

PRELUDE TO FREEDOM: GOD'S CALL

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Exodus 3:1-15

The two defining events of the Jewish people have to be the Exodus and the Exile. Exodus is a Greek word consisting of “ex”, to go out, and “hodos”, the road. Ex-hodos—literally, to go out on the road. In English an exodus is the departure of a large group of people. In the bible, the Exodus refers to that time when the Israelites fled slavery in Egypt.

The word exile means expulsion from ones' native land by authoritative decree. It comes from the Latin word *exilium*, banishment. The biblical Exile took place in the 6th century BC when many of the Jews were captured and carried off to Babylon in the Babylonian Captivity or Exile. The theological result of the Exile was that the Jews discovered that God did not reside just in Jerusalem but could be found with God's people everywhere, even in Babylon.

The Exodus would have taken place about 1,000 years earlier, about the year 1500 BC, give or take a few centuries. The account of the Exodus is located in the second book of the bible which we call Exodus. Exodus is actually the Greek name for this book. In Hebrew, the name is literally “These are the names” because the book begins with the words, *These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob* (1:1).

You will recall the story of Jacob. That story begins with God's call to Abraham. Abraham's son was Isaac. Isaac's sons were Esau and Jacob. Jacob conned Isaac into conferring upon him his brother's birthright and then Jacob then fled the country. He is gone for twenty years and in that time built up a family and amassed a fortune. He returns to his homeland and along the way wrestles with God. God renames him Israel. Jacob has twelve sons. One of them—Joseph—was clearly Jacob's favorite and something of a conceited jerk. Because of this, his brothers staged his death and sold him to a caravan of traitors (always be nice to your brothers). Joseph ends up in Egypt and works his way up to become the head administrator to the Pharaoh. His foresight and planning enable the Egyptians to weather a devastating drought and famine. Joseph is a hero and he brings his brothers and their families to live in Egypt with him. The Israelites, as they are known, thrived in Egypt for generations until, as we read in Exodus, *Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph*. In other words, the Israelites were no longer viewed favorably as the descendants of the great Joseph, but instead were viewed as an immigrant population to be exploited. The Israelites were enslaved and set to forced labor building cities for the Pharaoh. This continued for three hundred years.

In this story, we are introduced to Moses. The Pharaoh fears that the Israelites are becoming too numerous and orders the murder of all newborn Israelite boys. During this time Moses is born and his mother is able to hide the baby for three months. Eventually, in desperation, she waterproofs a basket and floats the child down the Nile past where the pharaoh's daughter is bathing. The daughter sees the child and takes it for her own. She names him Moses.

Moses grows up in the royal court. One day he observes an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Moses intervenes and kills the Egyptian and hides the body in the sand. When word gets out about this Moses flees across the desert to the land of Midian.

One day, in Midian, he is sitting by a well. The seven daughters of the priest of Midian come to draw water from the well but some shepherds drive them away. Moses comes to their defense. The girls return home and tell their father about the Egyptian who had helped them. Their father asked, "And you left him there? Go get this man. Invite him to dinner." Moses stays with the family and eventually marries one of the daughters and goes to work for his father-in-law as a shepherd.

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, things are getting worse for the Israelites. They cry out and God takes notice. God remembers the covenant made with their ancestors—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

At the same time, Moses continues working for his father-in-law. His shepherding takes him far from Midian, beyond the wilderness, to Horeb, which is described as *the mountain of God*. We will encounter this mountain later in the story when it is known as Mt. Sinai.

While shepherding his flock on the mountain, Moses notices a fire in a bush. That is nothing unusual. Maybe there were other shepherds camping here. Maybe lightning had struck the bush. But Moses looks closer and realizes that while the flames envelope the bush, the bush itself is not burning. Moses decides this requires further investigation. When God discovers that God has Moses' attention, God calls Moses by name. Moses responds, *Here I am*. God says, *Come no closer. Remove your sandals. You are standing on holy ground*. God goes on to say, *I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. I am aware of their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey. I have seen the oppression of my people and I will send you to Pharaoh to get my people out of Egypt.*

Moses is not buying it. *Who am I that I should stand before Pharaoh?*, he asks. And God says, *I will be with you. And when you are done, you shall worship me on this mountain*. Moses then asks God another question. Moses says, *If I do go to the Israelites and I tell them 'The God of your ancestors has sent me' and they ask*

'What's this God's name?' what shall I tell them? You see, it has been a long time since the people talked to God. God answers Moses saying, *Tell them, I AM WHO I AM* has sent you.

When we think of Moses we think of a prophet, a holy man, a leader, someone who has God's ear. But, it is important to remember, Moses was less than perfect. He led a life between lives. He was born an Israelite but raised in the royal court of Egypt. At that well in Midian, the daughters identify him as Egyptian despite his fleeing Egypt. Moses is in Midian because he killed that Egyptian. But God calls him anyway. God calls Moses to go back to the Pharaoh and plead the case for the Israelite slaves.

Unfortunately, the Israelites have largely forgotten God so Moses asks for God's name. This is a sneaky move on Moses' part—to know a name is to have control. But God is not having any of that and tells Moses "I AM WHO I AM." The Hebrew is intentionally vague here and that name could also be read I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. One scholar suggests that he likes to interpret the name as I AM WHO WILL BE. God is not a thing or a name. God simply IS. God is the great I AM. And this is the one who is calling Moses from the fire, from the holy ground, from God's mountain. Moses will return to Egypt but he will not be alone. I AM promises to accompany him. God is not sending Moses out alone. God will be with him. Does God need Moses for this task? Certainly not. But God calls Moses. Moses is not perfect, he is not trained, he is not eager, he is not eloquent. He is called.

My question for you is this: What has God called you to do? What task has God challenged you with? Are you the perfect fit for the job? Are you eager? Have you heard the call and are trying to figure out how to tell God no. Isn't there someone better, more experienced, more talented, more willing? What has God called you to do? God sees the misery of the people—the need, sorrow, the hurt. Just as God called Moses, God calls other less-than-perfect individuals (such as us) to ministries of healing and compassion and love. What have you been called to do? What is that thing that matters that God is calling you towards? Just remember, when you say yes, God will be with you.

Amen.