

Naming Our Hope and Power

Matthew 16:21–28 • Exodus 3:1–15

Ex. 3:1 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. **2** There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. **3** So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."

Ex. 3:4 When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

Ex. 3:5 "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." **6** Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

Ex. 3:7 The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. **8** So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. **9** And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. **10** So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

Ex. 3:11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

Ex. 3:12 And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

Ex. 3:13 Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

Ex. 3:14 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.'"

Do you ever feel like there's not enough time? What are some of the things we feel like there's never enough time for?

[Take responses from the congregation.]

Sure. Of course, there are also times when deadlines are on us, and we get into a time crunch. In a sense, our experience of time is very weird—sometimes stretching out before us

with endless possibilities and sometimes shrinking until we are funneled down to one moment. From the day we are born, we live our lives moment by moment, but always forward. Our passage for today is one of the most important passages you will ever read, because it not only deals with time and the nature of the universe, but the meaning of life and how to escape the restrictions of time.

First, God's Name says it all! In verse 14, God says, "I AM who I AM"—or the Hebrew could mean "I WILL BE who I WILL BE." But if we are thinking about how we experience time, God has left out something. Did you notice? God left out "I WAS who I WAS." Remember that God created time and space. Like a painter that stands outside her painting, or an inventor who stands outside their invention, God stands outside of time and space. Unlike a painter or inventor, God has chosen to be involved in life within the universe, but God is not limited by time and the universe. So where we are limited to living our life moment by moment only forward, God just is. In fact, in every time and every place, God is. Which means God is—in our past—and God is—with us now—and God is—with us in the future. Even though we are not there yet, God is in our future already. The idea that God is in all times at the same time, and still God is not bound by time, that is what eternity actually is. God says, "I AM."

Second, God calls us. As many of you know, I love weddings, and when I run the wedding rehearsals, someone from the wedding party always asks me, "How do I know where to look?" I always say, "Wherever the action is, that's where you are supposed to look." That's really true in our passage for today. So we are going to go through God's words and look for the action. Let's start with verse 7. What's the first verb you see that God speaks? Good! God sees—my people and what they are going through. What's the next verb? Yes! God hears—the cries of His people who are hurting. What's next? That's right. God knows/is concerned—what they are going through matters to God. Another one? Come down? Whoa! God is stepping in?! Wow! To do what? Three more verbs here. Yes, to deliver, to rescue. Once a friend of mine had a retriever that found a rabbit's nest and went to bite one of the little ones. The owner pounced on the dog, and before it could bite the baby rabbit, forced the dog's jaws open, and snatched the baby rabbit out. The word for rescue here is like that, God is "snatching" the Hebrews from the jaws of Egypt. Alright! Two more verbs. "To bring up." They are going to leave one land and go to another, to leave one life and find another, to leave the old and find the new. They are going to rise! God will bring them up. The last verb? Do you see it there? "Now, go! Because I have seen and heard and care...because I have come down to rescue and bring up...therefore, God says to Moses, "You go. I am sending you."" Because God sees and hears and cares and has come down to rescue people and bring them up, God says to us, "You go! I am sending you!"

These words, these commands, are a little unnerving, and they start to awaken our reservations. We might start by pointing out that since God has come all this way, we would hate to deprive God of the chance to do even more. Or we might try to suggest that really we don't have time right now. Would tomorrow work? Or we could try what Moses does, and say, "Who am I to do this?" Which brings us to third, God is with us. In a sense, this is the answer to all our reservations, struggles and excuses. There's always a reason not to be one of God's team, an excuse not to make one of God's plays for the lost, the last and the least. We can always trot out some rationale for why we can't help this person in this moment. We are, after all, finite beings—limited in energy and money and time. God's call to adventure never begins conveniently, but if God has grasped our attention (with or without the burning bush), then we become aware of God's Presence. We become aware that in our moment to moment life, we

have reached a turning point. This is the moment. This is the time when we make a decision to follow God's lead—or not—to let the One Who is outside of time guide our steps—or not—to learn to trust that the Presence of God comes with a promise to rescue and bring up, not just the other person, but us! God is with us!

Here we are face-to-face with one of the great mysteries of all existence: that the God who sees and hears and cares *has come down*—to meet Moses and to be in Jesus Christ, who said, "I AM the bread of life...I AM the good shepherd...I AM the vine..." But even more incredible than God coming down is this crazy idea of God working in and through us—just like Moses and Jesus—to free those who are enslaved, to bring hope to the hopeless, and to love those who are left out. In these historic days, when the pandemic has pressed us, and our stress levels are rising, and our anxieties about our own lives tangle with our anxieties for our community and our nation, God has come down. In these days when life feels like it is coming unglued, God has come down to be in our homes and our work and our play to penetrate our hearts, to carry our burdens, and to inspire our compassion. When in our moment-to-moment lives we take a moment and give it to God Who has come down to us, in that moment we touch eternity. When we live for God in doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God, we are indeed living into the future, drinking deeply of God's refreshing Spirit which is both beyond time and with us in all things. Instead of being on the world's time, we step outside and live in God's time on God's terms. The more we love like God does, live like Jesus showed, the more we will laugh with joy as our narrow, time-bound limitations are swallowed up in victory!