

Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up 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 Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

But Moses said to God, "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?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations."

It would seem that Scripture is, most simply, about discovering who God is and who we are. It's about learning where God likes to get involved and where we are from. In Genesis, we learn that God is one who makes promises. In Genesis, we learn that God is a god of wilderness who is as comfortable in the creation God speaks into existence as we might be sitting down at a meal we cooked to delicious perfection. In Genesis, we learn of our divine conception, of the dust and ashes from which we come, of how God breathes life into us. We learn of our ancient forefathers and mothers of many names: Abraham, Hagar, Melchizedek, and Dinah.

In Exodus, though, something changes. The book begins with a genealogy, as if we are at risk of forgetting it's the same story. Exodus 1:8 then says, "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." The setting and the characters of the story have changed. The place is now, claustrophobically, Egypt. Pharaoh is in charge and when he speaks, things happen. The Hebrews are many and enslaved. And we learn something new about God—something that it's hard to imagine not knowing. For the first time in the Scriptures—in all of salvation history, in fact—we hear God whose name is verb, is action, Yahweh which means "I will be who I will be," saying, "I have observed the misery of my people...I have heard their cry...I know their suffering...and I have come to set them free!" We learn that our God—this Yahweh—is the God of liberation.

The setting of God's compassionate utterance has a reminder for us about God and something important to teach us about ourselves. First, Yahweh remains quite comfortable in the home Yahweh built—a home of tall oaks and flowing rivers, of rhododendron flowers and mountain summits. Yahweh remains a God of wilderness, which is why we should not be surprised—and here is the lesson about ourselves—that we encounter God in the wilderness too: in the wild places of Appalachia, in Florida swamps and on Rocky Mountain slopes—but also in the wild places of our hearts.

When our reading for today begins, our ears should perk up when we hear where Moses is: he is "beyond the wilderness." He led his flock into the wild, and then, for some reason, he went a little farther. Often times we don't even realize that we are lost or searching until we are found by God. When Yahweh finds him, Moses hardly could have realized that wilderness and liberation are dancing partners—that God was in the process of liberating him through the wilderness, not from it, and that he was about to get caught up in the wild work of God's liberation.

Sometimes our feet follow our hearts and other times our hearts follow behind our feet. Moses' seems to have escaped his inner wildness—that identity crisis of his youth—by marriage, fatherhood, and a respectable job.[1]But he keeps returning to the wilderness. His new sources of identity are shattered—not so much by a burning bush—but by Yahweh saying, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." No wonder Moses hid his face as this God says to him, "You may be an Egyptian by adoption and a Midianite by marriage, but you are a

Hebrew by birth!”[2] It’s as if Yahweh is saying that Moses’ liberation will somehow be incomplete while his people remain enslaved.

For Moses, wilderness takes the lead and liberation follows: an order God reverses and then reverses again for the next flock Moses shepherds. But I think Moses, along with Isaiah, Elijah, John the Baptist, and Jesus, would confirm that we must first go to the wilderness ourselves seeking liberation before we can guide others to wild lands. This was certainly true for the freed slaves of the mid-19th century who returned at great peril to Southern plantations to liberate others on the Underground Railroad. They knew the way to freedom land.

The Great Dismal Swamp wilderness on the Virginia-North Carolina border near the coast was the first stop for many slaves on their own Exodus journey. I couldn’t help but imagine swampy hideouts as I paddled through the long straight canals of the swamp a few years ago. Each stroke of my kayak paddle swirled the dark tannic waters like a spoon stirring sugar into a cup of breakfast tea.

The canals were actually built by slaves for farmers to float goods to the market, which makes me wonder what kind of Exodus tune God was humming with these slaves as they dug those ditches in a mosquito infested hell. They would have gotten to know well the alligator paths and tricky fog of the swamp where some would, one night, slip into the liberation of wilderness. Perhaps it was no accident that Moses came to know well the paths and trickery of Pharaoh’s Egypt where he would one day return from the wilderness on a mission of liberation.

Our ancestral slave owners and taskmasters found St. Paul more suitable to their needs than the Gospels, though I imagine they glossed over passages like 2 Corinthians 3:17 which says, “The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” Somehow their carefully tailored biblical readings allowed Exodus through, not realizing it is one of the all-time most dangerous stories of in all of Scripture.[3] It is dangerous because in it we learn that behind the movement of God is a wake of liberation, and that liberation often occurs in the wild places and times of our world and our lives.

The thing about wilderness is that it is easy to get lost and scared there. When the sun sets and the temperature drops your life can be on the line. And this year it rather feels like the wilderness is pressing in on us from every side. Violence meets violence in the streets. Disease travels through cities and towns like something out of the history books. It would be easy for us -- like it was easy for Moses -- to not want to go so far into the wild, to be disinterested in stepping off the established paths where we know the way.

Perhaps we prefer the comfort and routine of bondage to the jungle that surrounds our prison. It makes me wonder how many times Moses ventured out to the wilderness before he went just a little bit farther. How long was the bush burning before he walked by? Maybe we know too well

the stories of those who let God in or seek God out. I can think of few things scarier than liberation, especially if God then expects me to start lugging around bolt cutters.

What does all of this mean for a church with not only “wilderness” in its name, but also wilderness in its spiritual DNA? It means we can go there. We can venture into the wilderness that surrounds us in these mountains just like Moses did to encounter God uniquely. We can invite God into the wilderness of our hearts and lives because, it turns out, God is already active there. We might begin to travel along unexpected pathways that lead toward Freedom Land. We might even bring others into the wilderness with ministries of contemplation and recreation. The nudge is to return to the wilderness that shaped us because there God has liberated us before and there God will do it again.

[1] William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, in *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Double Day, 1999), 221.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1, ed. Neil M. Alexander (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 691.

[4] <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2016/01/call-to-wild-text>.