

Great Is the Lord
Exodus 3:1-15
November 10, 2013

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up." When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending 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?" And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.' " God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation."

Every once in a while, a text comes up in the suggested weekly readings that carries a message most people miss. Today's reading from the book of Exodus is one of those texts. We all understand the reading is about the call of Moses. But I wonder how many of us heard the unmistakable cry, "Great is the Lord!"

Let's back up so we can lay some groundwork for this text. In the last chapter of Genesis, Joseph is about to die and he reassures the Israelites that God will be faithful to his promise to take them to the Promised Land. While waiting for the fulfillment of that promise, God kept another promise – he turned the children of Abraham into a great nation.

In the second chapter of Exodus, we find the birth of Moses, his flight to Midian after he killed an Egyptian, his marriage to Zipporah, and the death of Pharaoh. During the 430 years the Israelites spent in Egypt, they endured tremendous hardship. Now the time had come for them to leave Egypt and slavery. God remembered his promise to Abraham. With the call of Moses, God begins to unfold his plan for his people.

The story opens with Moses in a remote part of the Midian desert. This is 40 years after Moses left Egypt. For the last 40 years, Moses had been tending his father-in-law's sheep – or so it would seem. In reality, God was preparing Moses to tend his sheep for the next 40 years. Moses learned how to keep a group together, how to find water in the desert, and how to navigate a wilderness. **Great is the Lord!**

In verses 2 through 4, Moses comes face to face with God. The text says “*the angel of the Lord*” spoke to Moses from the burning bush. But this is no ordinary angel. Later, this angel will identify himself as “I AM WHO I AM.” No created angel could claim that title.

The term “*the angel of the Lord*” is a familiar expression used throughout the Old Testament for the second person of the Trinity before he took on human flesh. Before this, the angel of the Lord had appeared to Hagar, and as the voice from heaven telling Abraham not to kill Isaac.

Moses was witness to an awesome miracle. God, who had been silent for years, was speaking to Moses. He was calling Moses by name. That's important. God is not some impersonal supreme being who sits in heaven and wonders what's going on here on earth. God knows what's happening here. He is aware of the condition of his people – your condition and my condition. He knows each of us by name.

What's more, God cares for each of us. Each one of us is part of his plan for history. That means that God blends your history and my history into the world's history and the church's history to make all this work for the good according to his will. **Great is the Lord!**

Verses 5 and 6 give us God's opening remarks to Moses. The first thing God tells Moses is to take off his sandals. Moses was standing on holy ground. The ground wasn't holy because the ground was special. The ground was holy because at that moment it held the glory of God.

And Moses removed his sandals. That was not just an act of respect, it was also an act of reverence on the part of a sinful being in the presence of a holy God. We, too, should take off our sandals, so to speak. When we read or hear God's Word, when we worship here in church, in fact, in every moment of our lives, we should assume the air of respect due a holy God by his sinful people.

The second, and more important, part of this section comes in the Lord's words: *I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob*. This statement makes two points. First, God describes himself as a personal being. He is not just some great unknown or some ultimate first force. God is a person.

Second, God states that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He doesn't say he was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. By stating his lordship over the

patriarchs in the present tense, God is saying that these men are still living. They are alive with their God. Jesus quoted these words when he was speaking to the Sadducees, who didn't believe in life after death. Jesus said: *About the resurrection of the dead – have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead but of the living* (Mt 22:31-32). **Great is the Lord!**

Verses 7 through 10 are a great comfort to the child of God, who is seeking the Lord in prayer. Here we find that God not only hears our prayers, he answers our prayers. This entire text tells us that God will answer the prayers of his faithful people, but in his time not our time.

Remember, the Israelites had been praying for 430 years. I imagine some of those Israelites thought their prayers were falling on deaf ears. But their plight was never out of God's mind or his heart.

The time had come for their Savior-God to act. He steps into the Israelites history in such a dramatic way there was no doubt who was responsible for their deliverance. God issues the ultimate emancipation proclamation and leads his people from Egypt. God takes his people from slavery to the land of promise. More important, God kept his promises. In his time, God keeps his promises. **Great is the Lord!**

Our next section is verses 11 through 13. Forty years ago, Moses would probably have gladly accepted the role of deliverer. After all, Moses was raised in the house of Pharaoh as a prince of Egypt. But this is a different day. Forty years tending sheep in the desert has taught Moses some humility. Maybe too much humility. Moses doubts his ability to carry out God's assignment for him.

Yet God assured Moses that he would not be alone. God promised to be with Moses. It was God himself who commissioned Moses to be the one to rescue his people. God told Moses that his mission was so guaranteed that Moses would lead the people back to this very mountain to worship the great I AM.

Moses hasn't been the only person who felt inadequate to answer God's call on their life. Some of the others in the "I don't think I can do it" hall of fame are: Gideon, King Saul, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Paul. In his Sacristy Prayer, Martin Luther wrote: "Thou seest how unfit I am to administer rightly this great and responsible office, and had I been without thy aid and counsel, I would surely have ruined it all long ago."

God provides the needed strength to accomplish the tasks he assigns. Like the servants of God who have gone before us, what a comfort it is to know that we are never alone as we do the work of God. In his letter to the Roman churches, Paul writes: *If God is for us, who can be against us?* (Rom 8:31). **Great is the Lord!**

The last two verses hold one of the most meaningful passages in the Bible. God tells Moses: “*I AM WHO I AM.*” In this short sentence, God distinguishes himself as the God above all gods.

“*I AM WHO I AM,*” says that God is a personal being. God can think, feel, speak, decide, and act – all qualities beyond any idol. God is timeless, constant, and unchangeable. Nothing threatens the majesty of God. Martin Luther said, “God has no beginning nor end . . . and his name can never be ‘has been’ or ‘will be,’ but it must always be ‘Is.’”

In John’s Gospel, Jesus says: *Before Abraham was, I am!* (Jn 8:58). Jesus clearly identifies himself with the God of Israel. Through the Old Testament prophet Malachi, God says: *I the Lord do not change* (Mal3:6). And the author of the book of Hebrews tells us: *[Jesus is] the same yesterday and today and forever* (Heb 13:8). **Great is the Lord!**

God revealed himself to Moses and the Israelites to reassure them he had not forgotten them during their long bondage. God made good on the promises he made to their forefathers.

So, what does the underlying message of this text say to us. It says that we can be at peace no matter what is happening in our lives because God has a reason for everything. The things we see as trials and hardships are just God preparing us for some special mission.

It says that whether we see it or not, each of us is important. No matter how mundane and ordinary your life might seem, you are part of God’s good and wonderful plan for the history of this world and the history of his church.

It says that God knows you personally. God knows your name. He knows your name because it’s written in the Lamb’s book of life. That means that nothing in this world can change the fact that you will live with God forever. This life is not all there is. Your God is the God of the living, not the dead.

It says that God hears every one of your prayers. Never does the cry of one of his children escape the ears of the Lord. God also answers your prayers – but always in his time. Since God loves you enough to die for you, God will always answer your prayers with what you want or something better.

It says that you are never alone. God told the Israelites: *Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified ... for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you* (Deut 31:6). That promise is yours, too. Jesus promises to be with every believer to the very end. You can have confidence when you are doing the work of the Lord.

It says that our God never changes. God’s love for us is eternal. God’s help is eternal. God’s protection is eternal. God’s blessing on your life is eternal. Since God never changes, we can put our fullest trust in him.

What does this text say to us? It says, **Great is the Lord!**