about many different things. This is what God put on Moses' plate: "Moses, I want you to become the singular human leader of a mass of a couple million Israelites. Just return from the exile you're currently in and assert your authority as the leader of all those people. Then, Moses, after you do that, stand up to the most powerful man in the world and demand that he let you and all those Israelites that he has working for him for free to just go free for nothing. And then, Moses, after you do that, take that giant grumbling rabble of Israelites all the way across the desert to the most valuable real estate in the world – and, here: let me even remind you of all powerful tribes already occupying that land – and just take that land."

We get worried and anxious about all sorts of things. But maybe it's safe to say God gave Moses even more reason to feel that way. And it's easy to hear it come through in Moses' question: **But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"** He's worried and anxious for sure. He needs to listen carefully.

Moses asks about himself. **"Who am I?"** And the Lord answers. He answers by saying nothing about Moses at all. He will later in their conversation. But for now the Lord's answer is this: **"I will certainly be with you."**

This will not be our main takeaway. But is something important: When we find ourselves in overwhelming and worrying situations, like Moses in that moment, we need to start by thinking about the Lord and what he tells us about himself. Eventually Moes and the Lord will get around to talking about and thinking about Moses. But first it's the Lord. When we are under pressure and worry, it is easy to look inward first and focus on ourselves. It is not wrong to think about ourselves. But it is wrong to think about ourselves first. First we need to listen to God and what he tells us about himself.

And the Lord tells Moses that he will be with Moses. And then he gets into specifics about the future. When he goes to the Israelites and says the Lord has sent him, they will accept him. When he leads them out of Egypt, they will get all the way back to this mountain and beyond. The Lord will deliver the Israelites from Egypt, get them through the wilderness, and safety into that land flowing with milk and honey. That's what the Lord will do.

The Lord also goes back to the past. Moses lived a long time ago. But there was history before he came around, history between the Lord and his people. The Lord appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and made them precious promises about a Savior, a homeland, and a nation swelling with descendants. The Lord was good and faithful to Israel's patriarchs. He promised them things they never had coming, out of pure grace. And what he had promised in the past, he always delivered. The Lord goes back to the past. This is what he has done.

The Lord first speaks about himself, and as he does he goes forward to the future and back to the past to show his goodness and faithfulness. But that still leaves Moses with a problem, one that could easily press down on him: He is not in the past. He is not in the future. He is in the present. And what Moses has to do in present is find the courage to leave exile in Midian, return to Egypt, and lead the Israelites. That's his right now problem.

We Christians know about great things God did for us in the past. He made the universe, and us in his image. That was very good of him. When he called and blessed Abraham, he was doing something great for us too, because the salvation that came through Israel came all the way down to us. He sent his Son through that nation. Jesus came under God's law and kept every command for our sake, to make up for our sins. He shed his blood to break us free from slavery to our sin. He rose to break death's control over us. Even in the past of our own lives we can see good things God has done for us. He brought us to the font, where the Spirit washed our sins away. He has provided everything we need to live. And on top of that, he blessed many of us extravagantly with spouse and children and grandchildren and nice cars and houses and money to spare. God has done great things for us in the past.

And we believe that he will do good things for us in the future, too. He will get us through the wilderness to the Promised Land of heaven, because of all Jesus did for us. Jesus will, at some point in the future that no one knows, come back to take us there. And from there on out, the future really looks bright. No more worries or anxieties or sadness or depression at all. Won't that be nice? It will be. Will be. In the future.

But we, like Moses, have right now problems. All God has done for us is wonderful. And he will do is good, too. But what about now? Moses needs to keep listening. So do we. **But Moses said to God, "If 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?' what should I say to them?"**

**So God replied to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He also said, "You will say this to the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you."** The Lord is not just good in the past. He will not only be good to us in the future. He is good in the present. He still is good. **"This is my name forever, and this is how I am to be remembered from generation to generation."** There have been approximately 750 generations from Moses to us. But

I AM is the Lord's name forever. In fact, the name Lord is built off the Hebrew word for I am. He not only was good to people. He not only will be. He is.

God's work of creation is not just something he completed long ago. He still cares for the world, cracked though it is by sin. He still watches over his creation's crown, which is you and I. He is the God who gave your world and you life, and still gives it to you in the present.

And Jesus' saving work is not just something for the past. To be clear, Jesus meant it when he said, **"It is finished!"** on the cross. His work to take our sins away is totally complete. But as the writer to the Hebrews makes clear, the power of Jesus' sacrifice is eternal. His blood covers you and washes away all your sins in the present. As you live every day in the present, you do it as a holy child of God, clothed in Jesus' robe of righteousness.

Yes, Jesus' work is for you now. In today's Gospel, there is a reason Jesus' enemies tried to stone him to death when our Savior said, **"Amen, Amen, I tell you: Before Abraham was born, I am."** Jesus was calling himself God, the Lord, the great I AM of Exodus chapter 3. The Second Person of the Trinity was there in the burning bush. Right here, in the second verse: **The Angel of the LORD appeared to [Moses] in the blazing fire within a bush.** There is overwhelming evidence in the Old Testament that this Angel of the Lord is the preincarnate Christ, Jesus before he was conceived by the Spirit in the virgin Mary. Jesus and his work are eternal. Accomplished in the past, yes. But for you, now, in the present.

Your baptism, too, was in the past. But you remain to this day a baptized child of God. You still are. God's grace does not fade over time. Every day your baptismal waters are there for you to dive back into, to rise again in Jesus' love with your sin drowned. Your baptism, the gift of faith and peace with God you received on that day, is still yours today.

Now let's talk about the great things God will do for us. Yes, Jesus will come back and heaven will be ours. And yes, it's going to be awesome when we get there in the future. But did you know the Bible says that right now – today – your inheritance is waiting for you there? Or that Jesus is busy now building mansions for us? Or that he is busy now weaving everything that happens in this world together so it works to get us there in end? God does say all that! The blessings of Christ's return and the beauty of heaven belong to us in the present, too.

So now what should we do when we feel overwhelmed by worry, anxiety, or sadness in the present? I'll leave it to your doctor to tell you what to do with your body, and I'll leave to those who psych degrees to help for your brain. But, from my proper lane, this is the help God gives me to pass along to you for your soul: He is your good God today. In the present. And because he is your good God right now you are good right now.

It's great to remember, when are weighed down, all the great things God has done for us in the past, and the good things he will do. But he is eternally good: past, future, and present. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. And so are you. Amen.