

In the last two weeks we have met two main characters in Exodus: the villain, Pharaoh, and the hero, Moses. And now, we meet the third and most important actor in the drama that unfolds in Exodus. Today we meet the director, producer, creator, redeemer—God, Yahweh, “I AM WHO I AM.” God is mentioned at the end of Exodus 2, but that was just a flicker of the stunning theophany that will blaze on for 5 chapters beginning in Exodus 3.

Indeed, until the coming of our Lord Jesus, this is the most awesome appearance of God in the history of redemption. I say that because it is the beginning of the main act of redemption in the Old Testament, namely, God’s rescue of his people from the house of bondage. Yes, God appeared and spoke to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, inaugurating the covenant partnership between God and Israel. But all of Israel’s history will be focused on the history-changing action of God in Exodus. And that massive movement of God began here at the burning bush when God called Moses to be God’s man, God’s mouth, and God’s mediator in the drama of salvation.

While God has been active behind the scenes in the lives of his covenant people for four hundred years (as we see in the story of Joseph), God has been invisible and inaudible since his last conversation with Jacob. One can sympathize with the misery and impatience of the Israelites as they suffered in Egypt. Where is our God? Why doesn’t God come to help us? Why is God so silent? Here at last God shows up with words and deeds that will shake Egypt to its foundations and shape Israel for all of its future.

What is the first thing you ask when you meet a new person? “What’s your name?” We’re not simply being curious. The fact is that you can’t have a relationship with another person until you know their name (or these days Google their name!). Perhaps Moses asked God’s name because he was afraid of his fellow Israelites. But God told him that name so that every succeeding generation could call on that name with confidence, so that he could be *“remembered from generation to generation.”* And remember that Paul says in Romans 10:13, *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

Folks of a certain age will recall the famous words of the cartoon character, Popeye the Sailor Man. “I am what I am and that’s all what I am.” That was his way of saying, “I’m just me, so don’t try to make me something that I’m not. I’m my own unique self, so deal with it.” In our highly individualistic age many people today say things like that. But the fact is that all of us are the product of many forces that shape us into who we are. I am Karl, son of Charles and Rosemma, husband of Jayne and father of Christopher and

Jeremy. I am a pastor, a reader, a friend, a fan, sometimes a foe. All of those relationships and duties mold me, restrict me, enlarge me, modify me, motivate me, and control me.

But the God who reveals himself to Moses is not restricted, enlarged, modified, changed or controlled by anything or anyone. So, it is an absolute miracle of grace that such a sovereign God should give his life to save those who are mere creatures of time and space. Why would he do that? *“For God so loved the world...”* It began with a curious phenomenon in an out of the way place.

Having fled from Pharaoh after killing an Egyptian, Moses has been transformed from a prince of Egypt to a shepherd in far off Midian. Pursuing pasture on the far side of the wilderness of Sinai, Moses has inadvertently camped at the foot of Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. He didn't have a clue, until he saw that curious sight—a bush on fire that just kept burning and burning. The Scripture says that *“the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush.”* But Moses didn't see the angel; he only saw the fire. Rather than being awestruck, he was merely curious. So, he ambled over to see *“this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”*

It's fascinating how often this epic story makes reference to *seeing*; maybe after all those years of invisibility, God needed to be seen to be believed. At any rate, *“When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, ‘Moses! Moses!’”* With that, the audible part of the theophany overwhelms the visible. Using the curious sight to gain Moses' attention, God says something, something that will change Moses' life and the history of the world.

God's conversation with Moses contains 13 distinct pieces of dialogue. It begins with this call consisting of the divine summons (*“Moses! Moses!”*), the declaration of limits (*“the place where you are standing is holy ground”*), and the divine identity (*“the God of your father, of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob”*). After each divine word, Moses gives his response: *“Here I am.”* Moses *“hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.”*

That interplay of the divine and human, revelation and response, grace and faith characterize the entire story of Moses. Even though God could have liberated his people all by himself, he chose to act through a mere mortal, and a flawed one at that. Now comes the substance of God's revelation to Moses. Contrary to what Israel might have assumed about God, given their terrible situation in Egypt, God has *“indeed seen the misery of my people.”* And God has *“heard them crying out.”* And God is *“concerned about their suffering.”*

God goes on to reveal his actions on behalf of his suffering children. *“So, I have come down to rescue them.”* These words anticipate the ultimate coming down of the One who emptied himself and became obedient unto death on a cross. God has come down from his throne above the heavens *“to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey...”* Salvation is not only *from*; it is also *to* a good land; not only *from* bondage; but *for* flourishing.

At this moment, Moses’ heart must have been soaring with hope and joy, but then God stunned him with the words of verse 10: *“So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”* “Wait! What? You said that you were going to do those things. Surely you don’t need me. You can do it all yourself. Ah, just leave me out of it, Mr. Bush.”

But this is God’s way of working in history. There are occasional flashes of naked power (as in the Ten Plagues), but an unrelenting display of divine power will destroy humanity (as suggested by Moses covering his eyes when he realized that he was looking straight at God in a burning bush). Instead, God uses a man who doesn’t seem very excited about his role in this project.

Thus, begins Moses’ attempt to talk his way out of God’s plan. He raises one objection after another, beginning with this humble question that leads to the revelation of God’s real name. *“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”* Moses is suggesting that he’s a nobody. But in fact, he was much more than that. He was the adopted son of Pharaoh’s daughter, a member of the royal court, trained in all the wisdom and traditions of Egypt. True, he was a fugitive from Pharaoh. Yes, that Pharaoh was now dead. But Moses protests too much. He was far from a nobody. God won’t have it. God responds not with an affirmation of Moses’ ability as people do today (“You can be anything you want to be!”), but with a promise of God’s presence. *“I will be with you.”* The success of your mission depends not on your ability and power, but on my constant presence with you. Where else have we heard those words in Scripture when God issues a call to his people?

Moses doesn’t simply bow before God’s gracious and powerful promise, though. Instead he raises another question: *“Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask, ‘what is his name?’ Then what shall I say to them?”* God’s answer is as important as his promise to deliver his people. He tells them

the name by which they are to call upon God for the rest of history. Tell them, “I AM WHO I AM.”

Volumes have been written trying to penetrate the enigmatic name God reveals to Moses. I won't attempt to give you a definitive explanation. I will, however, make a few observations. First, it is fascinating that the name comes after a sequence of questions and answers. “*Who am I?*” “*I will be with you.*” “*What is his name?*” “*What shall I tell them?*” “*I AM WHO I AM.*” God is saying, it doesn't matter who you are, because who I am is more than enough to accomplish what I promise.

Second, the actual name can be translated several ways, but the essence of it seems to be that God simply *is*. God is not the product of other beings, or forces, or resources. Everything else in the world has been made, or developed, or evolved. Only God simply is—self-existent, sovereign, other, beyond the control of any other power.

And in the third place, it is astonishing that this supremely independent “I AM” should bind himself with an unbreakable promise to a community of puny humans who will constantly disappoint God. That's why God identifies himself as “*the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.*” With those words, we are directed to focus on the story of God's dealings with his people, rather than try to penetrate the mystery of God's essence. Our concern should not be with ontology, but with history.

We cannot penetrate the inner being of God, but we do know that we can count on God to keep his promises. What he has done that for generations, beginning with Abraham, he will do for Israel through Moses, and he will do for the world through Christ. Pharaoh may be mighty, a god among humans, but he is no match for the God who created all humans, covenanted with a chosen family, and will save the world through one Man.

Theologians make a distinction between God as he is in himself and God as he makes himself known in his works. In this name revealed to Moses, God gives us a hint about what God is like in himself. But his greatest revelation of himself came through his saving work in Jesus of Nazareth. As John 1:18 says, “*No one has ever seen God, but God the one and only Son, who is himself God, and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.*” Jesus himself says of himself in John's Gospel: “*I am...I am...I am.*” His enemies asked, “*Who do you think you are?*” (John 8:53). He stunned them all with his answer. “*I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I AM!*” (John 8:58). Amen.

(Credit: Stan Mast for help with this sermon)