

A Burning Question

Exodus: Revelation and Redemption

Exodus 3:1-22

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A. W. Tozer famously wrote “what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” C. S. Lewis disagreed with this sentiment, writing that it doesn’t matter what you think about God nearly as much as what God thinks about you.

In our Scripture today we find both are bound up together. As we come to know God, we see what he thinks about us. And as we see what he thinks about us, we come to know God, and we find the lengths he’ll go to be known by us.

Who is God? There is no more burning question for you this morning than the question of the burning bush. So let’s turn now to our text in Exodus chapter 3.

Exodus 3:1-22¹

¹Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. ³And Moses said, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.” ⁴When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” ⁵Then he said, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷Then the LORD said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” ¹¹But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” ¹²He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

¹³Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” ¹⁴God 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.’” ¹⁵God 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. ¹⁶Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, “I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt,” ¹⁷and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.’” ¹⁸And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.'¹⁹ But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. ²⁰ So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. ²¹ And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, ²² but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians."

This is the Word of the Lord.

The book of Exodus is a foundational narrative for Jews and Christians. It is a book about revelation and redemption. But before Israel is going to know their God, their leader Moses comes to know God. The revelation of God to Moses is the subject of Exodus 3. And the main idea of our Scripture this morning is that God makes himself known. God desires to be known intimately. God makes himself known.

It's a simple idea, and you may brush it off... "Of course God makes himself known, I'm a Christian, I know that." But it's a truth I want us to dwell on today. Because it causes us to ask further questions.

Ok, God makes himself known, but how does he make himself known and what sort of God is made known. Exodus 3 is concerned with both of these questions and we find that the way God makes himself known also reveals the sort of God that he is.

This is important because we come across all sorts of distortions. On the one hand, many would consider the very idea of God laughable. Others see god, if you can call it god, as simply an energy of the universe. And for Christian folks who believe in God we are prone to all sorts of distortions if we don't attend to the God who makes himself known.

In Exodus 3, God makes himself known to Moses. And I pray it will be instructive for each of us as we come to know God and continue in knowing God. As we look at this passage we will find three things God does to make himself known: God draws us, God invites us, God is with us. You've got to have all three.

GOD DRAWS US.

Knowledge of God involves being drawn out of everyday life. If you've driven through Kansas you've more than likely come across something like this [picture of the largest ball of twine]. Who knew Kansas had such wonders? Kansas is dotted with oddities like this. The largest ball of twine, largest electric shovel, largest hand dug well, Truckhenge, the geographic center of the united states... and many other wonders to behold.

Now, who's gone to see something like this? Be honest. You're driving along and you think to yourself, "I will turn aside to see this great sight." That's what's happening here with the burning bush. Except that the burning bush is truly awesome, not just some tourist trap.

Moses is drawn out by God. And notice it's not while he's meditating, or sacrificing, but rather Moses is in the middle of his work as a shepherd. Moses sees a great sight. A wonder. Something that breaks in and draws him out of the immediacy of everyday life.

We're told there is an angel of the Lord in the midst of the fire, but Moses didn't initially see that. Rather he notices that a bush is on fire, but isn't being consumed. "Weird. I didn't think that was possible. I'm gonna check it out."

What does this burning bush represent? Right here, at first, the burning bush is something that breaks into everyday life; breaking our preconceived ideas about the world. Opening up our imagination and sparking our curiosity. It's thinking the world works one way, and then seeing something that doesn't fit with your view of the world.

Moses saw something he couldn't explain away. It didn't fit with his worldview. Otherwise he wouldn't have gone over there, or he wouldn't have called it a "great sight." This was just something he couldn't make sense of and it drew him to something more.

We learn something very important about God here. God is the first actor in our knowing him. God is drawing Moses, just as he draws each of us. Asking us to turn aside and reassess our view of the world.

A pastor once referenced the Screwtape Letters to get this point across. C. S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Screwtape Letters*. Where Screwtape, a demon, is mentoring this younger demon, Wormwood. In the first letter Screwtape writes about an experience he had tempting a human. Listen to this:

...you don't realise how enslaved they [humans] are to the pressure of the ordinary. I once had a patient, a sound atheist... One day, as he sat reading, I saw a train of thought in his mind beginning to go the wrong way. The Enemy, of course, was at his elbow in a moment. Before I knew where I was I saw my twenty years' work beginning to totter.

...I struck instantly at the part of the man which I had best under my control, and suggested that it was just about time he had some lunch... [I suggested] "Much better to come back after lunch and go into it with a fresh mind," [by then] he was already halfway to the door. Once he was in the street the battle was won. I showed him a newsboy shouting the midday paper, and a No. 73 bus going past, and before he reached the bottom of the steps I had got into him an unalterable conviction that, whatever odd ideas might come into a man's head when he was shut up alone with his books, a healthy dose of "real life" ... was enough to show him that all "that sort of thing" just couldn't be true... He is now safe in Our Father's house [below].

The goal of Screwtape was to keep his patient in the stream of "real life." To not be drawn out and ask the big questions of life. Many of us are also caught in this stream. Distracted by work. Enmeshed with our phones. Worried about the news we see on TV. Overwhelmed by the tasks of just trying to make it through the day—clean the house, pay the bills, take the kids to school and to practice.

And our culture doesn't help. We're conditioned to explain away mystery, wonder, and even tragedy. We're conditioned to believe that if there is a God or spirituality, it's so distant and unknowable that god is essentially some unthinking power. In our age we are tempted to believe that God's action in this world is implausible. But God breaks into our everyday world to draw us out of it.

So what are the things that draw us out today? There are really too many to mention. It could be a simple walk through the woods, the birth of a baby, the generosity of a stranger. Even a tragedy can draw us out of everyday life, like the loss of a job or the death of a friend, that lead us to ask "Is this all there really is?"

So how might we be open to God's drawing? My suggestion? Be curious. Curiosity may have killed the cat, but it led Moses to a transformative encounter. Theologian Andrew Root writes, "personal curiosity is the engine into breakthrough. Moses' openness to encounter something other draws him into the event of God's arriving."

God is making himself known by drawing us out. But this alone doesn't get us very far. By itself it ends in an aimless wandering. It's why we need the second piece.

GOD INVITES US.

Knowledge of God always involves an invitation to walk with him.

Let's stop for a second and think about how we know anyway? Scholar Dru Johnson has helped me understand this. Knowledge of anything is an acquired skill. It takes struggle and repetition.

Two people can look at the same data but know very different things. When Sarah Beth was pregnant with Avery I remember being in the room when the sonographer was looking to find out the gender. And the sonographer would say, "Don't look at the screen if you don't want to know yet." And I just thought, you and I are looking at the same screen but we see very different things. The sonographer has been shown what to see, messed up, corrected and repeated that process hundreds of times.

The truth is, knowledge of anything only comes through entering into a guided process. Whether it's riding a bike, learning $2+2=4$, or reading a sonogram, knowledge takes guided practice. It takes struggle and repetition. But once you are skilled, you see differently. In fact, you experience reality differently than anyone else. Truly knowing is transformative. It causes us to see reality in a different way. It's why knowledge of God always involves an invitation to walk with him. Because God knows the only way to really know him is in the process of walking with him.

So in verse 4 we find an invitation to come closer. The Lord sees Moses coming and calls, "Moses! Moses!" Anytime Hebrew repeats a word that means it is emphatic. It is an emphatic invitation, an invitation to intimacy with God. To draw close. But this invitation also comes with a warning. God says: Do not come near... and take your shoes off. The place you are standing is holy ground.

So, in obeying God's call, Moses comes to know something about God in the process. God is holy. God's holiness means that God is completely other. He is in a class of his own. Distinct in every way. It also means that God is morally blameless and pure in every way. This is the essence of who God is. Holy.

It's why Moses must take off his shoes. Nothing dead can touch the holiness of the living God. Moses, who is wearing these leather wrapped shoes (dead flesh) has to take them off. And Moses can't come near because God is holy. Moses and God are different. Moses is a creature, but God is the creator. And there is a difference between them.

The first invitation is one of intimacy with God. Not as though Moses is absorbed into God, but rather two distinct persons in relationship. But this is just the first invitation. Look at verses 7 through 10. The Lord says that he has seen, he knows the affliction of *his* people. He has come down in order to bring them up. He wishes to bless them. In verse 9 it says God has seen their oppression. Same thing Moses saw when he was in Egypt. Then verse 10: "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

Here we learn many things about God. God is all seeing and knowing. God is compassionate. God physically acts in this world. And what's unique about God's divine activity in this world, is that he wants his people to participate in his work. It's the pattern all throughout Scripture, from Abraham to the apostle Paul. Here God invites Moses to participate in his mission to redeem his people. Why? Because in participating Moses will come to know God. God is making himself known through his invitation to intimacy and participation in his mission. But invitations have this way of making us consider our own self-worth.

Let me ask, have you ever gotten a pity invite? You just happen to be in the room when everyone else is getting invited and their like, "Oh, you can come too." How does that make you feel about yourself? Or maybe you get a really special invite. Many years ago, a friend of mine was invited to one of those big dinners with the president in D.C. That sort of invitation is bound to give you a big head.

So in verse 11 Moses responds "Who am I?" It's an expression of doubt—doubt in God's invitation to choose him. And you've got to assume this sense of inadequacy had been with him awhile.

In chapter 2:11-14 Moses had already tried to free his people. This was forty years ago. That time things went poorly. And listen to the response of the Hebrews he was fighting for. They said, "Who made you a commander and judge over us?" Essentially, who do you think you are? It's the same question Moses parrots back to God. It's the question that drove Moses into exile. Into the desert. Who do you think you are?

It's crazy how episodes from the past can haunt us and hinder our answer to God's invitation. Moses had a deep sense of inadequacy. Moses let his past define him. We are prone to the same haunting. The same feelings of inadequacy. Asking the same question, who am I?

Of course, God doesn't answer Moses' question (at least not how Moses expects). In verse 12 God says it's not really about *who* you think you are; what matters is *whose* you are. I will be with you; I will send you. Moses isn't validated by being the cast-out adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. Moses is validated by the God who is with him.

Look with me at God's response in verse 12: "I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain." We'll explore God's being with him in the next section. What I want to focus on is the sign God gives. This is one of the most surprising passages to me. Signs are all throughout Exodus. And they usually involve some miraculous happening that prove the authority of the sign giver and so compel some action. We'll read about them in the next chapter. Exodus is famous for its signs.

Well this is the first sign of the book. And whereas signs usually come before the desired action, this is a future sign. God says the sign that proves I have sent you, that I am with you, is that once you've delivered my people, you'll serve me on this mountain where you stand.

What's going on? Here's the best analogy I could come up with. In college I was a part of the New Student Welcoming Committee. The first week on campus, actually the first day, we would have these new freshmen walk the graduation sidewalk. And we'd say something like, "In four years you will walk this same path together, but you'll be different. You'll be changed. The things you come to know over these four years will transform you, and you will stand here ready to impact the world."

God is saying, if you walk with me through this process you will know me and you will be transformed. But it can only be seen on the other side of this walk together. This sign is a future promised sign anticipating their return meeting with God on the mountain where they are called a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19). Does that answer who you are?

Knowledge of God always involves an invitation to walk with him. If we accept his invitation to intimacy and mission, we will forever be changed. Just like Moses, God invites each of us into a life of intimacy and mission in order that we might know him. So how does Moses respond to God?

This is where we find our next action in knowing God.

GOD IS WITH US.

Knowledge of God always involves God walking with us. God does not just invite us to dinner and not show. He shows up himself. Each of these actions of God are a “drawing closer.” Which is essentially the definition of what it means “to know”—to draw closer.

In verse 13 Moses asks, “What’s your name?” He wants to know who this God is and if he can trust him. But he asks it really slyly. More like, “So, I’ve got this friend, really, it’s a friend of a friend who has a question.” Who are you? If my identity is going to be shaped by you, then who are you? And God answers with his name. It is a disclosure of his very being.

Up until this point in the Bible God has not disclosed his full being until he meets Moses in the wilderness (c.f. Ex. 6:3). People have been naming God. When Hagar met God in the wilderness, she named him the God who sees, but here we have God’s own declaration of who he is.

Moses asks after God’s name and in verses 13-22 is given three answers and a summary of everything that is about to take place. Each of these answers build on each other, disclosing a little more about who God is.

Let me suggest, along with Saint Augustine and the modern scholar Victor Hamilton, that the dominant idea in the name of God is that of presence. God’s name is the one who has always been and will always be with and for his people.

In verse 14, God says to Moses, for Moses, “I am who I am.” In Hebrew this is extremely tricky to translate, it’s just the “to be” verb repeated with a relative pronoun in the middle. Many modern translations will include a footnote with an alternate translation like, “I will be what I will be.” But this name echoes what God said in verse 12. In Hebrew the exact same word and form “I am” was used in verse 12 when God told Moses that he would be with him. God is recalling that earlier promise to be with Moses. This is who God is.

God’s second answer is for Moses to say to the people of Israel, “I am has sent me to you.” Again, the same word repeated and used in verse 12. And the same concept: God sent him, God with Moses.

With his third answer to the question of his name, Moses is also to say 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.” LORD here is where we get the term “Yhwh.” Though that might not be the right pronunciation. This is what we consider the personal name of God. The God who walked with the

patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is now with Moses. This is how our God is to be remembered forever.

Names are powerful things. And the name of God is something to be revered above all else. We will never be able to plunge the depths of this great and holy name. Orthodox Jews wouldn't even pronounce the name for fear of using it wrongly. So if you're reading in Hebrew instead of saying "Yhwh" you say "Adoni."

For the Hebrews, names always evoked some action in history. Remember Moses is named for being drawn out of the water. So when God reveals his name, he reveals who he is. But this involves a whole history; a whole theology.

"I Am" is the God who is self-existent, eternal, infinite, and unchangeable. He needs nothing. He wants for nothing. "I Am" is the God transcendent and in a league all his own. "I Am" is the God who is all powerful, all knowing, and all present. Our God is to be praised above all else. And as we journey through Exodus we will come to know more about this God.

Exodus 3 reveals all of that, but it focuses on the building of these three names. The most astounding thing in all the world. God is a God who is with and for his people. Do not take this for granted. The one who is present before Moses, the one who is with and sending Moses, the one who walked with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is both how he makes himself known, and what sort of God he is. He is a God who is present for his people.

You see, God's name is not simply some data to possess; not a list of characteristics you can rattle off. It's not as though knowing the name means knowing God. When God reveals his name, his name reveals a whole history of covenant faithfulness. A whole history of covenant love. Knowing this God who has been with and for his people is what it means to know the name.

It's more like a nickname you use with a friend or your significant other. A name that evokes a personal history of walking together. Like when I call Sarah Beth... Well, I'm not even going to go there. And that's the point. A name too personal, too sacred. That evokes a history of walking together.

But it's not just a history. It's also a future. Exodus 16-22 summarize everything that is about to take place. It's the next chapter in God's name. In fact, it's how he will be known. The beginning of the Ten Commandments says: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Deut. 5:6). Our God is a God who is with and for his people. And it's the wildest most extraordinary thing about him. It's the paradox at the very center of our faith. That the God who is transcendent and holy, needing nothing, is present with and for you... and me.

And so the name "I Am" gets at the very heart and paradox of our faith. And God's name looks ahead, even past Israel's redemption. Ahead to the one who would deliver humanity from death itself. Ahead to the one who claimed to be "I Am." The one who drew people out by performing miracles and asking the big questions. The one who invited people to follow him, in order that they might know him and know the Father. The one who was so for you that he died on a cross that you might live eternally. The one who said, "I am with you always."

Friends this is our hope. Jesus is the fullest revelation of the Trinitarian God. The fullest expression of "I Am."

But knowing God doesn't happen overnight, rather it is a continual walk where each day we see a little clearer. Knowing God requires walking with the God who meets us. As we read the Bible, the story of God's covenant faithfulness— his presence with his people. As we follow his leading and reflect on his working. As we share with one another about God's work in our life. As we work out the gospel in every nook and cranny of our lives.

God made himself known to Moses that he might be known to Israel; that he might be known to each one of us. God makes himself known by drawing us out, inviting us to intimacy and mission, and meeting us in the invitation. Going with us each and every day.

Conclusion

We leave this text with a bit of a cliffhanger. Moses asked, "Who are you?" God responded with his name, a declaration of his very presence. But how will Moses respond? How will Moses respond to the drawing, invitation, and presence of God?

You may already know the story. Either way I encourage you to read ahead this next week.

But over this week, I also want you to consider how you should respond to this burning question. Because the burning question of the burning bush isn't who is God, but rather how will you respond to his revelation?