

TAKE OFF YOUR SANDALS



MESSAGE 30TH AUGUST 2020

Exodus 3:1-15

Can you recall once seeing something that didn't make sense – something unlike anything you had ever seen before? Do you recall rubbing your eyes and saying, 'I must be seeing things!?' Personally, if I can't work out an explanation for something I see, I start to feel a little unnerved. My instinct is to leave it alone and walk away while trying to think of a rational explanation.

We have no other categories to explain unknown phenomena than the ones familiar to us. As a result, we quite often go into denial, pretending everything is as it used to be. Unfortunately, that is happening right now with some people ignoring warnings about COVID 19 – or, dare I say it, about climate change.

Moses must have thought he was seeing things, confronted with a bush on fire out there in the middle of nowhere, its green leaves clearly visible through the flames. The bush was on fire, but it was not being burnt. How could this be?

Before we go any further, let's take a look at this character, Moses. We are told he was born to a Hebrew mother in Egypt. The Hebrews – the ancient Israelites, in the time before Israel was a nation – had been living as semi-nomadic groups possibly in the eastern part of the Sinai Peninsula. It is not hard to imagine that whenever the rains failed to come, the Nile delta was an attractive destination for these people. We are talking about the period roughly between 1900 and 1200 BCE. It suited the Egyptians to allow them in, because they needed large pools of cheap labour for the countless monuments, temples, tombs and other structures they constructed in this period. It is likely that many of these labourers were treated as slaves and could not escape. We are told in Exodus 1 that because the Hebrews multiplied rapidly, the pharaoh of Moses's day sought to eradicate all male Hebrew children in one whole generation to keep the numbers down. Moses, as the story goes, is rescued through the ingenuity of his mother and sister, and the compassion of Pharaoh's daughter, who raises Moses as her adopted son.

Moses grows up as an Egyptian in the Pharaoh's house but knows he is a Hebrew. He is keenly aware of the cruelty being meted out to his fellow Hebrews and has an overwhelming desire for justice. One day, perhaps when he is still in his heady teens, he lashes out against an Egyptian whom he sees beating a Hebrew labourer and kills him. Word gets out, and Moses flees. He ends up being taken in by the family of a Midianite priest, Jethro. The Midianites lived east of the Jordan valley and possibly spread north-west into the Sinai Peninsula.

Moses marries into Jethro's clan and ends up a shepherd, tending Jethro's flocks. When one day Moses sees the burning bush, his curiosity is awakened. 'I have to take a look at this!', he says. Moses does not shy away from the burning bush, even though in such a lonely, barren place it could have seemed quite threatening. He could have said: It can't be. He could have ignored the prompting of God, turning away to continue with business as usual. He could have decided his priority lay in his responsibility to Jethro, to the animals, to his family. The burning bush didn't fit into his safe scheme of things. But had he ignored it, he would not have encountered God. He would not have become the leader we know him as.

How do we learn to recognise the promptings of God to look and listen? How do we gain the courage to let ourselves be unsettled by what we see, especially if it lies outside our comfort zone? I believe that our vision of resurrection as the triumph of life over death, the presence of God with us, the hope of the New Creation and our life as a community of believers – all these things – should enable us to see the challenges presented by the world in which we live, face them without looking away, and speak the truth about them to the world around us. If we, as people of faith and hope, do not have the courage to name things as they are, how can we expect others to do so?

Moses did not go looking for the supernatural intervention of God in this world. It was a very ordinary day for Moses. He was probably thinking his thoughts, now and then stopping to cast his eye over the herd, calling out to the stragglers, moving them on with his staff. Nothing unusual. God came to Moses. Moses did not go looking for God, but when God prompted, he stopped and looked.

It's tempting to assume that the more we see signs of God's intervention in this world, the more spiritual we are. It's tempting to think it's our job to go looking for miraculous signs of the Holy Spirit – miracle healings, visions and so on. But Jesus promised that he would give us the Advocate, the Spirit, to be with us always. God comes to us. Immanuel – God with us. We don't have to go looking. That's what our baptism and Holy Communion are all about. However, we do have to be open to the promptings that come when we least expect them. Sometimes God prompts us to rethink what we are doing, perhaps to take on a new task. God's prompting usually comes in very ordinary ways, not in a burning bush: through friends, through Scripture, through something else we read, through prayer, through taking part in a new activity, or even through something we hear in the news. God's wake-up call. And often we don't recognise it as being the prompting of God until the Spirit has moved us in a new direction. Then we look back and praise the God of disruption who gave us the strength to look, listen and follow. Ever had an experience like that?

Being called to move out of our comfort zone is not comfortable. Moses struggles with it. God tells Moses to take off his sandals because he is standing on holy ground. The ground is dry and stony. You can't move around easily if you don't protect the soles of your feet. Removing your shoes means being 'grounded': it means you feel every stone, every rough surface, the sharp stalks of grass. There is nothing between you and the earth. Nothing between you as a created human being and the rest

of the created world. It's back to basics. We are stripped of our protections, made to see ourselves as clay, robbed of our illusion of being lords over the earth.

As important as they are for our stability in this society, the trappings we build around us – our sturdy houses, our insurance, our vehicles and furniture and bank balances, for example – can keep us from feeling the stones beneath our feet, from sensing our connection to God as created, vulnerable beings. These things give us the illusion of being self-sufficient. Spiritually, don't we need to take off our sandals and stand before God, individually and collectively, in the realisation that all these things are but dust in the end – to be free of them inwardly so that God can speak to us? To see ourselves in the light of God? In that process of grounding we might realise which of our trappings, including the dreams we cling to, we can reduce or do away with. It isn't a comfortable thought, but if God is leading us there, God will show us the way.

Perhaps this COVID time is an apt time to reflect on our priorities, not just as individuals but as a society and a church: what do we hold sacred that is not sacred at all? What about our society's obsession with economic growth, and the bind it has got us into: using more and more of the world's natural resources to produce more and more goods for more and more consumers to spend more and more money, creating ever more jobs to give us greater prosperity? Where is that leading us? Who are the losers? What is the cost to God's creation, of which we are a part? Collectively perhaps it is time to take off our sandals and realise that the ground we are standing on is sacred.

Back to Moses. He feels his vulnerability. God speaks: 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' Moses is afraid. He hides his face, not daring to look.

God then tells Moses why God has 'come down' and is calling him. 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry ... I know their suffering, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, to bring them out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey ...' (verses 7–8a).

There is so much in these verses. God has 'come down' to earth. Heaven and earth touch in the burning bush, but God does not consume the earth, or Moses. God 'comes down' – enters into this world – out of compassion and love. 'I know their suffering', God says. This is no superficial cognitive knowing. Looking at that statement from the perspective of the gospel, we see Jesus suffering on the cross, bearing all the suffering of God's people, of God's created world, out of love and mercy. God comes 'down' to us in Jesus. 'I know their suffering.' God comes to Moses to deliver God's people out of slavery and bring them into a fertile, fruitful land. God comes to us in Jesus to heal us of our bondage to the selfishness and cruelty that we call sin; to reconcile the whole of the creation to God, joining heaven and earth forever in what the gospels refer to as the Kingdom of God on this earth.

God invites Moses to be part of the people's liberation. 'So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' 'So *come*, I will *send* you.' God invites us and God sends us. The mission is of God, not of ourselves. We are partners, and God's invitation shows us how deeply God desires relationship with us.

If you think Moses would jump at the invitation, think again. He has a history in Egypt, and it's not a pretty one. This is someone who had to flee the country he grew up in because he was wanted for

murder. God chooses this person to confront the Pharaoh and request the people's release. Rather an unlikely choice, don't you think?

But then, Jesus' choice of disciples was not always what we might think it should be. Consider Peter, the blustering fisherman who thought he knew better than Jesus, as in the passage we read this morning, and considered himself the most loyal of all the disciples – until he denied Jesus three times after Jesus' arrest. Peter, who wanted to do things on his own – walking on water, for example, or cutting off the ear of the high priest's slave upon Jesus' arrest. Was not this man a liability to the cause? Could he not bring Jesus into discredit? Didn't Jesus know who he was choosing?

In his second letter to the believers in Corinth, Paul says, 'We have this treasure' – this gospel, this hope, this 'Spirit who gives life' – 'in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us'. What mercy, that God should invite such fallible people as Moses, Peter and us into partnership in healing and reconciling this world. What forgiveness and love.

Moses is not a very willing participant. 'Who am I', he says, 'that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' God says, 'I will be with you'. This should be enough, but Moses argues with God. Here comes the 'But –'. '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?"' Like all displaced people, the Hebrews have lost their cultural and spiritual memory. They can no longer recall the name of the God of their ancestors.

It sounds like Moses is trying to get out of this job. And yet, his question is legitimate. Who is this God – this God of the Israelites' past?

We have already been told that the God who appears to Moses is none other than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the fathers, the patriarchs. In the beginnings of the story of the Israelites, God is linked to specific human beings, their stories, the places they came from and their descendants. This is reiterated in verse 15. But in this amazing text, God is also revealed in a different way. 'God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM". This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you."'

So Moses is first told to tell the people that God is simply 'I AM'. For a people in bondage, that might not sound very convincing.

The Hebrew words for 'I AM WHO I AM' are fluid and dynamic. It is not possible to distinguish between present and future tenses. In fact, Martin Luther translates this name as 'I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE' – 'Ich werde sein, der ich sein werde'. God's people will know who God is. It is the promise of revelation and recognition. God self-defines as the future, a future of promise.

God says to Moses, 'I will be with you'. The word 'I will be' (one word in Hebrew) is the same as the name 'I AM' or 'I WILL BE'. The ongoing presence of God with us is implicit in the very name of God, in God's nature. Immanuel, God with us. [Isaiah 7:14]

We learn who God is partly through our past journey with God, but we must never limit God to the images and memories of our past experience. God is not only the God of our forefathers and foremothers. As soon as we try to put God in a box, no matter how closely that box might

correspond to our individual or collective memory of what God has done for us, we limit God to our static and fragmented perceptions, perceptions that cannot embrace the future of promise. Limiting our perception of God like that means keeping our sandals on – just as Peter was ‘keeping his sandals on’, figuratively speaking, when he rebuked Jesus for revealing that he, Jesus, would undergo much suffering and rise on the third day: “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” Jesus had to put Peter squarely in his place. Take off your sandals, Peter. Peter wanted to secure the status quo and keep Jesus with them, but this, said Jesus, was of Satan. Peter apparently overlooked Jesus’ statement that he would rise again. Sin is our blindness to the saving power of God, to the future of God with us that may not yet be visible. We need to take off our sandals and look.

God is God of the past, and of the present: I AM WHO I AM. Look around and you can see me, God tells us. You will see me revealed in the wonders of nature, as the Psalms tell us, in the neighbour Jesus tells us to love, and in the Spirit’s promptings. You will find me in the Scriptures, in your baptism, in communion. But the name of God given to Moses, to pass on to the people enslaved in Egypt, is also a promise: I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE. God tells us to expect the unexpected – to take off our sandals and be vulnerable to God’s future, whatever that might look like – as individuals, and as a church.

AMEN

Glenine Hamlyn