

Hearing God's call – Exodus 3:1-17

In the passage we heard from Exodus, Moses received a message, a call, from God. First we will consider what it was that enabled Moses to hear what God was saying to him, and then we will look at how Moses responded to what he heard.

The thing about hearing a message is that it has to be in a language that we understand, or it will just go straight over our heads and not affect us in any way. We all know that at the moment, when Christians cannot meet in the usual way, in groups in our buildings, communication has become a really important theme. Churches and individuals are finding all kinds of creative and technological ways of communicating, both among ourselves and communicating the gospel to others. Our son David's church consists of several congregations, including a deaf congregation. As you can imagine, this gives an extra challenge to communication, and the method they have settled on for their services is live streaming them on YouTube, with a sign language interpreter. In order to do this they have 4 or 5 people in the church building, all standing far apart, including the sign language interpreter, and they are filmed and transmitted simultaneously, so that the deaf congregation are hearing the preaching at exactly the same time as everyone else.

We could call God himself the ultimate communicator, because He speaks to each of us in a language we can understand. This reminds us of Pentecost, when through the Holy Spirit people from many countries heard the gospel in their own languages. But this passage about Moses shows us that God's communication is not just words, and in Romans 8, verse 26, we are told that 'the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express'. Moses did not just get a list of instructions from God, like the sort of instructions that I used to leave for babysitters. God communicated with Moses in more than words. He reached into his heart and soul, and their communication became a conversation, grounded in their relationship, as we shall see later.

The passage opens with Moses working as a shepherd for his father-in-law, after experiencing a number of ups and downs in his life, and by this point he might have thought that God had done everything he was going to do with him. However, God hadn't finished speaking to him or using him, and that is perhaps the first point we can take from this passage – that God can surprise us by calling us at any time in our lives, and in unexpected ways.

In order to hear God speaking to him, Moses had to be open to receive God's message, and the passage describe three ways in which Moses made himself ready to hear God.

First of all, he was curious about the bush which, we read in verse 2, was on fire but did not burn up. He was going about his ordinary business, but he was not so focused on it that he missed the supernatural fire, the sign of the Holy Spirit, as seen at Pentecost and in the pillar of fire which later led the Israelites in the desert. We could ask ourselves if we are still curious? We may not see God in fire, but we can pray that we 'stay alert' for signs of the Holy Spirit all around us – a much better use of that phrase I think. Moses said to himself in verse 3 "I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up". That's a great example of being curious and alert to signs of God's working.

Having first been curious, Moses then walked towards the burning bush. This was a physical act of taking a step forward, and then he heard God calling his name, and said the memorable words in response, "Here I am". Moses opened himself up to God, took a risk and made himself a bit vulnerable. Do we do that often?

Thirdly, making himself available to God had an immediate effect on Moses – he was suddenly intensely aware of the awesome nature of God. The song we have just heard, Holy Ground, expressed that awareness of being in God's presence beautifully. Verse 5 of our passage tells us Moses took off his shoes and verse 6 that he hid his face. These acts of reverence show he knew how unworthy he was in comparison to God. We read that Moses was afraid to look at God, because of God's holiness.

I don't know if it is the same in Canterbury, but in London there has been a lot of fear expressed in the last few months. This could be because people have been reminded that many aspects of our lives are beyond our control, in this case determined by microscopic viruses and other people's actions. But the kind of fear that Moses had in the presence of God was the complete opposite of this. Rather than fear of his life being out of control, he was convinced that there is a Holy God who is in control. Instead of causing him to run away, it caused Moses to worship.

So, in the encounter with the burning bush, God communicated with Moses in ways that he could understand, and which were more than words – there was the sign of fire, and the power of God's presence. And Moses also took steps himself which helped him to be ready to hear God's call. He was curious to see what God was doing, he stepped forward to make himself available and open to God, and he acknowledged God's holiness and awesome power. Then he was ready to hear God's call.

So we have heard that God has a interested and open listener in Moses. What's more there is a two way conversation - despite the awe and the holy nature of the meeting, Moses speaks with God. There are three aspects of this conversation that I'd like to reflect on.

First, Moses' expression that he is inadequate for the job that God has asked him to do.

Moses is a changed man, no longer an Egyptian Prince walking at will in Egypt, but a humble Midianite shepherd. Yet God tells Moses he is sending him back to Egypt, to the Pharaoh himself, to bring the Hebrews out of Egypt. Moses would know only too well the resistance that he would meet with, and it didn't help that he'd still be on record as an runaway murderer. He would also know how difficult it would be to approach the Hebrews out of the blue with a message.

So not surprisingly, Moses is reluctant and raises objections, and raises more in later chapters. Moses reasoned that he was inadequate all by himself, and, of course, he was right.

But he was not being asked to do it alone – he would receive the help of God Himself – "I will be with you", the Lord says. God just wanted Moses' willingness and then He will do the rest.

And that applies to us too. God may call us to tasks that seem too difficult, but he doesn't ask us to do them alone, he offers us his resources. He doesn't leave us in the lurch, he doesn't take us beyond our breaking point, or what we can bear.

God does not want us to hide behind our inadequacies as Moses tried to do, but to look beyond ourselves to the greater resources available.

Secondly, Moses wants to know God's name.

For us today this might seem a unusual request. But let's put it into context, Egypt had a *lot* of gods. It's been estimated that there were over 2,000 deities, some well-known, most less so. All had names, individual personalities, and characteristics. Moses wanted to know God's name so that the Hebrew people would know exactly who had sent him to them.

The answer that came - I AM – may seem perhaps at first enigmatic, even puzzling. Yet if you think about it, it conveys God's eternal power and unchangeable character. It's not I WAS it's I AM. It's really all they and we needed to know. So the instruction for Moses was to tell the Israelites "I AM has sent you" - the same worshipped by generations before (the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, and of Isaac and of Jacob), and by generations to come, "This is my name for ever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation".

In a world of change where values and laws change constantly - usually each day at around 5 o'clock in the afternoon! In a world which was unimaginable barely five months ago, when our vocabularies lacked the words bubble, furlough, and zoom. In a world with what seems to be an uncertain future. Surely this is a time to seek and find stability and security in our unchanging God. The God who appeared to Moses is the very same God who can live in us today.

God is the same, yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). As we sometimes sing: "In this fragile world [he is] the only firm foundation". So let us put our trust in him.

Thirdly, Moses is told to go and tell.

God tells Moses to tell the Hebrews what he has heard. You can imagine how Moses would have told it. He couldn't possibly have omitted the spectacle of the burning bush and why he had approached it.

One of the most convincing ways to tell others about God is to simply describe what he has done through Jesus for us, for you, for me. We all have a story to tell, we may not have a dramatic conversion experience – if we do that is great – but hearing about the simple occasions in our lives where we have felt God at work can really engage others. We all know how we like to listen to a story, and a personal story so much the better.

I once was in a house group which ran a series based on a book *Becoming a Contagious Christian*. Perhaps that's a sensitive phrase at this moment in time, and I won't elaborate the analogy, but I think you know what being a contagious Christian can mean.

The Story of Moses' life is a gripping one, with its ups and downs: threatened infanticide, an opulent lifestyle in the Egyptian Court, a murder, an escape, a lowly herdsman, and now, God's Messenger. And things are only just starting - you will have the privilege of learning more through Moses' story over the coming weeks.

So praise God that: he is with us, we know his name, and though Jesus his holy character. We have stories to tell of what he has done and the confidence that he will bring each one of us to the future that his love has planned for us.

Jane and Richard Nicholas

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