Foundational Stories #13 of 24:

"The Burning Bush"

Rev. Bill Pinches

Exodus 3:1-15

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Last week we heard about the enslavement of the Israelite people by the Egyptian Pharaoh, Pharaoh's cruel edict calling for the murder of all baby boys among the Israelites, the birth of Moses, and the courageous decisions of five women that saved Moses and resulted in him becoming the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. Today we pick up the story with Moses as a full-grown adult. He's no longer living in Egypt but rather in a land called Midian, which is now in the country of Saudi Arabia, in its northwest corner. Obviously we skipped some stuff, so we need to backtrack. But where we are headed is to the base of Mount Sinai, where Moses has an astonishing encounter with God.

So how did Moses end up in Midian? He *murdered* someone, and then he ran for his life. This is a part of the story that we often don't include in children's Sunday School lessons! Here's what happened. "One day after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor." It sounds like Moses had never seen the dire situation his people were in. His adoptive mother had probably kept him quite sheltered; she probably never took him on a "field trip" to the work sites where his fellow Israelites were suffering and sweating under the hot sun under the whip of their Egyptian taskmasters. Then came a day, in his young adulthood, when he went exploring. "He went out to his people and saw their forced labor." He was shocked and appalled at what he saw. "He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people." Strong emotions erupted inside him. This was injustice he could not tolerate. "He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand." He committed murder. Later on, God will tell Moses that murder is never okay, but what was Moses to do? Just stand by and let the beating continue? At this point, he's just one man against an empire. What power does he have? What would *you* do, in the face of systemic injustice and the oppression and exploitation of an entire people? Sit idly by and do *nothing*? Look for ways to *speak up*? Or to *act*? And if you act, where do you draw the line? What *ethics* guide your decision-making?

I wonder how Moses slept that night. Did he regret what he had done? The next day, "he saw two Hebrews fighting, and he said to the one who was in the wrong, 'Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?' He answered, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?'" So there was a *witness*. Maybe more than one. "Moses was afraid and thought, 'Surely the thing is known.'" *Now* what's he going to do? What would *you* do, if you were in his sandals?

"When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses." Moses had escaped Pharaoh's wrath as a baby. Now he is facing it again. "So Moses fled from Pharaoh." He runs away, *far* away, out of Egypt, ultimately coming to the land of Midian, *hundreds* of miles away. There he meets and marries

Zipporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest. They have a child. He names him Gershom, which means "alien." Moses says, "I have been an alien residing in a foreign land." He still thinks of Egypt as *home*.

Years pass. "After a long time the king of Egypt died." But the new Pharaoh continues the previous Pharaoh's oppression and subjugation of the Israelite people. In fact, it sounds like it gets *worse*. "The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out…. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were the ancestors of the entire Israelite people. God had given them some significant promises. One of God's promises to Abraham was this: "your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years, but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions." God is remembering that promise, and God is *always* faithful. "God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them."

This is what sets everything in motion. "Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian." One day "he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God." Mount Horeb, we think, is *this* mountain, now called Jebel Musa, or possibly *this* mountain right next door, which is called Willow Peak. Today there is a monastery at its base. Most scholars think Mount Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai. This is the place where, later, God will give the Israelites the Ten Commandments. It is near the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula.

Then an astonishing thing happens: "the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush." Moses looks. "The bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed." He examines it more closely. "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up." Then a voice calls from the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He responds: "Here I am!" The voice says: "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." This place is *sacred*. The appropriate thing to do is *be reverent*. *Stand in awe* before the Almighty. This is the first instance of God visibly *appearing* to anybody since God had appeared to Moses's great-great-grandfather Jacob many decades earlier. Moses must have wondered who or what he is encountering; God clarifies: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Moses's father-in-law was a priest in the land of Midian, and the Midianites had their own gods, but *this* is the God of Moses's own *Israelite* people. "Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God." Perhaps Moses did not think he was *worthy* to stand in the presence of God. Perhaps he feared that God would *judge* him for murdering that Egyptian. Perhaps he believed that no one can behold God and live.

God is appearing before Moses for a reason. God has a *job* for him. A sacred *mission*. God says: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites." God had told Abraham, several times, that God would give that land to his descendants; now the time has come for God to begin fulfilling that promise. But God needs a helper. So God says: "Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." You can imagine Moses's astonishment. God wants him to go back to the land that he had fled. This seems absurd to him: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Moses does not yet understand: sometimes God asks us to face our fears and do the *impossible* thing we think we cannot do.

God replies: "I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain." That seems to satisfy Moses, at least for the moment. He moves on to his next question: "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" As far as we know, *no Israelite who was alive at that time had ever seen God, or even heard God's voice*. God hadn't given anybody a *job* to do in a very long time. So if Moses shows up claiming that he has seen God, that God has spoken to him, that God has sent him on a mission, he's going to need some kind of *proof*. So he boldly asks God to reveal the sacred, holy name of God. Remarkably, God complies. "God said to Moses, *ʾehyeh ʾasher ʾehyeh*" – those are the Hebrew words. It can be translated, "I AM WHO I AM," or "I AM WHAT I AM," or "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE." The name emphasizes God's eternal and unchanging nature. It also means that God is self-sufficient; God does not need anybody or anything to exist in order for God to exist. God just *IS*. God always *has been* and God always *will be*. There was nothing *before* God and there will be nothing *after*. There is nothing as eternal as God. In the New Testament, when Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am," Jesus is harkening back to this divine name, to this ontological reality. When he says, "I am the bread of life," and "I am the light of the world," and "I am the good shepherd," and all the other "I am" statements, everyone who knew the scriptures would have made this connection. Jesus is the great "I AM," the eternal, unchanging, self-sufficient God: the Alpha (the beginning) and the Omega (the end).

God reiterates: "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.' … 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, 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 my title for all generations." The word that is translated *"the Lord"* is another form of the word for *"I AM,"*; it is four Hebrew letters: *yod, he, vav, he*, which correspond to our letters Y H W H. Some older English translations render this as *Jehovah*; other translations render it as *Yahweh*. This is where those names of God come from – like when we sing, "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah," that word "Jehovah" comes right from this verse. When observant Jews come across these four letters in the scriptures, they do not pronounce either the letters, or the word. They believe these letters are too sacred, too holy, to be spoken aloud. So they make a substitution; they either say "Adonai," which means "My Lord," or "Elohim," which means "God," or "HaShem," which means "The Name." They give the name a *reverence* – which, honestly, we Christians don't. We could learn from them.

God then gives Moses some instructions. But he still has objections. The Israelites might not listen to him. They might not believe him. He's not eloquent, and he's got a speech impediment. He does not believe he's the right person for the job. God responds to *all* of his objections. Finally, Moses pleads: "O my Lord, please send someone else." But God says no. Moses isn't going to get out of this. He *will* go back to Egypt; he *will* speak to his people; he *will* confront Pharaoh. When God calls, God really *calls*, and sooner or later you simply *have* to answer. You really don't get a choice. For many years in my younger life, I prayed, "God, I will do anything you want, except I will *never* become a Pastor." You can see where that got me! When God *really wants* you to do something, you're not getting out of it. Eventually you exhaust your excuses, and you realize you simply *have* to do it. That is what happened to Moses. He tried and tried to get out of it. But God wanted *him*. Finally, Moses stopped arguing and surrendered to God's will. The road ahead wouldn't be easy; God doesn't ask us to do the easy stuff. Once Moses finally said, "Okay, *fine*," that was the first step towards *freedom* for his entire people.

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