



Reading: Exodus 3:1 - 15

Date: August 30, 2020

Called by the glory of God

And Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am". And they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Picking up stones was a sign that the people thought they heard blasphemy. Is it blasphemous to claim to precede Abraham? No, it was the use of the phrase 'I am'. A seemingly innocent phrase that is actually the Greek version of the Hebrew verb that starts the mysterious name of God revealed to Moses from the burning bush. "You shall say to the people, "I Am has sent me to you." A name that was considered so holy that it could not be written or said out loud. The immense sense of the holiness of God that surrounds the story of the calling of Moses – burning bush, sacred ground, mysterious name – affected the Hebrew sense of who God is and what worship is all about. A holiness that carries through the story of the Exodus and the people before God. The holy mountain covered in smoke and fire; too holy to even approach. A holiness replicated in the design of the tabernacle, and on to the Temple, with the space called the Holy of Holies, into which only the High Priest, suitably prepared may enter. This is the glory of God that confronts Moses. A glory that we see again in the call of Isaiah; a story from which we have taken the eternal cry, 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD, heaven and earth are full of your glory'. In the face of this holiness and glory, is it any wonder that Moses hides his face and, in humility, finds excuses not to do what God is asking? Or, maybe the story is inviting us to think of a different question. If God, with all glory and fire and mystery came to you and asked you to do something, wouldn't you say yes? After all, it is God who is asking.

I have for a while held to the idea that the most fundamental statement of faith we can make is, "God is." The philosophers will take that simple statement and ask, 'What do you mean by 'is'?' or, 'What do you mean by God?' The 'isness' of God is not the same as the 'isness' of a person, who is alive now but not forever. Or the 'isness' of a mountain, which is worn down by wind and rain. And so on the arguments can go, this is not an exhaustive statement of faith, it is a simple expression that matches the simplicity and the mysterious complexity of God's self-revealed name; 'I am who I am'. A very profound self-title for God, because if any person tried to say the same, they would need to consider the influence of parents, culture, media, and relationships. Only God can say, "I am who I am". But there is much more to this name revealed in the encounter with Moses. This is not a disinterested 'I am who I am'. God says, "I am the God of your ancestors and I have heard the cries of misery in Egypt and I have come to deliver them". Compassion and mercy are part of who God is. Moses has seen the misery of the people in Egypt and heard their cries, and here he is confronted by the holy, powerful God who is agreeing that the people are suffering and willing to act. So again, why is Moses offering excuses? If God, full of compassion and mercy came

to you and asked you to act against an injustice that you had seen, wouldn't you say yes? After all, it is God who is asking.

As much as we might want to be captured by the holiness and glory of this story of Moses at the burning bush, and the mysterious name, and read this story as revelation, focusing on God. This is a call story to say that God, the God of the ancestors who guided the formation of the people of Abraham, is here to act again. The God who called Abraham, who saved Isaac, who wrestled with Jacob, is calling again. Moses is not the grand hero who, after seeing first-hand the suffering of the people in slavery to Pharaoh, gathers the help to form a revolution. This is not Charlton Heston confidently challenging Yul Brynner. This is a call story to establish that the long-promised release from slavery is the work of the God who hears the cries and responds. A call story where God overcomes Moses objections about being unworthy or being an outsider by saying, "I am God and I will be with you." Moses says, "Who am I?" and God answers, "It's not about you, I am who I am". This call is presented a story full of Moses objections so that it can function as a call story for all of us. I know the answer to the question I have been asking. "If God came to you and asked you to act, would you say yes?" Most of us would be like Moses, offering excuses about being untrained, unprepared, low in skills, a poor speaker and so on. The fact that it is God asking doesn't make the answer easier, it only makes it worse because we would be overcome with awe and reverence and feel small and weak in comparison. So, the story isn't full of Moses eagerness to answer, it is full of God's eagerness to work with Moses to get the mission underway. "I will be with you, the sign is that this will come about, and the people will be free to worship me, and there will be future generations to know my name."

Few of us get to experience a dramatic call from God, we don't all get a burning bush type sign, some of us are fortunate to feel ourselves on sacred ground, but we can enter into this story and see that God is a God of compassion and mercy. We can all feel compassion for those suffering injustice and oppression. We can all see the misery around us and hear the cries. Can you hear, in those cries, the call of God saying, "I have seen the misery and heard the cries and I want you to act to bring freedom, justice and release?"

Back in the 90s there was a movement in the church, prompted by Thomas Bandy, calling people to their 'heartburst.' The concern, the mission, the need, the idea that is so strong it feels like your heart is bursting; that is the call of God to act. Bandy prompted people to find their 'heartburst' and follow it. Not necessarily to push for the whole congregation to follow one mission, but to find a group of supporters and go for it. I know of several churches that took up this idea and openly supported several 'heartburst' missions. The point was to encourage people to hear the call of God and to be willing to support them as they followed that call.

With the size and networks of our church throughout Victoria and Tasmania, and throughout Australia and our sister churches overseas, there is plenty of opportunity and information to hear the cries of need. Our active Social Justice networks, the work of Uniting in social services and the work of Uniting World in overseas aid. All of them not just looking for

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money, but also for volunteers, for advocates and for partners. Another avenue for the call of the God of compassion and mercy.

The Moses story has the traps of philosophy and theology in it. It is too easy to treat the story as an expression of the name and nature of God. It is too easy to get lost in the glory and the holiness and miss the purpose. This is Moses story, a story of God calling Moses. And Moses story is not just about a call to action but more importantly the promise of God's presence and support; "I will be with you." All our excuses about not being up to the task are taken up in the grace of God and the reality that this is God who is calling. The God who is, and who is the God of compassion willing, and calling, for people to be free, to be able to live as the people of God, to be released from slavery and oppression. We are because God is, and, in the grace of God, we can help others to be. Amen

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