

### **A reading from Exodus 3:1-15**

**3** 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."

<sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." <sup>6</sup> He said further, "I am the God of your ancestors, 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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, <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup> So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

<sup>11</sup> But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" <sup>12</sup> 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."

<sup>13</sup> 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?"

<sup>14</sup> 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.'" <sup>15</sup> 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.

**This ends the reading from the Book of Exodus. Thanks be to God.**

I hate going barefoot. It's one of my least favorite things to do. I don't even like wearing shoes without socks – I hate that feeling of the shoe leather against my feet. When Cheryl and I go on vacation, I bring sneakers, sandals and water shoes – footwear for every occasion. Yes, I go swimming with shoes on! I am the middle-aged doofus who wears socks with her sandals. Most of the time I look ridiculous. I own one pair of flip-flops – but I hate that little strap thing that wedges between my toes. It doesn't sit right. But I embrace my doofus-ness.

I have known for my whole life that this is one of my characterological flaws – that I don't go shoeless. In the early 1980s I traveled to India as part of a delegation from the World Council of Churches. The first week of the visit, I was part of a team working with a small group of women in New Delhi who had created a sewing collective to become economically independent.

When we arrived at the small building where they worked, we were asked to leave our shoes at the door. Of course this was true everywhere you went in India. The entrances were stacked with shoes and sandals. I almost had a meltdown right here – “I can't take off my shoes – my socks will get dirty, what if I step on a sewing pin? What if someone steals my shoes? People will make fun of me.” – and yet, after taking several deep breaths and calming my anxiety, I took off my shoes, put them in the pile of shoes and walked into the workroom. Every day. For a week.

In the second week of this journey, I took a bus ride to Agra about three hours outside of New Delhi. This is the town of The Taj Mahal. As I walked in through the exterior gates into this gorgeous, pristine setting, I reached down and took off my shoes.

I don't know what made me do it. There were no signs to take off your shoes. Many people were milling about barefoot but there were also a lot of people wearing sandals and shoes. But something inside of me experienced the moment as Holy. Something inside of me knew this was sacred ground. Something inside of me knew my role was to honor and respect the faith and place and work and Spirit.

Here I am, Lord.

There is an old story of a very long evening. The Search Committee for a new pastor had been going over resumé after resumé in hopes of finding the perfect minister. None so far. Tired of the whole process, they were about ready to call it a night when they came upon this letter of introduction from a candidate:

To the Pastor Search Committee:

It is my understanding that you are in the process of searching for a new pastor, and I would like to apply for the position.

I wish I could say that I am a terrific preacher, but I can't - actually, I stutter when I speak.

I wish I could say that I have an impressive educational background, but I can't - no college or seminary, just the school of "Hard Knocks."

I wish I could say I bring a wealth of experience to the job, but I can't - I have never been a pastor before (unless you count the flock of sheep I have been shepherding).

I wish I could say I have wonderful pastoral skills, but I can't - sometimes I lose my temper and have been known to get violent when upset. Once I even killed somebody, but, gracious folks that you are, I am certain you will not hold that against me.

I know churches these days want young ministers to attract young members, and I wish I could say that I am young, but I can't - actually, I am almost 80...but I still FEEL young.

With all that which might go against me, why am I applying for your position? Simple. One afternoon recently, the voice of God spoke to me and said I had been chosen to lead. I admit, I was a bit reluctant at first, but, here I am. I look forward to hearing from you and to leading you into an exciting new future.

Yours sincerely,

The Search Committee members looked at one another. The chairperson asked, "Well, what do you think?"

The rest of the committee was aghast. A stuttering, uneducated, inexperienced, arrogant, old, obviously neurotic, ex-murderer as their pastor? Somebody must be crazy! The chairperson eyed them all around before she added, "It is signed, 'Moses.'"

Here I am, Lord.

Whenever I read this story from the Book of Exodus, I am immediately transported to watching the movie "The Ten Commandments." Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 four-hour epic, is a classic. It's not aired as much as it once was. Used to be that every year around Easter, the movie was aired multiple times. Even before the advent of cable TV, one of the major networks would -- without fail -- screen the picture for those of us who could not seem to get their fill of Charlton Heston, at his best as Moses; Yul Brynner, bald and beautiful as Pharaoh Ramses; and Yvonne De Carlo, vamping as only she could, wooing the reluctant hero who has bigger fish to fry than the rich life of an Egyptian prince.

Why does that film linger in my mind? It was one of the very first big-budget biblical movies. I am old enough to have seen it on the big screen, with intermission. Did you know it won only one Academy Award, and that was for special effects? With what can be done now with CGI and all things computer, those effects look somewhat laughable. The great event of the parting of the sea (still worth seeing nonetheless) was performed by using Jell-O! Yes, Jell-O!

And when Moses confronts the burning bush, its unquenchable flame does not really look like an unquenchable flame, no matter the grand and deep voice of God booming from the fire. Because we live in a hugely visual culture, with all things media crowding our eyes, I think it fair to say that many more folks have seen the movie than have read the book, or perhaps better said, more people remember the movie than remember the book.

That's true of a lot of our culture, isn't it? We remember the movie but not the book. Movies assault the senses, grab us in their grasp and they don't let us go. Books, on the other hand, offer themselves to us, luring us to read and engage, but we may not be lured and may not engage.

So we are left with Heston as Moses, the hero figure set in our minds as very tall, extremely handsome, big-chested, blessed with a voice for the ages. Brynner is forever Ramses II, resistant to

follow the increasing demands of Moses, and shouting his repeated command, "So let it be written; so let it be done!" And De Carlo, madly in love with the fabled prophet, that has no biblical basis whatever.

The Bible simply goes in none of these directions. It focuses on a thoroughly reluctant Moses, reluctant to do what the burning bush demands that he do. The Bible focuses on YHWH, who is also reluctant, reluctant to be fully revealing of who YHWH is and who hides God's essence behind the incendiary bush.

The Bible's version has Moses offer five increasingly lame excuses why he of all people should not go back to Egypt to effect the release of the Israelites from slavery. He questions himself (Ex. 3:11), his God (Ex. 3:13), his lack of tricks among the very trick-filled Egyptians (Ex. 4:1-9), his supposed poor elocution (Ex. 4:10-12), and finally, and most truthfully, he asks God to choose someone else (Ex. 4:13), something he apparently has thought from the very minute the bush started talking.

Here is no big-chested, grandly-haired, man of power, but a little weasel, conniving to get out of the call of God. I always imagine that such a figure should be played by Woody Allen or Ben Stiller, or maybe Jim Carrey.

Yet, Here I am, Lord.

I think the Biblical story is closer to our reality than the movie ever was. It's true in my experience of God and life. There is a constant sense of "come closer -- stay away." Two opposing reactions to the same event.

It's the moment you want to get closer and get a better view and also, simultaneously, you want to stay away because it is all jumbled up, maybe a little weird and disconcerting but definitely not what we are used to. God says to us, come closer this is holy ground, no, stay away you might get burned. Come closer. Stay away.

"Look it's me," God says, "I know your people are in pain. I see what is happening. I am going to change all that, so it's okay, come closer. No, you're seeing a real fire, you will get burned, better stay away. If you get any closer, you will be have to do something, encounter and change something, become aware, shout and march and dance; you'll have to write new laws, get rid of the old oppression; you'll have to go to places that will be scary and less than ideal. Be careful because if you come any closer, you will get burned."

To tell you the truth, I think this is the way it always is. To know God, you have to go with God. Faith is a full contact, participation sport. You just can't sit back and expect to really know God, you have to get up off the couch and get in the game, take a risk, try something marvelous, reach for something you thought unachievable, step out onto the winding road the end of which you can't see from your doorstep.

You have to take off your shoes and step into the unknown. Here I am, Lord.

Amen.