

ENCOUNTERING THE GOD WHO IS

Exodus 3:1-22

Illustrative opening - white board and pictures.

In the heat of a London summer in 1725, a young couple gave birth to a baby boy and named him John, after his father. The boy's mother, Elizabeth, died when he was 6 years old and he was left to the care of his irreligious seafaring father. At the age of 18 young John was captured and pressed into service with the Royal Navy.

He quickly began living the debauched life common to the sailors he was alongside. Later, reflecting on this time, he wrote of himself this: "I was capable of anything; I had not the least fear of God before my eyes, nor so far as I remember the least sensibility of conscience." In spite of this, John eventually became so depressed with the seafaring life that on one of his visits home he deserted his ship only to be caught and flogged with eight dozen lashes.

John later transferred ships to the *Pegasus*, a slave ship that worked the West African coast. He found out quickly that he didn't get along very well with the crew of that ship, and on a slave trading mission to some small islands off the coast of Sierra Leone the ship and its crew abandoned him on one of the islands.

He lived there under the rule of a brutal slave trader and his wife as a virtual slave himself in almost destitute circumstances. His situation was so desperate that even the African slaves would try to smuggle him food from their own rations. After a year and a half in cruel captivity John knew there was nothing he could do to get himself out and he began to wonder if he would ever be delivered from his hopeless captivity. How would he ever be rescued from this dreadful island?

It wasn't long before salvation would arrive in the form of a providential encounter. It happened that a passing British ship, after seeing some smoke, laid anchor on the very island John was on. The ship also just happened to be captained by a man who knew John's father and had been on the lookout for him. The captain was able to bargain for John's release and eventually returned him to England. But it was this providential encounter that spared John's life and rescued him from the slavery and oppression he found himself in.

What Exodus 3 is saying to us this morning is that getting out can only happen through an encounter. It doesn't happen by resolving to be a better person. We don't move forward on

this journey from slavery to salvation by trying harder, cleaning up our lives, coming to church every Sunday, and being nice to our neighbors. Exodus says to us that the way we get out, the way we move from slavery to salvation is to encounter God. How you become a Christian, how you come to faith, *and* how you grow as a Christian, how you move forward in the Christian life ultimately all rooted in encountering God,

What do I mean by encountering God? This is one of those terms that can mean so many things to so many people that in the end it means nothing. Here's what I mean. An encounter with God means being confronted at the very core of our being with the reality of who God is and what he's done. Let me say that again: When we encounter God, the deepest part of us, our very core, is confronted with the reality of who God is and what he has done.

So what does an encounter with God look like? Well, that is the question I hope to answer this morning. Exodus is so helpful for us because it frames so much of what it has to say to us through the life of Moses, a man just like us. And so this morning, this little vignette from Moses' life, where Moses' encounters God, offers us a paradigm of what encountering God looks like. In Moses' experience we see an archetype, a pattern for an encounter with God. And there are three elements that we are going to see, three components to an encounter: Three things that really mark what it means to have the core of who we are confronted with his reality. As we encounter God he draws us in, he shows us who he is, and he sends us out.

1. God draws us in.

It ultimately isn't us who encounter God, but God who encounters us. An encounter with God is always and only initiated by God.

Chapter 3 opens with Moses, out in the fields, keeping his father-in-law's sheep. And if you remember Ch. 2, Moses had grown up far from the pastoral setting that we find him in here. He had grown up in the city, in Pharaoh's palace, in the courts of power, where he had had every privilege, the best education, the best opportunities, the best of everything. But then Moses, thinking that God rescues through human might and power, took Israel's freedom into his own hands, killing an Egyptian and as a result ended up in exile in Midian.

And while Moses is in Midian he meets his bride, and they start a family together. Moses gets along well with his father-in-law who gives him a job, and life begins to feel quite comfortable. The text isn't explicit here, but it seems Moses begins to like the simplicity of this rural life. Returning to Egypt, returning to the city, returning to God's people, is far from his mind. But Moses is out one day with Jethro's flock and God draws him in.

An encounter with God is always initiated by God. God draws us in.

For most of you, whether you are a Christian or not, life can be a lot like it was for Moses. Moses isn't searching for God here. He is very content with the status quo, for life to stay as it is. His is so busy with the tasks of ordinary life, caring for his family, doing his job, that he really doesn't have much time for God.

You can't just stop and decide, I'm going to encounter God today. The truth is for most of us is that you are so busy with your family, your job, your own stuff, with the busyness of ordinary life, that you are walking around in life with blinders on and head focused down on your next step, that unless God encounters you, you will never encounter him. Unless God draws you in, you will never connect to him. You'll be too caught up by what's in front of you to see what's above you.

But God puts something in Moses' path. God get his attention. How? God puts something before him that doesn't make sense. A bush that is burning but doesn't burn up. When God draws you in he puts something before you that doesn't make sense, that doesn't add up. That may be a trial or difficulty that you can't make sense of. It may be something wonderful that you just can't comprehend.

I remember C.S. Lewis' own story of being drawn in. Before Lewis became a Christian he had a deep and profound experience of longing that he could describe in no other way than to call it "joy". In his autobiography he describes it this way:

"In a sense the central story of my life is about nothing else... [The story of my life] is that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy. Joy has indeed one [distinct] characteristic, the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again... I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever exchange it for all the pleasures in the world."

Before he became a Christian Lewis couldn't wrap his mind around this deep experience of joy he felt. God had put something before him that didn't make sense and through that God drew him in.

But there is something we need to do. We need to respond. You see, you could just as easily go through life and ignore the burning bushes God puts in front of you, but look what Moses does. In vv. 3-4 the text says that he turned aside. I love that word. It literally means to take a detour. It's as if Moses steps out of the path that life is going down, this freeway of busyness, steps out of traffic for a moment, and turns toward God.

What is it in your life that might be God drawing you in? God is drawing you in, will you turn aside? If you are not a Christian this morning I want you to think about the things that are

going on in your life. Both the challenges and the joys. Might these be God's tools to confront you with who he is and what he's done? If you are a Christian here this morning, this is just as important for you. For you to move forward as a Christian you need to continue encountering God through his Word, in prayer, in daily relationship with him. If you want to grow in him, it won't happen unless you recognize how he's drawing you in and turn aside to meet him. On this journey from slavery to salvation this is essential.

2. God shows us who he is.

And when God shows us who he is, it both lowers us down and it raises us up. What do I mean by that? Well, look at Moses' experience (vv. 4-6)

The picture we have here is of Moses hitting the dirt. He gets low. Look throughout Scripture when individuals encounter God. What is their first reaction? They're humbled, they're fearful, they're ashamed, they are appalled at their own sin, they despise themselves in his presence. Look across the Bible and that's what you'll find whether it is Moses or Isaiah or Ezekiel or the Apostle John, they are utterly humbled in his presence. Why is that?

Well there are two things we see in the text that tell us why.

The first is the burning bush itself. Do you see that God calls to Moses out of the bush? Out of the fire? Fire isn't just a throw away image here. It's not like God could have just as easily appeared as a seven foot tall clown riding and unicycle and juggling and that would have just as easily captured Moses' attention. The fire is significant. It means something. Hebrews says that God is a consuming fire and as we go along in the book of Exodus you are going to see that God leads his people as a pillar of fire and that as God gives his people the law they are instructed to offer sacrifices to atone for their sin and those sacrifices are to be consumed by fire. So what is all this fire? The fire is representative of God's holiness. God is perfectly holy in all he is and all he does.

And so because God is holy he can't be approached lightly. Look at what he says, v. 5, "Do not come near." Don't stand next to me! he's saying. Paul says the same thing in 1 Tim. - that God dwells in unapproachable light. To approach Moses has to remove his sandals - it's a symbol of removing his filth, of only being able to come before God after he's been made clean.

God is holy and we are not, so when God encounters us, he lowers us down. We get a sense of our own humanness. We start to see that we are utterly sinful, broken and helpless and in need of him. R.C. Sproul puts it this way: "The clearest sensation that a human being has when he experiences the holy is an overpowering and overwhelming sense of creatureliness.

That is, when we are in the presence of God, we are humbled and become most aware of ourselves as creatures." When God shows us himself initially it lowers us down.

But there is an amazing reality here in the story because God doesn't leave us there. God raises us up. Here's where we begin to see the utter beauty of an encounter with God, because look what God is doing here. Look at how God calls out to Moses. "Moses, Moses," he says. And that means nothing to us. He repeated his name. He must have really wanted to get his attention. But think of the times in the Bible you see this doubling up of a name. Think of Jesus cry of Jerusalem. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," he says. "How often I have longed to gather your children together." And as Jesus was at the house of Mary and Martha, what does he say - "Martha, Martha, there is but one thing is necessary." This doubling up of a name is a communication of longing. When God says Moses, Moses - he's saying, I long for you to come near, but don't come near. But when Moses removes his sandals he is allowed to draw near, and he converses with God. Do you see the dignity God is giving to him?

And then God says this to Moses v. 12 - "But I will be with you." The consuming fire, the God of unapproachable light says, "I will be with you". God lowers us down, but then he raises us up.

All of what we're talking about of who God shows himself to be is summed up perfectly in the declaration of his name. Look down at verse 13. You know the story. As Moses converses with God, he says to God, if the people ask me who it is that sent me, what his name is, what am I supposed to say to them? And here is God's answer. Tell them "I am who I am". Tell them "I am" has sent me to you.

In the Bible a name is more than just what you're called. A name was the definition of who you were. It represented the core of who you were as a person. So when God says that his name is I am, he is saying something profound about himself. He is saying that all that needs to be said about him is that he simply is. He is the God who exists period. He is the eternal present tense, which means his is transcendent, above all things, there is nothing that affects him, but he affects everything. In theological terms this is called God's aseity. There you go, you can impress your friends with that big word.

But there is another implication to that name. It is not just that he is eternally present out there, but that he is eternally present right here... beside us, in our midst, with his people. Because God is unchanging, nothing can change his covenant commitment to rescue and redeem his people.

This utterly shatters all your boxes for God. You see, when you encounter the I Am, you encounter not what's you'd like God to be but who he IS. Some of you want a god who meets your needs, a god who fits in your boxes, a god in your own image.

There are some of you that don't understand God's transcendence, his holiness. You don't think God is really too concerned about judgment or discipline, what he's really concerned about is love. What God really wants is just for you to be happy. He's a nice little God. And you want god to accept and take and love everybody and whenever anyone says differently you say, "well my God would never do that."

Others of you don't understand God's imminence. You haven't ever encountered a God who is present with you. In fact, you're afraid of a God who would come near. It's easier to keep God at a distance, not to get too personal, too touchy-feely. You believe in a demanding God, a righteous God, but a God who you can work to please with your own goodness.

Do you see that it only when you encounter the God who IS that all your boxes are shattered. That you are confronted at the core of your being with his reality. A God who is both transcendent and imminent. A God who is at the same time holy and set apart from us, and present with us.

The ultimate confrontation with what doesn't make sense about the burning bush is being confronted with the nature of God himself. Why did Moses draw aside to look at the bush? Turn back to v. 2-3 again. The author says it twice to make sure we catch it. The bush is on fire, but is not consumed. The bush is burning, but it's not being burned. Look at Moses again. Here is Moses, dirtied by his sin and humanness, too filthy to approach God, and yet God allows him to approach, and not just approach but argue with God. Look what God allows him to say! How can God do that? How can Moses approach God and not be consumed by the consuming fire of God's holiness? How am I saying this morning that *you* encounter this utterly holy God and not be consumed?

Standing in the middle of the fire is a mediator. Look at verse 2. It tells us that in the flame was the angel of the Lord. Who is this angel? Well, He is not a normal angel. How do we know that? Well, in the text his words are God's words, they are essentially interchangeable. And he appears several times throughout the Old Testament, always in this capacity of speaking for God. Most commentators would say that if he is not some form of the pre-incarnate Jesus, at the very least he is a type that points us to Jesus.

How do you encounter God without being consumed by God's holiness. How do you encounter him and have him not just not destroy you, but promise you his presence? The

answer is that a mediator stood in the midst of the fire. Jesus bore the full brunt of God's holy wrath against your sin. He was consumed so that you wouldn't be. He was forsaken that you might be welcomed. He experienced the Father's absence, that you might experience his presence.

You see, to encounter God as he is we must encounter Jesus. Brothers and sisters, if you want to encounter God, come to Jesus.

Do you remember the story I told about John? He had encountered a captain that bargained his freedom, but he had yet to encounter God. The ship he was on had business on the seas for the next year. Then on Mar. 21, 1748 he awoke in the middle of the night to a violent storm. His room was filling with water. As he climbed the stairs toward the deck the captain of the ship stopped him and had him go back to fetch a knife. The man who took his place on deck was washed overboard. John worked the ship's pumps from three in the morning until noon, slept for an hour, and then took the wheel to steer the ship until midnight. At the helm he began to think back over his life and spiritual condition. For the first time in years he began to pray. God saved the ship and John spent the remainder of the trip praying and pouring over the Scriptures. By the time another storm hit while they were anchored off the coast of Ireland, John knew he had encountered God. Here are his own words: "I had satisfactory evidence in my own mind of the truth of the Gospel, and of its exact suitability to answer all my needs... I stood in need of an Almighty Savior; and such a one I found described in the New Testament." John had encountered the God who IS and it completely transformed him. In response to God's mercy in his own life, John went on to write the best known and most sung hymn ever: Amazing Grace. At the end of his life John Newton uttered those famous words, "Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior." He had encountered Jesus.

3. God sends us out.

An encounter always comes with a commission. When we meet God it is always in order that we join with him on his mission in the world. God blesses us in order that we would be a blessing. He draws us in to send us out.

Look at Moses. God tells him that he is going to deliver his people out of slavery and into the Promised Land. And it's through Moses' words and actions that God is going to do it.

And there is another implication here to God's encounter with Moses that we wouldn't see unless we were Moses. You see, Moses' removal of his sandals didn't just have to do with coming clean before God. Do you remember that Moses grew up in the palace. He wasn't always a shepherd. And in the palace there was only one class of person that removed their sandals. Slaves. God is saying to Moses, if you are going to follow me you are going to have to be mastered by me. Your life is at my disposal.

In the New Testament Paul uses a similar word to describe himself as God's bondservant. God is at liberty to use his followers as his wishes.

Then In verse 16 God tells Moses to 'Go'. And he explains to him that it isn't going to be easy, but there is a promise attached to it. God's presence. God says, I will be with you.

Does this remind you of anything? Jesus words in Matt. 28. What did Jesus say? Go and make disciples of all nations... and what is the promise? I will be with you.

Summit Christian - God hasn't put us here on the corner of 84th and Vickery on Sunday mornings for ourselves. He hasn't scattered us throughout our communities in Tacoma and Puyallup and Edgewood and Lakewood during the week, and in our jobs and in our families, in order that we would be blessed, but so that we would bless others. If you are a Christian here this morning you are a slave to God... how your life is used is up to him. I know that's a new concept for some of you. You've made your own decisions and set your own goals and not come under the rule of King Jesus. But there is no better Master. God encounters us so that we would join him in his story.

(Look at timeline). God is rescuing a people for himself out of the slavery and bondage of sin and death. God has redeemed his people through the death of Jesus. And one day God's people will dwell with him forever in a new heavens and a new earth. To move forward on that journey you need to be confronted with the reality of who he is and what he's done, and when that happens, he sends you out to join him in his mission to encounter others.