

I am

Exodus 3:1-15

The 20th Century Christian Writer, AW Tozer, once made a stunning claim.

He said that what comes into our minds when we think about God, is the most important thing about us.

It's a stunning claim,
What comes into our minds when we think about God
Is the most important thing about us

God-ology, theology, is the most important activity of our brains.

Because what we worship
And what we believe to be God,
Is what we will move towards
It will be what we become.

If we believe in the success God of our power, the God of Roman Emperors, the God of certain politicians, then that is what we become, the God who lifts up the strong and crushes the weak - if that's our God, then that is what we are drawn towards.

If we believe in the God of pleasure, the God of living for the moment now, if we believe that there is nothing beyond being made happy in this moment now, then we will find versions of that limited God in one of the many entertainments we use to distract ourselves, numb ourselves, pass away the time, in a kind of meaningless semi-pleasurable bubble.

The God we believe in, is the God we become.

I wonder what God that Moses believed in Exodus chapter 3, verses 1.

I think it's really important to imagine what that God might be...

Remember the story of Moses is that he was born an Israelite, a persecuted people in the most powerful empire known in the world; he was there because his people's God, his people of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had led them there to safety; and now many generations later, there had arisen a king who knew not the story of Joseph.

So Moses spent the first half of his life hiding - his success was based on him pretending to be a member of the Egyptian royal family;
And the moment he acted upon his true identity, as an Israelite, possibly because it had been held down for so long, he enacted that with violence, but it was a cowardly, hidden show of force, and when discovered he ran away.

Then for forty years he lived in the wilderness with Jethro his father in law, a priest of Midian, in a desert, tending sheep. And later on we know he had forgotten the story of Abraham and Isaac, because we know his sons were not circumcised.

So you have three visions of God,
God of Abraham, Jacob and Isaac - but that God is not working any more

God of Pharaoh, Egyptians - great to be around, but you have to hide who really are.

God of Midian, Jethro, Wilderness - this is a really interesting vision of God - we know that some idea of God must be part of this, because we know that Jethro is a priest.

I think the idea of God is here is limited, local, unambitious, pleasant, enough for me.
I think this image of God is very interesting, because if I am honest I think this is the image of God that we have settled for.

And Moses in his forty years has become this image of God,
So he tends sheep in the wilderness, far away from trouble, far away from home,
Far away from the memory of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob
Untroubled, enough,
Small, local, disappointing, but not disturbing.

And I wonder if for many of us,
I wonder if for me,
That has become my image of God,
Middle aged God
Given up God.

If you had asked Moses which God he believed in he might have said
"I believe in the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob"
But the God he drifted towards was the domestic god of median, the shepherds God, God who looks after my patch, and that will do.

I think he might have also believed in the Egyptian gods as well, but believed that they had charge over Egypt, they were strong enough, but he had done enough to get away from them - they were big, but if you ran away far enough, you could also hide.

But I think he had given up on his people's God's. He was no longer around - his people's cries were not heard, there was no justice, the great stories were hundreds of years ago. And I think not only had Moses given up on Israel's God, I think that he maybe believed that Israel's God had also given up on him.

Because of his mistakes, because he hadn't lived up to potential, because he had squandered his privilege, squandered his early promise; maybe because he simply lived with the human doubts that every single one of us lives with, he maybe thought that God had given up on him.

So Israel's God - Given up
Egypt's powerful God - over there, out of harms way

Midian's local, domestic gods, they will do me.

So that is why we read in verse 1

"And Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father in law, priest of Midian, he was driving the flock in the desert, and he came to the mountain of God, to Horeb".

And then he sees a bush, and he turns towards the bush.

I think that that is Moses' great redeeming gift, moment,
I think the whole story hangs on this moment where Moses turns aside in his curiosity to this bush.

The whole story would not be the same if he had been kind to have just gone, there's a wee fire - there was something about Moses looking, turning aside, long enough to notice that the flame was not consuming the bush, and willing enough for this moment to stop driving the sheep, and to be open to wonder.

The whole story hangs on this latent curiosity, spirituality, capacity for wonder in Moses.

Moses has been in presence of the gift, but he has to be prepared to turn aside and notice it.

Years ago I remember I went through a whole spate of funerals where I would go to the family - can you tell me how your Mum met your Dad, "oh I think it was at the dancing, yes it was the dancing - the Denniston Palais"

How did your Dad meet your Mum - oh it was a dance, at the miner's Welfare in Blantyre

How did your Mum meet your Dad - at the Barras, they met at the dancing.

And I thought how much life would have been missed if these encounters had not happened at the dancing.

And there was a whole dance within the dance, on these occasions, a choreographed routine, where one would say - and it was often the guy -

"Are you dancin'"

And rather than a simple "yes, no", the dance had to be played out

"Are you askin'"

And there was a further invitation here not to hide, to be clear about what was being asked here

"I'm askin'"

Well am asking...

There could be a further layer of remove, if you didn't do the asking yourself, you got a friend to do it, an emissary, a messenger...

"My friend wants to know if you're dancing"

"My mate wants to dance with you"

And life, decades of holidays and homes and families, depended on these few crucial moments of turning aside, of noticing, of slowing down... it's the same here... listen to the text...

"And an angel of the Lord" the word angel literally means "Messenger"
"And an angel of the Lord was seen to him in the flames of fire in the middle of the bush
And Moses say 'Behold, the Bush burns with fire, but the bush is not consumed
And Moses said "Let me turn aside,
And I will see this great seeing and why the bush does not burn

And the Lord saw that he turned aside, to look at the bush
And God called to him, from the middle of the bush

And he said
Moshe
Moshe

And Moses said
"Behold me"

And he said
"Do not draw near closer, and take off your sandals from your feet because the place where you
are standing is holy ground"

And he said
"I am the God"... which God, which God, might we be wondering - the God of the Egyptians,
who win, but who were successfully over there
The God of Midian, the tidy, domestic, just enough god
Or Could it be, could it be?
"I am the God of your Fathers"...

The God of Abraham
The God of Isaac
The God of Jacob

And what does Moses do - Moses hid, because he was afraid to look at God.

And then God says

I have seen seen the misery of my people
Who are in Egypt
I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters
For I know their pains

And I have come down
To deliver them from the Egyptians
And to bring them out of that land to a good and broad land
A land flowing with milk and honey

To the country of the Canaanites

The Hittites
The Perizzites
The Amorites
The Hives
And the Jebusites

For the cry of the Israelites has come to me
I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them

So come, I will send YOU

And I love that what God has done is
Taken Moses passion for justice, which was thwarted, and violent
Taken his ability to drive across a desert,
Taken his previous lineage in being Pharaoh's palace

Takes what was bubbling, but thwarted
Takes what was latent, and failed
Takes what was seemingly inconsequential,
And takes all that within him
And says I am will send YOU

Moses says
"Who am I"

And God says
"I will be with you"

There is a rhythm of Moses and God with each other, dancing together perhaps
There is something in that Moses said to God Behold Me
And God says I am with you.

And then God says I will give you a sign
This is very unusual for God to give a sign,
But then the sign is
On the mountain where you are now, you will come and worship me
This is something of a not very useful sign
Once everything has happened, you will realise that I was with you...
Couldn't there be something more useful, something more immediate
Well actually there is - the burning bush, that is a sign
But this is a different kind of sign
The sign seems to be, you will come back to the same place, only it will be different because you
will have been on a journey to get there
The sign is that you will have a story
The sign is that this will somehow make some kind of sense
There

And then Moses says, and I love him for this,

Because he knows that in order to do this, he still needs a bigger understanding of God,
He knows that even here perhaps he needs his theology expanded.

I know that the reason he says is because he needs a name to take to the Israelite leaders
But what name does he think will convince them
He needs a name to take to himself.

And this is where God refuses to sit within the confines of a name
The Midianites with their local gods will give their gods names
And the Egyptians with their empire gods will give their gods names

But God refuses a name of confinement,
A name that ties him down,
Biggest to have a finite name, will give you a finite god.

"I am whom I am"
Which can mean
"I will be who I will be"
Which can mean
"I am defined in terms only of myself"
Which can mean
"My identity will be revealed in all that you will see me do"
Which can mean
"I am the source of all being"

I am beyond what any description can give.

I think this is a story about the importance of turning aside,
Of playing the dance that opens you up to the place of God
Of existing with a wonder that dares to pause.

- **Slow down to turn Aside**

I think this is a story that says you don't given a vision without a mission
God is going to blow your mind, then he is also going to ask you to do something.

- **What is the mission?**

I think this is a story that that says that when God calls us, calls our broken selves
He takes all the fragments of our identity, all our different bits, and brings them to a whole.

- **Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee**

It's a story about encounter,
That we say to God here I am, and God says I am
And that Moses will one day not hide, he'll not hide any more
One day he will speak to God face to face

- **Let us boldly enter the presence of God**

I think this is a story that points to Christ,
The one who will enter the place of human slavery to bring us back out

The one who will bring us into the presence of God so that we do not hide but enter boldly
The one who will call himself I am, not as burning bush, but as human being

- Let us put our trust in Christ

But today, I want us through God,
Through encounter with God,
To have our vision of expanded, exploded.

A friend of mine, Glendon once told the story of John Bell visiting his Church, and during the afternoon meeting with the congregation, to talk about worship.

He gave each member of the congregation a sweetie, and said to them, place your sweetie as near to this cross,
And people took their sweets, and placed them at various points around the cross,
But one woman took her sweet and stomped right out the door with it,

When she came back in, and they were having the feedback session,
John said to her "I noticed that you went round out the door"
And she said "I cannot stand the worship in this Church, I hate it, we never sing any songs that anyone likes, I love the songs that we used to sing, and I can't stand the music, and I can't stand the musicians and I can't stand his worship"

And John said, "You sound like someone who needs to let go of their Sunday school faith, and inhabit a faith which belongs to you, and your life now as an adult"

And Glendon said, this was high risk, but this was exactly what needed to be said.

This is something I have been saying a lot,
That our vision of God must be expanded, so that God is not trapped within a name, or a line
Because the minute you draw a line, God steps outside of it,

For me, it has simply been encounter with God in contemplative prayer, and the number of times, that stuff just happen, people I encounter, the wonder of the world, the places I find myself.

Whenever we draw a line, God steps outside of it.

This was Jesus' reading of this story, remember he was confronted by the Sadducees, whose view of God is limited to this life, and because their view of God is limited their mode with the powers of that time is compromise and conformity and allyship, and they try to catch out Jesus and he will not have it, this small God, so he says to them,
Remember the story of the bush, and remember God said he was the God of Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob
And he is the God of the living and not of the dead.

***. Something here about our need of God to change ***

Your view of God is the single most important thing. About you,

And our view of God expands,
In the singing of praise
In the contemplation of his story
In turning aside to the bush
In going on the mission and receiving the sign at the end of the mission when the whole thing
makes sense

It happens when God sets fires to the bush
And catches our attention

May God do this,
And explode every narrow understanding
Every limited thought
Everything that held God down
May God blow you into the future
With a vision of God's self
God will be
Who
God will be

AMEN