

Take the Staff  
Exodus 2:23–25, 3:1–15, 4:1-17  
John 8: 56-58

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Exodus 2:23–25, 3:1–15

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

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.

Exodus 4:1-17

Then Moses answered, “But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you.’” The Lord said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, “A staff.” And he said, “Throw it on the ground.” So he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it. Then the Lord said to Moses, “Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail” —so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand— “so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.” Again, the Lord said to him, “Put your hand inside your cloak.” He put his hand into his cloak; and when he took it out, his hand was leprous, as white as snow. Then God said, “Put your hand back into your cloak” —so he put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored like the rest of his body—

“If they will not believe you or heed the first sign, they may believe the second sign. If they will not believe even these two signs or heed you, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.”

But Moses said to the Lord, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” Then the Lord said to him, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.” But he said, “O my Lord, please send someone else.” Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, “What of your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him. Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs.”

### John 8: 56-58

Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad.’ Then the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.’

Once again, we have skipped ahead in the epic story of God and God’s people. The Book of Genesis ended in Egypt, where Jacob, (you remember God’s own con man Jacob), Jacob’s son Joseph had settled the family, in order to escape a famine back home. That’s a great story, involving a coat of many colors, slavers, dreams, forgiveness, and a touching family reunion. It is the stuff of Broadway and movies.<sup>1</sup> I encourage you to check it out, starting in Genesis 37. But we’re moving a bit further along here, a few generations later.

The descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and Sarah and Rebecca and Leah and Rachel and Bilhah and Zilpah, are living in Egypt. They have been fruitful and multiplied. However, the new Pharaoh<sup>2</sup> enslaves them. The people cry out to the God of their ancestors, and God takes notice of them.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (stage 1972, movie 2000) is actually pretty accurate.

<sup>2</sup> Likely Ramesses II, or Ramesses The Great.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramesses\\_II#As\\_the\\_pharaoh\\_of\\_the\\_Exodus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramesses_II#As_the_pharaoh_of_the_Exodus).

I have one quibble with the translation here: the original Hebrew doesn't just say that God took notice of them. It says that God knew them.<sup>3</sup> Knowing goes beyond mere noticing. When you know someone, they are more than just "somebody." They are Kevin, or Mary Jane, or Jan, or Paul. They are an individual, of value in and of themselves. Just like Jesus says that he knows his sheep and they follow him,<sup>4</sup> God knows God's people here. God remembers the covenant between God and God's people, and God keeps that covenant. The people have, as God promised Abraham, been fruitful and multiplied. But they are not yet in their own land, the land that God promised them.

We skipped over the beginning of Moses' life story, but the brief version is this: he is a Levite, meaning a descendant of Jacob's son, Levi. The Pharaoh was having Israelite infant boys killed, in order to kill off the race in slow motion. Moses was adopted by the daughter of the Pharaoh, and raised in luxury. He lost that position when he lost his temper and killed an overseer who was beating a Hebrew slave. He is reduced to shepherding for his father-in-law in Midian, a desert area in what is now Saudi Arabia.<sup>5</sup>

There, on Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, he finds a bush that is burning, but the fire is not burning the bush up. He goes to investigate this, and God speaks to him through the burning bush.

God identifies Godself to Moses in terms of relationship – "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." But it is not enough that Moses' ancestors had relationships with God. Moses must have a relationship with God.

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<sup>3</sup> My thanks to Rev. Dr. Rolf Jacobson for pointing this out in the "I Love to Tell the Story" podcast, episode #284.

<sup>4</sup> John 10:27.

<sup>5</sup> See Exodus 2 for this story. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midian> for the location of Midian.

Moses' first reaction is to hide his face. He knows that he is not worthy to speak with God, and God is speaking with him anyway.

God tells Moses that God has seen the suffering of God's people in Egypt, and God is sending Moses to bring the people out of slavery.

Moses gets a lot of criticism for his response to God's call. He tries to get out of this assignment no fewer than five times!

First, Moses says, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?" God says that God will go with him.

Second, Moses wants to know God's name, so that he can answer the question, "For whom are you speaking?" God gives him God's name. God says that God is the great I AM. In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus makes a pun and reveals that he is, in fact, the same God who was in the beginning.

Third, Moses wants a sign to show people, in case they call him a liar. God gives him a staff and a whole repertoire of signs he can show people that he is indeed speaking for God.

Fourth, Moses says that he has never been eloquent, he is slow of speech. God says that he will give Moses the words to say.

Fifth, Moses stops making excuses and just plain says, "Please send someone else." God gets angry here, and sends Moses' brother Aaron with him as his spokesperson. But God tells Moses to go, and to take the staff, with which to perform the signs.

Moses gets a lot of trouble for his response to God's call here, but I believe that we ought to cut him some slack.

Despite his storied history, Moses is a shepherd. He is really an ordinary guy. He is not a mighty warrior or a famous diplomat.

This is the all-time high point of Egyptian civilization.<sup>6</sup> God is telling him to go to the most powerful human being who has yet existed in any time, any place on the face of the planet. God is telling Moses to take Pharaoh's slaves and bring them out of Egypt, whether Pharaoh consents or not.

I believe that some hesitation, or at least some appreciation of the scope of the task that God is telling him to accomplish here, is appropriate. I cannot think of a time in the Bible when God's people were commanded to be stupid. It's usually the reverse – “be as wise as serpents, and as innocent as doves.”<sup>7</sup>

We should also note that Moses did some things right. He noticed the burning bush, and went to look at it. All too often in our world today, people don't notice anything that is not on the screen in their hand, and they miss what God is doing. We don't know how long that bush had been burning, waiting for someone to notice – the Bible doesn't say. But Moses noticed, and he went to find out what was happening. He acted on what he saw, and God called on him after he had acted.

Then, when he has finished raising objections, Moses does what God tells him to do.

So, what should we twenty-first-century Americans take from this story?

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<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramesses\\_II](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramesses_II)

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 10:16.

First, it is not enough that our ancestors had relationships with God. Yes, our ancestors did have those relationships, and that is a good thing, a wonderful thing. I can speak about ancestors who were missionaries and frontier-tamers. So can many of you.

Many of you can speak about congregation-founders and about the kind of people who quietly lived the Christian faith day in and day out for decades, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, loving their neighbors. Showing the world that love, not money, is the mark of greatness. That's great.

But it is not enough. Each of us must pursue a relationship with God, the God who wants to be in relationship with us. Moses did not get to coast on Abraham's and Isaac's and Jacob's coattails, and neither do we.

And our children and grandchildren don't get to coast on ours.

Second, and this is the scary part, each of us must take the staff. Each of us must, as part of that relationship with God, seek to do God's work in the world. That may be as simple as feeding people at HM3<sup>8</sup> or bringing a coat for the coat drive. That may be as complex as helping to find at least local solutions to the opiate crisis that is enveloping Southern and Central Ohio.

Third, I think that we all raise each of the objections that Moses raised, don't we? And we get Moses' answers.

We ask, "Who am I, to even talk about this issue?" The answer is that you are a child of the almighty God, made in God's image. And God will go with you.

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<sup>8</sup> Hoge Music, Message, Meal. A weekly Saturday night gathering at Hoge Memorial Presbyterian Church where the hungry are fed in body and soul. Churches in the area take turns providing food and worship leaders.

We ask, “Who says I need to care about this?” The God who made you, who knit you together in your mother’s womb. And the Jesus Christ who came down here, was born, lived, died, and was resurrected for you. And who told you to love your neighbor as yourself.

We ask, semi-hopefully, “What if people don’t take me seriously?” God has given us signs. People who give, expecting nothing in return, in today’s world, are a sign from God. Last Fall, we saw an elementary school nurse receive a bag of coats, and immediately start handing them out to kids who needed them, that morning. To her, that was a sign from God.

We claim that we do not have the words to say what needs to be said. Personally, that used to be one of my favorite excuses. Truly I tell you, God will give you the words.

Lastly, we finally say, “God, please send someone else.” And God gets frustrated, and sends other people with us. But we still have to go.

So, my sisters and brothers, take the staff. Go into God’s world and do God’s work there. And remember, God goes with you, and so do your brothers and sisters.

Amen.