

**Sermon File # 648**

**Scripture Text: Exodus 3:1-12**

**Sermon Title: *A Burning Bush and Bare Feet: When God Calls***

**Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and sermon preached at IBC Sunday 20 February 2011.**

***A Burning Bush and Bare Feet: When God Calls***

**Introduction:**

Open your Bibles with me to the Book of Exodus, as we continue this series of sermons begun this past Sunday. We'll be skipping over sections of this 40-chapter book, but also we can trust the Lord to lead us to consider those passages that he will use to speak to us in a special way. Last Sunday we looked in the 1<sup>st</sup> Chapter, as we observed God's lessons to us "in the days before deliverance," as the Israelites encountered the sudden hostility, persecution and attempted genocide by the Pharaoh (king) of Egypt. This cruel dictator didn't know about or regard the contribution that Joseph had made to Egypt and that entire part of the Near East during the famine some 400 years before. We noted that we today need to live in readiness for the last days of increased suffering before God's final deliverance.

Chapter 2 is the narrative of how God rescued baby Moses from the decree of Pharaoh to have all male Israelite babies slain. You're probably familiar with the story of Moses' mother hiding him in a basket in the Nile, where he was discovered and rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, who even enlisted Moses' mother to care for him. Moses then was reared in the royal household, being given a privileged upbringing. When he had grown up, he rescued a fellow Israelite by killing his assailant and hiding his body in the sand. The next day when he tried to settle a dispute between two Israelites, he realized his crime had become known. Eventually his crime was discovered even by Pharaoh, who attempting to kill Moses, forced him to flee Egypt for his life. Now Moses, as we find him in our text, is living as a refugee in the land of Midian (a region located on both sides of the Gulf of Aqaba—in the southern Sinai Peninsula and on the western edge of the Arabian Peninsula. See Oswalt, 127). There he was taken in by a pagan priest who gave Moses one of his daughters, Zipporah, to be his wife, who bore Moses a son, Gershom.

In our Scripture text for today we see Moses as a fugitive in this foreign land, as one who is reduced to serving his father-in-law as one of his shepherds. He's about 80 years of age by this time, when he meets God in a burning bush on the mountain that's to figure prominently in Exodus, perhaps Mt Jebel Musa near the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula (Ryken, 80).

Follow as I read **Exodus 3:1-12**.

The account of Moses' meeting God at the burning bush is one of the most widely known of Bible narratives. We use the phrase "a burning bush" when we speak of someone's dramatic encounter with God. And this was not only a dramatic but was a life-changing encounter of Moses with God. It was the "most momentous experience" (Durham, 30) in the life of one of the greatest figures in salvation history. This was the time when Moses was called by God to be his chosen instrument in delivering his people from bondage in Egypt to the entrance of the Promised Land.

What's exciting for us is that the experience of Moses's standing before God in his bare feet is a model for each one of us. I believe we should all be able to say we've stood before God's burning bush in our bare feet, on God's holy ground. This doesn't mean that your conversion experience needs to be as dramatic as was Moses' in order to be authentic, but the elements of God's call to salvation and to a life of service in following Jesus should be just as life-changing and profound. We are all candidates for God's call, and when God calls...

### **He chooses us**

There is a sense in which all may hear the general call of God, can at least be exposed to the message of God's love and saving grace, and yet not respond positively with faith. Jesus seems to address this possibility when he says that many are called (*NIV* "invited") but few are chosen (This was in the context of Jesus' parable of the wedding banquet, when he had described those who responded to the invitation and came adequately prepared. See Matthew 22:1-14). But there is what those in the Reformed tradition call "God's effectual call," when he speaks to us powerfully, giving evidence of saving grace. As in Moses' case, when God so chooses us...

### *He draws us*

From his birth, Moses was God's chosen child and instrument, as is evidenced by the way he was rescued from murderous Pharaoh and how he was cared for in childhood and into his middle years. At age 40, Moses killed an Egyptian in order to rescue a fellow Hebrew, which necessitated his flight to Midian as a refugee from Pharaoh. In our text we find him, after another 40 years, having inexplicably led this father in law's sheep far away from home to Mt Horeb. It was as though God was mysteriously drawing him, "by a higher force" (Enns, 95) toward this time and place of divine encounter.

Those of us who have come to God's saving grace through Christ agree with the words of Jesus, as we look back upon our conversion experience, that we did not choose him but rather he chose us (John 15:16). The Apostle Paul, affirming this, notes that the Father chose us in Christ before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4).

The Lord was drawing Moses to an encounter with him at a miraculously burning bush, which was none other than the heavenly fire of God, which burned without consuming the bush. The fire of God is a prominent feature throughout Exodus and elsewhere in the Old Testament (19:18; Genesis 15:17; 1 Kings 18:38f, Isaiah 33:14), and here with the angel of the Lord appearing in the fire is what is known as a theophany, a God-appearing (Durham, 30).

The angel of the Lord who appeared in this mysterious fire may have been more than "the Lord's officially authorized envoy" (Oswalt, *NLT*, 129). This angelic appearance in the miraculous fire may have been none other than "a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ" (Motyer, 51).

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was the great French mathematical genius and Christian apologist "whose faith grew in fits and starts before finally emerging in full maturity on November 23, 1654. It was on that evening that he had a 'definite conversion,' the result of a mystical vision that lasted two hours and which he called a "night of fire." In this powerful event, known as the 'Memorial,' Pascal experienced 'Fire. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, The God of Jacob. Not of the philosophers

and intellectuals.... The God of Jesus Christ.”

[http://catholiceducation.org/articles/catholic\\_stories/cs0011.html](http://catholiceducation.org/articles/catholic_stories/cs0011.html).

Your and my conversion experience was likely not as dramatic as Moses' or Pascal's, but the only way we could be awakened from spiritual death to the life of God was for the fire of God to burn in us and the light of Christ to shine upon us. John the Baptist said that Jesus would baptize us “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Luke 3:16). This Spirit baptism is the only way we can be awakened from spiritual death and receive the understanding of Christ as Lord and Savior:

“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6).

By grace working through the Spirit, we are drawn to the Christ of the cross by the marvelous attraction of his suffering love:

“But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32).

The Holy Spirit, the fire of God, must awaken our minds and hearts to listen to the truth of Christ.

When Christ draws us...

*He speaks to us*

Moses was drawn to the burning bush, but then God spoke to him from the fire. As ancient church father, Hilary of Poitiers noted, “The angel of the Lord is God himself: an angel when he is seen, the Lord when he is heard” (9). Later on in Exodus, Moses asked the Lord if he could see his face, but his request was denied. “No one may see me and live,” replied the Lord (33:20). As sinners we cannot see the unveiled glory of the Lord, which must await the Day when we will be glorified in the presence of God as the living Word (John 1:1-18). But now we may by the grace of God see some of his glory in the face of Christ and also in his spoken word.

God speaks to us through his word to us that brings about the understanding of faith, resulting in our conversion (Romans 10:6-13). God speaks to us about his holy love as revealed in Christ and his death on the cross; he speaks to us about our lost and sinful condition; we then are given a heart to turn from sin in repentance and to believe in and follow Jesus as Lord. When God speaks his word to us it is in fact Christ himself, the living Word, through the power of the Holy Spirit, working in us to see and to believe.

God draws us and speaks to us and then...

*He connects with us*

When the Lord drew Moses and spoke to him from the burning bush, he then told him to take off his sandals, “for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (5). Taking off one's shoes is a sign of reverence still practiced in the Middle East (Enns, 98). With Moses' standing before him with bare feet, the Lord introduced himself to him as the God of his fathers (6). Whatever else the significance of the bare feet on holy ground might be, it's clear that Moses had connected with the holiness of God. He was a sinner made righteous before God, able by grace to stand completely forgiven and made acceptable in the eyes of holy God. When God called Moses to stand before him he chose him

as an unworthy, broken sinner who had made a grievous error in Egypt 40 years before, and had been spending 40 years in exile in what appeared to be a mundane and empty existence.

As one has commented, “The grace that God has shown us through the cross enables us to approach the Holy One—not as Moses did, hiding his face in fear, but by faith, trusting the person and work of Jesus Christ” (Ryken, 83).

We are made righteous by the grace of God, giving us faith to believe. As the writer of Hebrews says, we are given “confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus” (10:19). When we trust that Jesus shed his blood for us to cleanse us from sin and make us right with God, and we turn from self-direction to follow Jesus as Lord, we have a totally new standing with God. In fact, because we are now personally related to God through Christ, our feet are always planted in the righteousness of Christ, standing in his grace (Romans 5:2). God now looks upon us as holy because he sees us in Christ and gives us grace to grow toward complete Christ-likeness, which is our new destiny. And unlike Moses (6), we don’t fear to look upon God because when we see Jesus we see God in his perfect, unconditional and transforming love.

Just as was true with Moses, so God chooses us, drawing us, speaking to us and connecting with us in a life-changing relationship. This is the call to salvation. But that call doesn’t stop with that initial experience when conversion begins. When God calls us also...

#### **He uses us**

God’s call to Moses was a call to conversion but also to a life of obedient living and service. God doesn’t call us just to keep us out of hell and to guarantee we’ll “go to heaven when we die,” which is about all the value some people place on conversion. God calls us into a dynamic relationship and a new level of living called eternal life, which changes our life orientation as well as our everlasting destination. It’s impossible to separate Moses’ call to saving faith and his call to service, but we do know that Moses began a relationship with God that began a progressive transformation in his character (Motyer, 49).

As with Moses, when we are called to a relationship with him he uses us in...

#### *His Kingdom work*

At the very beginning of his life-changing relationship, Moses received from the Lord a description of God’s plan to deliver his people in compassionate response to their suffering (7-9). God’s plan is to bring his chosen people into his everlasting Kingdom. And he has called all of his people to join him in that work of deliverance and expansion of the borders of his kingdom, until it embraces all who have been chosen for eternal life (Acts 13:48).

I realize that for most of us, there’s a time of separation and maturation in discipleship between God’s initial call to conversion and his subsequent call to service. Yet there is also a connection and unbroken continuity with the call to conversion and a life of service. If we have been truly converted and brought into a relationship with Christ, he begins to lead us immediately into a life of service, even though there may be subsequent calls to specific assignments.

God's plan is to expand his kingdom and to bring the entire world under his reign. The work of the Kingdom involves the spreading of the message of Christ to the ends of the earth (Mark 13:10); it also means bringing the kingdoms of this world into submission to the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (Revelation 11:15). The work before us is one of evangelistic proclamation but also one of social justice and acts of compassion that reveal Christ to the world and prepare the way of the Lord (Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 3:7-14; Romans 8:21f).

The amazing thing is that God uses us in the work of his kingdom and gives us...

### *Our overwhelming assignment*

After the Lord told Moses his agenda to deliver the Israelites, he then gave Moses an overwhelming assignment, at which Moses demurred. Moses, at age 80, exiled into Midian as a refugee from Pharaoh's justice, now unknown to his fellow Israelites back in Egypt, was called to join the Lord in his humanly impossible task of leading the people of God from bondage to freedom in the Promised land.

The Lord has a task for every one of his people. We have been saved and are being converted for a purpose—to glorify God through a life of obedience and service. And as was true for Moses, we might think and feel that God has forgotten us and that it's too late to devote ourselves to his service. But let Moses be our example. After 40 years in Midian in the service of his father-in-law as a shepherd tending his sheep, it must have seemed that God had passed him by.

You might think it's too late for you, that your best years are already spent, but when God calls he's saying that the time is just right to do what he has prepared for us to do. God would use Moses' previous 40 years in Egypt, where he received his education and knowledge of the culture and people. He would also use those 40 years in Midian, and those years of shepherding sheep, when God was teaching him lessons to prepare him to shepherd God's people in the wilderness. Moses probably thought his life had been detoured onto a "cul-de-sac" of uselessness. But God may simply be taking his time to give us time to train for a greater work (Kelly). Wherever you are in life, now is always the best time to give your life to him and follow him in surrender and joyful service. He will even use your past failures and defeats to better equip you with understanding and compassion.

When God gave this call, Moses was overwhelmed with a sense of inadequacy. Moses offered a series of objections to the Lord that stretch all the way to 4:17. At first he protested his inadequacies as a leader, then as a speaker, then finally begged off the assignment altogether (3:11,13; 4:1,10,13). With the first objections the Lord gave Moses encouragement and assurance that he would provide what Moses needed. The Lord understands our weaknesses and even our reluctance, which he overcomes by his gracious assurance. In fact, without some sense of our inadequacy, we've probably not stopped to consider the cost of following Jesus (Luke 14:25-33) and might be relying on what Bonhoeffer calls cheap grace (43ff). True humility that God uses is a genuine awareness of our unworthiness and our total dependence on the grace, power and wisdom of God.

Paul himself confessed his inadequacy for his ministry assignment and declared that his sufficiency for life, witness and service came only from Christ (2 Corinthians 2:16; 3:4f). To follow Jesus as Lord requires some "fear and trembling" as we think of our inability to live faithfully (Philippians 2:12).

And we are not qualified to serve Christ if we think we can do everything in our strength. That's why I believe Christ calls us to do a "God-sized" job, one that we know we could not do in our strength or with our resources.

The Lord became angry with Moses only when he wanted to be excused from the call altogether (4:14). The call to a relationship with Christ is a complete call, not just to believe certain things about God and decide that going to heaven is to be preferred to going to hell. The call of God is a "complete package deal." When we try to separate our call to salvation from a call to service we forfeit the assurance that we indeed have eternal life and will be with Christ in glory.

When we consider Moses' call to a relationship with Christ and obedience to serve him as Lord, we see him as a reluctant convert, which is how C S Lewis described himself:

Lewis wrote about the "unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed; perhaps that night the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing: the Divine humility which will accept a convert on such terms" (182).

God indeed accepts us on such terms. While Moses was demurring and raising questions and objections, God was patiently at work forming an honest relationship with him (Oswalt, 307). Also, had Moses responded quickly and easily with a self-confident "yes!" without the struggle, then he likely would not have been God's person for the job (Enns, 100f, 114, 117).

Although Moses' dialogue with the Lord was to continue until finally, when Moses tried to beg off of the call, the Lord became angry with him and told Moses to forget the excuses and go to Egypt and get on with the job (4:13-17). The Lord told Moses all he needed to know that would allow him to obey the call. Sooner or later, our struggle with God must lead to surrender to him and to his assignment for us.

God uses us, as he did Moses, because of...

#### *His indispensable presence*

The Lord answered Moses' objection with the greatest assurance and promise he could have given—his presence with him (12). That's the greatest and the only truly necessary promise the Lord gives to us in assurance our success in the life and service of discipleship. He will be with us always (Matthew 28:20).

This is the significance of the burning bush and the bare feet. God wants us to stand before his holy presence in worship and he wants our bare feet to sense his presence beneath us, bearing us up and assuring us of his love to sustain, protect, guide and provide. In fact, everywhere we go with the risen Lord Jesus becomes a place of worship, before his fiery glory and beauty, burning out our sin and burning his holy love into our hearts (Luke 24:32). Wherever we set our feet becomes holy ground, because the Lord of glory, through the Holy Spirit, dwells in our hearts, as well as goes before us and guards our way behind us (Isaiah 52:12). We need to keep thinking about "fire and feet"!

Whether we are new converts, wondering how we can live up to our new calling to follow Jesus as Lord, or whether we are “old soldiers of the cross,” we need to practice the presence of God and realize, as Moses was challenged to do, that the Lord is here, “really here” (Durham, 34). To fulfill our calling to salvation and to service, how we need to learn to stand before the presence of our glorious Lord and to worship him with our lives as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1).

Just as was true for Moses, we cannot “go out before we come in.” Indeed, Satan would stir up our religious zeal for God and have us get busy for God and engage in Kingdom business and spiritual warfare without heartfelt worship in the presence of God, putting on the armor and living in the spirit of worshipful, prayerful dependence on the power and anointing of God (Motyer, 62f).

The presence of the risen Lord Jesus is really all we need, for power, boldness and the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22f), as well as confidence that he will meet every need of ours (Philippians 4:19). When God calls us he provides for us. What he assigns to us he guarantees success for us, success as *he* measures success.

The Lord promised a sign of success to Moses, but one which may not have been particularly appealing to Moses (12). The Lord didn't give him an advanced sign of success before he launched out in obedience toward Egypt. Rather, the Lord said the sign would come after his obedience in faith. After the Lord would successfully deliver the Israelites and lead them safely to the very mountain of the burning bush, then Moses would see the sign that the Lord had fulfilled his promise to him. Just as Moses had worshiped the Lord on this mountain, so would his fellow Israelites.

Faith demands we step out in simple trust and obedience, without all the signs and props we would like to “prop up” our faith and guarantee our success. God says, “Obey me and then you will know I was with you all the time.” Then our faith will be greater and our confidence stronger for the next test of and venture for our faith.

## **Conclusion**

Moses' call was momentous and life-changing. His was dramatic. But it was recorded for our instruction and encouragement (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11). Those of us who have had less dramatic call experiences, whether to salvation or to service, can and should be encouraged that ours, though less dramatic, was just as profound and as meaningful in the eyes of God as was Moses.'

Someone here today may have been drawn here today by the gracious “pull” and magnetic attraction of God's love. As the Lord drew Moses mysteriously yet inexorably toward Mt Horeb, he may have drawn you here today to this worshiping assembly to hear his word, the Gospel of Jesus. God may be drawing you to himself, and may well shine the light of the Spirit into your mind and heart to awaken you to his love, and to the truth of the message of the crucified Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). If so, he is confronting you with your sin and need for his forgiveness. He is calling you to look to Jesus, who died for you, and call upon him to be your Rescuer from sin and to be the Lord and Master of your life.

Those of us who received and answered this call in the past need to realize the Lord continues to call us, to stand before his holy presence with bare feet, i.e. with the awareness of our poverty of spirit

and need to be in touch with his holy presence. We need to know we have all been called to live before him in an act of perpetual worship and sacrificial, willing service.

Those who have received a challenge or request to join a particular ministry in this church or in another venue of ministry, we need to stand in openness before holy God and with a willingness to receive his fresh word of challenge. Again, when God calls, he enables and provides. What he provides above all is his presence, the source of all strength and joy.

I am almost tempted, were it not for the sake of propriety and dignity, to ask that we all take off our shoes and realize that we are standing together on holy ground. We are standing before the burning, glorious presence of the Lord, who is the one who calls us to know him, worship and serve him. Whether your shoes are on or off, he is here. And the place where you stand is holy ground. When you leave this place, everywhere you go with holy God becomes holy ground.

He is here. He is really here.

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