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My Story, God's Story
Moses - Exodus 3

Each week, we gather and tell a story. It is an old story, one that has been around for a very long time. It is a family story, but it isn't just about our own family.

Rather, it is about our extended family of sorts. It is a story rich in meaning, and one that, even though we are separated by generations from those who experienced it firsthand, feels strangely familiar. Maybe that is because these stories are about life, no matter when you lived.

We are talking about both our own personal story and God's story; our story, as found in our day-to-day lives, our ups and downs, our joys and struggles, and God's story, as found in scriptures. Each story illuminates the other. Knowing God's story helps me understand my own life's story, and knowing my own life stories helps me understand God's story.

Today we hear the story of Moses, who is a central figure in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. Moses' story is told starting with the second book of the Bible, Exodus, and not ending until the end of Deuteronomy, three books later. There is much we could talk about when we look at Moses' story. Today we will just focus on Exodus, chapter three. But let me give you background on the story.

The book of Exodus starts with the ending of the story of Joseph, which we heard last week. His family story ends with a list of descendants. The text then says,

In all, Jacob had seventy direct descendants. **6** In time, Joseph and each of his brothers died, ending that generation. **7** But their descendants had many children and grandchildren. In fact, they multiplied so quickly that they soon filled the land. (Exodus 1:5b-7)

But then,

A new king came to the throne of Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph or what he had done. **9** He told his people, "These Israelites are becoming a threat to us because there are so many of them. **10** We must find a way to put an end to this. If we don't and if war breaks out, they will join our enemies and fight against us. Then they will escape from the country." **11** So the Egyptians made the Israelites their slaves and put brutal slave drivers over them, hoping to wear them down under heavy burdens. (Exodus 1:8-11)

The Hebrew people become slaves. Subjugated by the Egyptians, they were forced into labor, doing the difficult work. No longer is their story — the story of Joseph, who saved the Egyptians from famine — known and respected. Now they are a threat; now they need to be controlled.

It is into this time that Moses is born. Scriptures say he was a Hebrew brought into Pharaoh's home by Pharaoh's daughter. Then the text says,

11 Many years later, when Moses had grown up, he went out to visit his people, the Israelites, and he saw how hard they were forced to work. During his visit, he

saw an Egyptian beating one of the Hebrew slaves. **12** After looking around to make sure no one was watching, Moses killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. **13** The next day, as Moses was out visiting his people again, he saw two Hebrew men fighting. "What are you doing, hitting your neighbor like that?" Moses said to the one in the wrong. **14** "Who do you think you are?" the man replied. "Who appointed you to be our prince and judge? Do you plan to kill me as you killed that Egyptian yesterday?" Moses was badly frightened because he realized that everyone knew what he had done. **15** And sure enough, when Pharaoh heard about it, he gave orders to have Moses arrested and killed. But Moses fled from Pharaoh and escaped to the land of Midian. (Exodus 2:11-15)

In Midian, Moses marries and has a son. His life continues in this new land. Then the text says,

23 Years passed, and the king of Egypt died. But the Israelites still groaned beneath their burden of slavery. They cried out for help, and their pleas for deliverance rose up to God. **24** God heard their cries and remembered his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. **25** He looked down on the Israelites and felt deep concern for their welfare. (Genesis 2:23-25)

Here is our main text for the day: Genesis 3:1-17

1 One day Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he went deep into the wilderness near Sinai, the mountain of God. **2** Suddenly, the angel of the LORD appeared to him as a blazing fire in a bush. Moses was amazed because the bush was engulfed in flames, but it didn't burn up. **3** "Amazing!" Moses said to himself. "Why isn't that bush burning up? I must go over to see this." **4** When the LORD saw that he had caught Moses' attention, God called to him from the bush, "Moses! Moses!" "Here I am!" Moses replied. **5** "Do not come any closer," God told him. "Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground." **6** Then he said, "I am the God of your ancestors – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." When Moses heard this, he hid his face in his hands because he was afraid to look at God.

7 Then the LORD told him, "You can be sure I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries for deliverance from their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. **8** So I have come to rescue them from the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own good and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey – the land where the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites live. **9** The cries of the people of Israel have reached me, and I have seen how the Egyptians have oppressed them with heavy tasks. **10** Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You will lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

11 "But who am I to appear before Pharaoh?" Moses asked God. "How can you expect me to lead the Israelites out of Egypt?" **12** Then God told him, "I will be with you. And this will serve as proof that I have sent you: When you have brought the Israelites out of Egypt, you will return here to worship God at this

very mountain." **13** But Moses protested, "If I go to the people of Israel and tell them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' they won't believe me. They will ask, 'Which god are you talking about? What is his name?' Then what should I tell them?" **14** God replied, "I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS. ^{F7} Just tell them, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" **15** God also said, "Tell them, 'The LORD, ^{F8} the God of your ancestors – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you.' This will be my name forever; it has always been my name, and it will be used throughout all generations.

16 "Now go and call together all the leaders of Israel. Tell them, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – appeared to me in a burning bush. He said, "You can be sure that I am watching over you and have seen what is happening to you in Egypt. **17** I promise to rescue you from the oppression of the Egyptians. I will lead you to the land now occupied by the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites – a land flowing with milk and honey."

Let's look at a couple things. First, the burning bush. What do you make of this—God appearing in a burning bush? The text is a little confused, describing both "an angel of the LORD" and "the LORD" as being in the bush. This is similar to a couple of weeks ago, when Sarah and Abraham, and then Lot, were visited by mysterious beings named both as angels and, later, God. It seems that in some real, yet mysterious, way, the essence of God was there.

Moses is both drawn in by the unusual appearance and fearful of it. As God addresses him, "Moses, Moses!," He replies, "Here I am", and then hears that he is standing on holy land. He must remove his shoes, as one does in humility before what is awesome. God says, "I am the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob..." Moses, upon hearing this, covers his face. He is fearful of looking into the awesomeness of God head-on.

Like Lot's wife, who looked back as she fled the burning city and was changed into salt, Moses knows that to look upon God would change him forever. We will come back to this later....

Why would God appear in a bush? I am thinking that God should have at least made Godself know in a big tree—not a shrubbery, no matter how nice.

Rabbis have wondered whether, in fact, God's presence in a bush spoke of God's identifying with the pain and suffering that the people felt. God says,

"You can be sure I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries for deliverance from their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. **8** So I have come to rescue them from the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own good and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey..."

While the Hebrews were suffering at the hands of the Egyptians, who used them as slaves, God appears in the lowly bush, identifying with their low stature, their commonness. In the lowly bush, God makes real how much he is also suffering.

God commissions Moses to go to the mighty Pharaoh and lead his people out of Egypt. But Moses isn't too sure about this. He says,

"If I go to the people of Israel and tell them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' they won't believe me. They will ask, 'Which god are you talking about? What is his name?' Then what should I tell them?" 14 God replied, "I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS. Just tell them, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" 15 God also said, "Tell them, '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 will be my name forever; it has always been my name, and it will be used throughout all generations. (Exodus 3:13-15)

Let's look at this name for God: "I AM THE ONE WHO ALWAYS IS." Others translate it as: "I AM WHO I AM" or "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." It is when this is translated into the third person form that it becomes *Yahweh*, *he is* or *he causes to be*. This name, *Yahweh*, becomes the name by which the God of Israel is known. Other names, such as *Elohim* (God) and *El Shaddai* (Almighty God), are also used, but refer to this One God, *Yahweh*.

While God does reveal God's name to Moses, he doesn't take away the mystery of who God is. In fact, many writers who have explored God's name have developed a variety of ways of understanding the meaning of I AM, including:

- offering that it denotes God's absolute existence,
- God's being outside the realm of time
- and, according to the Kabbalists, God's name denoting the "Crown of creation, the very first thought and impulse of Will that initiated the creative process." (commentary on name of God from the Internet)

Where does this story connect with our lives?

What jumps out at me is best expressed in a part of a poem by Ann Weems, from "Family Faith Stories". She writes:

In the absence
 Of a burning bush
 Or a blinding light
 Or a voice that claims us,
 How does one know for sure
 That it is God who is calling?

I have never seen a burning bush, or met an angel, but I have heard God speak in my life. How do we hear God? How do we come to know God's will? There are no "three easy steps to knowing God's will." Sorry.

When I was at the Academy for Spiritual Formation, we had a wonderful speaker who shared about how, throughout time, people have sought to hear God speak into their lives, to guide them in their choices, to lead them forward, and how, oftentimes, people would ask, how can I be sure it is God and not just my imagination or my wishful thinking? That is a good question.

God—for the most part—has to use the tools we have, and so imagination, "coincidence", conversations, books and movies, music, dreams and many other things are ways God speaks to us.

So don't be afraid of your inner voice, don't be afraid to connect the dots (if rather loosely). Listen, then test it out with a friend who shares your faith; get feedback, be open, use your mind. Yes, there are times when it *is* wishful thinking or, I find, thinking much affected by being tired and worn out. But let me suggest this tool to help you grow in hearing God in today.

God's presence is oftentimes known best in retrospect. That is, as we look back on our lives, we can see where God was. I find taking the time to review our life, to discover where God was, enables me to see more clearly God's leading today.

Remember earlier when we read Exodus 3, and how, in the text, Moses looks away because he is fearful of looking at the awesomeness of God head-on? Later in Moses' story, he does want to see God face-to-face. If he can do that, maybe he can follow God more fully; maybe things will be clearer, he believes.

Listen to the text; this is Exodus 33, 30 chapters after today's main text:

18 Then Moses had one more request. "Please let me see your glorious presence," he said. **19** The LORD replied, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will call out my name, 'the LORD,' to you. I will show kindness to anyone I choose, and I will show mercy to anyone I choose. **20** But you may not look directly at my face, for no one may see me and live." **21** The LORD continued, "Stand here on this rock beside me. **22** As my glorious presence passes by, I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed. **23** Then I will remove my hand, and you will see me from behind. But my face will not be seen."

Moses does not get to see God face-to-face, but has to be satisfied with seeing where God has been, seeing God from behind.

When I look at my life, its ups and downs, its failures and hurts, its joys, what jumps out at me is how, sometimes for the first time, I can see where God was. It is only as I review my life that I see more fully where God was present. Developing this spiritual practice enables us to grow into seeing God's hand more clearly today. Starting with the past—maybe distant past, maybe just early today. is important.

Today is All Saints' Day, the day in the church when we reflect upon the lives of those we have loved and lost. And as I think about those I have known and lost, I think about how maybe it is only in retrospect that we come to realize what people mean to us, how much he or she changed us, or how much—in our suffering at their loss—God was with us.

During prayer time, we are going to pray a form of prayer that helps us develop the vision to see where God has been. It is called the Examination of Conscience.

Let us pray...