

“Moses and the Burning Bush”

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Exodus 3:1–15 (NRSVUE)

1 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. 2 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. 3 Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." 4 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." 5 Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 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.

7 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, 8 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. 9 The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the

Egyptians oppress them. 10 So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" 12 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." 13 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?" 14 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.'" 15 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."

May the words of my mouth
And the meditations of all of our hearts
Be acceptable in thy sight
O God, our Rock and our redeemer.
Amen

In the chapter preceding ours, we see Moses, nursed by his own Hebrew mother and adopted into the household of Pharaoh. He is a man of two identities—at once the oppressed and the oppressor—Hebrew and Egyptian.

But, as both Abraham Lincoln and Jesus will remind us, a house divided against itself cannot stand. It should come as no surprise then that the two identities war against one another. Observing a cruel Egyptian taskmaster beating an enslaved Hebrew, the Hebrew within Moses rises up in defiance. The Hebrew within—rises up against the Egyptian within—and kills the taskmaster.

But when his fellow children of Israel see Moses—not knowing that he is one of them—they do not see themselves in him—they see only the Egyptian oppressor. They denounce him, they cry bloody murder, until he is forced to flee into the wilderness for fear of reprisals from the Egyptians. He is a man without a people, claimed by no one—neither Hebrew nor Egyptian. He is something new.

Historically, both the Rabbis and the Church have often interpreted the story of Exodus allegorically—seeing in it, not so much a merely literal history, but rather, the story of the soul's journey from bondage to liberation. It is a spiritual journey—the journey of the soul's return to God.

But that is not to say that the allegory has no social application. Many African Americans have historically seen in this story an allegorical road map for their own political and social liberation. The Black Church has known for a long time that the spiritual and the political are intertwined—as inextricably as body and soul.

Which is to say, to fully live the Word of God in this story—to know the Truth and be set free—it is not enough for one to lose their physical chains—or to set free the ones they enslave themselves—we must also lose our spiritual chains—whether we find ourselves among the Hebrews or the Egyptians, because allegorically both represent a state of spiritual bondage, the master and the enslaved. Indeed, they are both two sides of the same coin—part of a system—or as the philosopher Hegel put it, a dialectic.

There are no masters without enslaved people—and there are no enslaved people without masters. That is why, if Moses were to lead the people out of the house of bondage, then he had to flee to a foreign land, far from Hebrews and Egyptians alike—and become something new.

In any case, the spiritual chains are perhaps the tightest bonds of all. Spiritually, we internalize our own bondage, our bias becomes implicit, until quite unconsciously, we become our own jailers—enforcing our own spiritual imprisonment—whether oppressed or oppressor. We become part of a self-regulating system.

(It's just like when we start to get healthy, set boundaries, people around us very often get mad at us—it's like crabs in a bucket. If anyone tries to climb out, the other crabs try to pull him back in.)

At the end of the day, spiritual chains are bonds of despair. They make us believe that it cannot ever be any different—that the way things are is inevitable, or worse, the way things are intended to be. It becomes the very structure of reality. This is why racism, for instance, is so insidious, and why it is so hard for so many white folks to even admit the possibility of systemic racism. We can't see it—because it is everywhere—and because it is everywhere, it is nowhere. It's like my southern grandmother used to say—my Big Mama—that's we called her: "A fisherman don't smell his own stink." And unless something intervenes—some Exodus—some burning bush that causes us to turn aside...well, let's just say, this can't end well.

But thank God, there is a burning bush—there is something that calls us to turn aside—calls us, in every generation, for those who have eyes to see, to behold the living God in our midst, the one who comes to set the captives free.

Our passage begins at the point where Moses begins his new life. He is something new—neither Hebrew nor Egyptian—he is a new creation. We begin as absolute beginners.

But let's not romanticize this. This spiritual state of being can make us very vulnerable and uncomfortable. It's scary as hell. We can find ourselves longing to return to the familiarity we knew—even if that familiarity was suffocating us—just as the children of Israel, wandering in the desert, will long to be back in Egypt. Make America Great Again.

In any case, into this void, into this spiritual state of the loss of the old identity—God bursts into our lives like a burning bush that is not consumed, calling us to turn aside from our fear and paralysis. Calling us to become something new.

And in that moment, just like with Moses, God calls us by name. Claims us. ("Moses, Moses!") We no longer belong to Pharaoh. We no longer belong to the vicissitudes of existence, or tribe, or vagaries of cruel fate—we belong to God—the one who hears our cries of distress and misery.

Hear the Good News: God calls us by name—and then reveals the Divine Name that we might know and be known—that we might be in communion. "Ehya-Asher-Ehya," God says, "I AM WHO I AM, or I AM WHO I WILL BE, or I AM WHO CAUSES ALL TO COME INTO BEING." The Hebrew is flexible enough to contain all these meanings—just as God in God's fullness contains all that is. But the larger point to be made is that freedom is just another name for love—it has nothing to do with the might makes right of Pharaoh, or power over others. It is about the give and take of love—about knowing and being known.

All things result from this revelation of the Divine Name—the most intimate essence of God—this divine act of Grace—this divine act of giving—(that we might receive and then, give in turn)—this new creation—this new birth. This revelation marks the beginning of our new life beyond Pharaoh. Beyond bondage. Beyond death. Beyond even unconscious racism, the oppressor within. The burning bush burns eternally, calling us to turn aside—if we only have eyes to see.

Let us become something new—neither oppressed nor oppressor—and dream us up a new Promisedland. Amen.