

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Moses: Burning Bush, Return to Egypt | Exodus 3-4**

The power of story. The power of a life to change everything. Listen to the story of Exodus: When Pharaoh heard that Moses had killed another Egyptian, Pharaoh tried to kill him, but Moses fled to Midian. While he is resting by a well, Moses winds up rescuing the daughters of a local landowner—this time without killing anybody—and ends up marrying into the family of Jethro, a wealthy Midianite. Forty years go by, and Moses is 40 when he goes out into the desert. Then forty more years go by. He's a father, but he still feels like he is on the outside, looking in. Maybe the same way he felt in Egypt...on the outside looking in. We know he feels on the outside because he calls his first son Gershom. Gershom means "I am a stranger in this land." And now we get to the part of the story that we are going to launch from for the next nine weeks.

¹ 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 wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² 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. ³ So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." ⁴ 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." ⁵ "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. ¹⁰ So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹² 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.”¹³ 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?”¹⁴ 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.’” [Exodus 3:1-14]

This is a story about the changing of a soul, the changing of a nation, the changing of the world, and in our ways, the changing of a church—because it says that, over time, some people learned to hear the voice of God. And when they act upon what they hear, life comes.

One of the reasons we wanted to do this series is because Moses is a story for all ages. It’s a story for young kids, and it’s a story for you guys. Moses is a story that reminds us that no matter how you screw up, no matter what you have done, it is not the end of the story. God will not only come after you, but God will change your heart. To the young people, Moses teaches us that all of the frantic running that you do—and can I just say that a lot of the frantic running that young people do is because of their frantic parents, who keep loading on the schedule—all that running stops them from the silence that is needed to hear the voice of God. That’s the story of Moses. And for those of us in the middle of life, Moses speaks to you. He says the key to the busy middle of your life is what is forming on the inside. Not what you are accumulating, not all the decisions you are making, not all the titles and relationships that you accrue, it’s the shift from what David Brooks has called “building your resume” to “building your legacy.” We spend the first half of our lives building our resume, and the second half, Lord-willing, building a legacy to pass on. Some of us never make that shift. Moses talks about how that shift is forced upon us, often when we don’t want it. And maybe for those of us in the middle of life, that’s the great lesson...that most of us do not change until we are pushed. Henri Nouwen says, “The great illusion is to believe that people can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there.” God uses people who have bled. God uses you more when you have failed. God uses people who have gotten lost.

So, there is a voice that speaks to the young and to the middle aged, but often those of you who heard the story of Moses before I was born—you need to realize that God has something to say to you through the life of Moses. God is saying that in the last third of life—first forty years in Egypt, second forty years in the desert, last forty years of Moses’ life...if you’re not dead, you’re not done. You may be retired, but if you have the belief that there may even be the possibility of a God who knows your name, you’re not dead and you’re not done.

And sometimes it may not be until you've been knocked around some in that last third that you finally get ready to answer the really big questions. I think there are two really big questions in this passage that set us up for the next nine weeks. Moses asks God, "Who am I that You think I could do this? **Who am I?**" Then Moses asks God, "And by the way, **who are You?**"

So, the image that we will all remember is the burning bush, and for some reason this shepherd turning aside to see what has happened. How does that play out in real life? If God were to put a burning bush in somebody's life would they even notice it, or would they think they were getting punked? I have a friend, as a matter of fact one of the stories in CPC Life is about him, and he was in his early thirties and doing great. He had a wonderful job, great all-American family, and he felt increasingly dissatisfied...like he was winning the wrong race. He said, "*I was restless, and in one day I had three different conversations that made me feel like God was knocking on the door.*" He said, "If God wants to get your attention, He throws a pebble. And if that doesn't work He throws a rock. I decided I wasn't interested in finding out what the boulder felt like that God could throw at me. So I decided to stop running and see what God had for me." And what God had for him was to get off the track that he was on—climbing higher and higher up the corporate ladder, becoming someone he didn't want to be—to do something completely different. He had a burning bush moment and he turned aside.

Ward Brehm is a friend of this church and many of you know Ward from Colonial Church. He has just written a great book, and in the book he talks about the same experience that my friend had. He says, "I always figured I could get to the top. What I hadn't realized was how the top would get to me." I see that in so many of you. You are really good people and you are doing well and you are getting to the top, and I question whether you know how much the top is getting to you. The burning bush for Jeff put him on another path. But it doesn't always appear to be big and bright and shiny and burning.

We have a great youth program, so big that a couple hundred of the kids—sophomores, juniors, and seniors—meet in houses. They were meeting this last week and Carrie Gleeson, our director, was leading one of the junior groups. She came in last Thursday and said, "It was just so interesting because we are talking about Jesus this year...what do they really know about Jesus, what do they think about Jesus...so I thought I would just start by asking 'What do you really think about Jesus? If I wasn't on staff, what would you really say to me about that?'" She said the junior girls started to give her all the Sunday School answers and the things they thought she wanted to hear, and then there was a pause and one of the girls said. "Well, you know, I'm not sure how much I believe that right now.

I have all these questions that I'm hearing about in school, and I see the way that other people who say they believe in Jesus act, and I don't know." And Carrie said it was as if God came into the room. That's a burning bush moment where all of a sudden you slow down enough and you are honest enough to ask *what would God really say if God were to speak to me?*

That's what happened with Moses. Moses became ready for a sacred, take-your-shoes-off conversation. And unlike the way we usually translate it, where it is mostly about *Moses – glad you're here – go to Egypt – take care of my people*, I took this conversation to be about the questions, these big questions of life. All of his life, Moses has been asking: *who am I, really? Who are you, really?* He's a slave, he's an orphan, he's a stutterer, he's a prince, he's a murderer, he's an exile, he's a foreign peasant, he's a revolutionary, he's a miracle man, he's a law-giver, he's dead in exile, he lives in the land between. He lives in the land between slavery and the promised land, and he never gets to the promised land. He asks *who am I?* This is a question that I think you need to ask; you run so busy on the treadmill that you rarely say *God, who am I?* And when he turned aside and took off his shoes and took his time, not just that once but in the years that would follow, God started to tell Moses who he was. God started to tell Moses, and God will tell you who you really are.

There is a great book about this. It's called "Developing the Soul of Your Leadership" by Ruth Haley Barton, and in that book she talks about that moment. She says, "It is in solitude we stop believing our own press (all the stuff you think other people should believe about you) and we stop being defined by other people." (We're not who they say we are anymore when we get off by ourselves.) "When we are alone with God we discover we're not as good as we thought but we are also more than we thought we could be."

All these long conversations in solitude with God, all the adventures that come out of those over the next forty years, change Moses. He probably, until the end of his life, asks *who am I?* But he is being changed so that by the end of his life, he's a different man. In the book of Numbers, Moses is described this way,

³ Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth. [Numbers 12:3]

He had been a slave and he had been a prince. He had been humiliated but now he was humble. You know what the difference is? There is a big difference between being humiliated and being a humble person. Lysa Terkhurst has a great observation about the difference between humiliation and humility. Terkhurst says, "The difference between humility and humiliation is that one person bows low [humble] and the other person trips and falls, and they are humiliated." Humility is the ability to bow low rather than being worried what

people think when you get knocked down. Over the course of Moses' time with God, he started to see that he was precious to God, that he didn't have to pretend to be somebody he wasn't with God, and because he stopped pretending to be somebody he wasn't with God, he could discover who he was with other people. He didn't have to try to be impressive, and in his humility he showed a different kind of leadership.

The first question that Moses asked is, "Who am I?"

"Moses, you are a beloved child of God."

The second question that Moses asks in the story is, "Well, suppose that I do go to Egypt, and I say to them, 'The God of your fathers sent me.' They are going to ask, 'Who is that really?' Who are you God?"

More times than I want to admit, walking late at night I ask, "God, are You like what I think You are like? What are You *really* like? Who are You, God?"

And the answer that Moses receives is two-fold. The first is that answer that is so cryptic: "Tell them that I AM who I AM. That I AM has sent you." It is supposed to convey at least that I am unique; I am different from all the other gods. He could say to them, "Tell them that I am the only one, and you will spend the rest of your life discovering who I am that I am." But the second part of God's answer to Moses is, "I will be with you." Just like Laura told the kids, *I will be with you. You don't have to come to the holy mountain. You don't have to come to church. You don't even have to open your Bible.* God is saying to you, "I am the only God there is. I will be with you."

And over the course of time, Moses started to believe that. Again from Numbers, God said, *Moses is entrusted with all my house. With Moses I speak face to face, like one speaks to a friend, clearly and not in riddles. And Moses beholds the form of God.*

⁷Moses is faithful in all my house.⁸ With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord. [Numbers 12:7-8 NIV]

It begins as a burning bush and a voice that frightens him so much that he hides his face. By the end of the story it says that Moses would go into the tent of meeting, and all the people would stand at the edge of their tents and watch him go in, and Moses would talk to God as one talks to a friend. Not only does Moses teach us that we can learn the reality of God and even the name of God, but we can become aware of the presence of God in all of our life. It says,

When God saw that Moses had turned aside, He called to him out of the bush. [Exodus 3:4]

He called to him. There is a sense in which what people do with their lives is their calling. You guys are called right now to be students; your parents are called to

be parents. Would you like a fresh calling? What is God calling you to do? What is God calling from the bush that would give fresh newness of life? God called Moses to be what Moses had always been—what he had been all along—and He called Moses to become something that was yet to emerge. And that is the whole story of the exodus.

Will you say yes when the fire goes off? Will you say yes when God calls you to do what is next? There is almost always a call to do something, to follow God. God gives Moses something to do and Moses goes off to Egypt, to do his not so little part in the story of how God rescues humanity and brings them to a place where they can flourish. And God wants to do the same thing to you. I believe that God wants to call you to the burning bush today. God met Moses in the middle of a Tuesday afternoon, in the middle of the ordinary, out in the desert in the mundane. And God spoke to him because Moses stopped and he turned to listen.

Laura and I love a poem of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. It talks about the burning bush, and this is what it says:

“Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.”

I believe there are burning bushes all around us. I believe that most of us are running too fast to stop and see the glory of what God does, and in the midst of that glory, to listen for God's voice. Most of us are very much like the disciples the week after Jesus died. Remember the two disciples who were walking down the road to Emmaus, and they are so worried about what has happened they don't even recognize Jesus when Jesus comes up and starts to walk on the road with them? The burning bush has come to them and they don't recognize Him and they go on mile after mile. He opens the scriptures and He says, “This is what God intends for you. God with you.” And then the part that I love...so they begged Him to stay for dinner, and He stopped and He ate with them. He held up the bread and He blessed it and He broke it, and that's when they recognized Him.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon.
Soli Deo Gloria.*