

A Divine Encounter

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Date: 26 May 2024

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] Well, good morning to you, especially if you're here for the first time. My name is Tommy. I'm the rector here at Church of the Advent.

I'm delighted that we are celebrating Trinity Sunday. I'm delighted that we, in just a few minutes, are going to have the joy of celebrating baptism, which is one of my favorite things we get to do in the life of our church.

But first, we're going to spend a little time looking at God's Word. Statistically speaking, the vast majority of people believe in God of some kind.

They believe in some form of divine. What's interesting is that people for a while thought that we were becoming more and more and more secular in the modern West. We've actually realized that's not true.

And in fact, there are people who used to be those who claimed to be atheists who are now coming into faith somewhat reluctantly. The phrase lapsed atheist has become more and more common.

[0 : 57] People like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, at one time known to be among the great and well-known atheists such as Dawkins or Hitchens, has now begun to describe herself as a lapsed atheist.

Belief in God is rampant. It is pervasive. And there are a good number of those people who believe in what we might consider to be the God of the Bible, the God that we read about in the Old and New Testaments.

But did you know that the Bible was never written with the aim of convincing people that they should believe in God? In fact, the Bible just assumes that people believe in God.

Belief in God is pervasive. Belief in God is pervasive. There is actually a place in the Bible where the Apostle James says, So you believe there is one God? Good.

Even the demons believe that, and they shudder. So the Bible simply assumes that we believe in God. The entire aim of Scripture is not to convince us that there is a God. It's to show us how to know that God personally.

[2 : 06] That's the goal. And in Exodus chapter 3, we see a man named Moses, and up to this point in his life, Moses believes in God. And maybe like most of us, Moses even prays to God from time to time.

But what we see happen here is that for the first time, Moses actually has a powerful encounter with God. And you say, well, how do we know that?

And the answer is clear. Because it changes him. He comes to know this God personally, and it transforms him. From this point forward, his life follows a very different course.

Raises the question, how can this kind of thing happen? How might this kind of thing be true for us? There is no formula, no seven-step method.

But this encounter does show us that before we can know God personally, before we can move from believing in God to actually knowing God, we need to know at least three things first.

[3 : 12] We're going to look at those three things as we look at this passage. Let's pray. Lord, we ask that you would be true to your promise, that you're a God who speaks and desires that we would know you, and we pray that those things would happen this morning, that by your grace, you would open our hearts to receive what you have to say, that through your word, we would encounter the living word, Jesus Christ.

Lord, he's the reason we're here, whether we know it or not. And it's in his name that we pray.

Amen. So the first thing that we need to know if we desire to actually know God personally and not just believe in him conceptually is this, that God is here.

God is here. One of the first books I read after coming to faith in my early 20s, at the very end of college, I came to faith, and I was really hungry to read books that would help me understand what

it meant to have a relationship with God.

And somebody gave me the book, *The Pursuit of God* by A.W. Tozer. And I highly recommend it if you've never read it. And in it, Tozer says this, that our pursuit of God, our striving to know and have a relationship with God is only possible because God is always seeking to reveal himself to us.

That's the only thing that makes it possible. And he says this, quote, always everywhere, God is present. He is nearer than our own soul, closer than our most secret thoughts.

[4 : 46] So God is not off away somewhere at the other end of a long and sacrificial pilgrimage. He's not high on some mountaintop. He's not sequestered away in some remote temple.

He's here. And this is why someone like Moses is able to encounter God the way he does. Where is Moses when this encounter takes place? He's not meditating on a mountaintop.

He's not in a temple. He's not participating in some elaborate ritual. He's at work. He's literally in the middle of a normal Tuesday at the same mundane job that he does every single day, working for his father-in-law.

As far as we can tell from the text, Moses is not pursuing God in any way. There's no reason to think that this day will be any different than any other day in his life. The point is not that Moses is pursuing God.

The point is that God is pursuing Moses. He appears as a burning bush in order to get Moses' attention. And notice, and this is very important, verse 3, Moses says, I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.

[6 : 01] Verse 4, when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush. Here's how it works. God does something to get Moses' attention.

He's extending an invitation. But only when Moses turns aside, when Moses accepts that invitation, by turning his attention toward God, then God speaks.

So I just want to consider the implications of this before we move on. If you want to move from believing in God in some abstract way to actually knowing God, the first thing that we need to know is that God is here, and God wants us to know him.

And what a wonderful thing to think about on Trinity Sunday, where we celebrate the nature of the God we worship as being an eternal relationship between three persons. The idea that all of this and all of us are here because that eternal relationship wanted to expand, that God wanted to broaden the number of people who are a part of this eternal loving relationship.

He wanted the family to grow. He wants to be known. And, you know, there's tremendous hope that comes out of this truth for the world.

[7 : 21] Because often you hear people say, and I've heard many people say, in fact, before I was a Christian, I used to say the same thing. A lot of people will say, well, so-and-so is only a Christian because they just happen to be born into a Christian family or into a country where there are a lot of Christians, and that's the only reason they're a Christian.

What if they had been born in some other part of the world into a family that believes very different things? Are you really wanting me to believe that unless you just happen to be born in a Christian society, you're doomed? And I would say, well, if we understand what this is saying, if we understand the implications of what we're saying, we understand that that's the wrong way to think about it.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul says in his sermon at the Areopagus. He says this in the book of Acts, God made every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place.

So he's saying God determines when and where we live. Why? Verse 27, that they should seek God and perhaps feel their way toward Him and find Him.

Yet He is actually not far off from each one of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being. Right, so what does this mean? It means if our relationship with God depended solely on us pursuing God, well, then there would be almost no hope for people who didn't just happen to be born into a Christian family or a Christian society.

[8 : 55] But Scripture reveals a very different kind of God, a God who is as close as our breath, who is constantly trying to get our attention, and who can do that through any means at His disposal, regardless of where we live, regardless of the family or cultural context into which we happen to be born.

Because He is behind all of it. And this is a God who desires for us to feel our way toward Him and to find Him. The fact that we don't know this, the fact that we don't recognize that God is here and trying to get our attention is a product of our spiritual blindness, not God's absence.

So a couple of applications before we move on. Number one, chances are, you know, I assume there's always a mix here on Sunday morning. Some people are long-time Christians, and sometimes some of you are new Christians, and some of you are not kind of sure what you believe. And you're here for other reasons. Maybe you're not even sure why you're here. But a couple of applications. Number one, chances are, God is trying to get your attention right now.

God is speaking to us all of the time. You know, it could be through a conversation that you had with a friend. It could be through a walk that you went on. It could be through the beauty of nature. It could be through times of grief and hardship.

[10:19] Sometimes God speaks to us most clearly when we are struggling. As C.S. Lewis famously said, God whispers to us in our pleasure and shouts to us in our pain.

So God is trying to get our attention all the time. The main question is, are we paying attention? I mean, how many burning bushes do we walk past every day because we're too busy scrolling? You know, if Moses had been on Instagram, would he have seen the burning bush? Or would he have just kind of walked right on by because he wasn't paying attention?

How many times does God try to get our attention? Are there ever moments in our lives when we are not just racing from one thing to the next? Right?

If there were to be a massive flaming tree that's not being consumed, would we even see it? God is always trying to get our attention. Are we paying attention? Number two, when God does get our attention, are we willing to turn aside?

[11:22] Right? Moses responds how? With fear, with humility. He hides his face. He's open. He says, here I am. He's ready to listen. So for us, what would this mean?

It would mean, well, clearly, a willingness to open Scripture, right? How do we listen to God? Well, God speaks most clearly through His Word. But it's also a turning of the heart. It's a shift in our posture.

Maybe you're familiar with the concept of anamorphic art. It's a painting or a sculpture that is designed to only be able to be accurately perceived from a certain angle.

Right? So it looks like chaos until you get around to just the right angle and then all of a sudden you see the image. Right? But from any other angle, it looks like nothing.

And that's a way of thinking about what it takes to accurately perceive God. God can only be accurately perceived from a posture of humility.

[12:23] That's the only way we will accurately see God. If we try to place ourselves above God, if we demand that God prove Himself to us, if you're here, prove it right now.

Give me a sign. If we expect God to scramble to meet our expectations, we will remain blind. As Tozer says in that same book, you can see God from anywhere if your mind is set to love and obey Him.

So the first point is that God is here. And He's trying to get our attention. But in order to actually know that God, there's something else that we need to know that we see here in this text, and that is this.

God is not only here, but God is holy. He's holy. Why would God appear as a burning bush?

Well, it's an attention grabber, but it's not arbitrary. God is actually revealing something about Himself and His plan by appearing this way.

[13:30] So first of all, God is revealing something about Himself, that He is holy. And the holiness of God refers to the absolute moral purity of God, the absolute goodness of God, and it refers to the absolute moral distance between God and human beings.

When we read about the holiness of God, it refers to the absolute goodness of God, the absolute moral purity of God, and then the absolute distance between that God and us. And this presents a major problem for human beings, which is why God warns Moses, don't come too close, take off your sandals.

That was an ancient Near Eastern custom to recognize you're on holy ground. Your life is in danger. God's presence is a lot like the sun.

On the one hand, we need the sun to live. If the sun were to go away, even for a few minutes, we would, within moments, be plunged into frozen, lifeless darkness.

We need the sun for our very existence. But on the other hand, if we get too close to the sun, we are immediately destroyed. God's holiness means his pure power, his pure goodness.

[14:51] He's the source of all life. He's the source of all goodness. He's the standard of all goodness. And so on the one hand, we need God to live. Apart from God, nothing would exist.

But on the other hand, when something mortal, when something corruptible, someone like us gets too close to that kind of power, we would be instantly destroyed.

So God is revealing that he is holy. Moses, keep your distance. Your life is in danger. And yet, the burning bush shows us God's plan. Because it says that the bush is engulfed in flame, and yet somehow, even though that bush is highly flammable in an arid environment in the wilderness, it should go up like a bundle of matchsticks, it's not consumed.

And this is revealing, it's a little preview of God's plan for his people. God wants to establish a community of people in the world, a great family from every tribe, tongue, and nation, people who are engulfed by his presence, by his holy presence, and yet they're not consumed.

It's a great mystery. At this point in the story, how is such a thing possible? Now, before we go further, I want to take a moment just to reflect on the implications of what we've just said about God's holiness.

[16:22] If you want to go from simply believing in the concept of a God to knowing the God, you have to at some point be confronted by the reality of God's holiness.

We need to understand this truth that if God were to actually appear before us, if, as I used to as a teenager, pray so many times, God, if you're here, if you're real, could you just appear and show me that you're real?

We need to understand that if that were to actually happen, we would be completely overwhelmed. In Isaiah 6, God does that with Isaiah.

He reveals himself. He appears in his glory. And how does Isaiah react? Does he say, well, see, now that you just gave me a little proof, now I'll follow you. No, Isaiah, he falls on his face.

He cries out, woe is me, for I'm lost, for I'm a man of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. He thinks his life is over.

[17:30] In Job 42, Job finally sees the glory of God and he cries out, I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.

Therefore, I despise myself. I repent in dust and ashes. Right? In each case, a person has some idea of God, they've heard about God, some sense of God, maybe they've gone to worship or pray to that God, but when they actually encounter the power and the holiness of God, they are utterly undone.

It is not at all what they expected. The point is this, once we see God for who he truly is, only then do we become capable of seeing ourselves for who we truly are.

Only when we see God for who he truly is are we then capable of seeing ourselves for who we really are. This is one of the ways I think the church in the modern West, and I would take partial responsibility for this, has gone wrong, frankly.

In our attempts to reach people with the gospel, we've tried to make Christianity more accessible, and in part we've done that by minimizing the holiness of God, but by doing so, in our attempt to make the gospel more appealing, we've actually made it far less so.

[18:58] Because the gospel is only meaningful, it's only appealing, it's only relevant to people who truly understand the dire problem of our sin in relation to God's holiness.

Unless you get that, unless you have had that confrontation and you have fallen to your face and you want to repent in dust and ashes, unless that has happened in your heart, the gospel is more or less irrelevant.

It's just more religious drivel. I heard the gospel my whole life. For over 20 years, it never had any relevance to me because I'd never really seen anything that was true or real about my own heart because I had never really glanced the holiness of God.

The holiness of God is essential if we are to ever know God personally. So number one, God is here. Number two, God is holy. This brings us to our third and final point.

We have to still solve the mystery of the burning bush. How does this actually happen? And in order to solve the mystery of the burning bush, in order to understand how God could create a community engulfed by His presence and yet not consumed by it, we have to know this, that God is gracious.

[20 : 16] He's gracious. When God speaks, He refers to Himself in a very particular way. I'm the God of your father. I'm the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.

Now, why would God introduce Himself this way? He's not just saying, hey, I knew your dad. This is a reference to the covenant that God made with Abraham and all of His descendants.

He's saying, your life is in danger. By my very appearing before you, your life hangs in the balance. But have no fear. I'm the God of the covenant.

In that covenant, God promises to bless Abraham and his descendants. He says that through those descendants, all the nations of the earth are going to be blessed. In return, He calls His people to be faithful and to be obedient.

If you're faithful and obedient, if you are holy as I am holy, if you, when a covenant like this was made, you would lay the animals down on the ground and each party entering into the covenant, one at a time, would pass through those animals.

[21 : 25] And it was a way for each party to say, if I fail to uphold my end of the covenant, may this happen to me. May my blood be spilled. May I be executed. May I die a horrible death. But when God makes His covenant with Abraham, He appears as a smoking fire pot.

But God is the only one to pass through the animals. Moses is not required to. The meaning is clear.

God is saying, if I break this covenant, if I, God, break this covenant, may this happen to me. But if you, Moses, if you break this covenant, may this happen to me.

If you break the covenant, I will pay the price. This is the covenant that God reminds Moses of. He introduces himself to Moses saying, I'm the God of that covenant.

And then as we follow the story of the Exodus, God works through Moses and He sets His people free from slavery. He leads them out into the wilderness and He continually calls them, be holy for I am holy.

[22 : 33] The entire book of Leviticus is about what that means, what that entails. But they continually fail again and again and again.

And yet somehow, God's presence remains with them and they are not consumed. And in the last book of the Old Testament, all the way up in Malachi, God is saying through Malachi, the day is coming when you will be consumed, when all who continue to rebel against God will be consumed. But the very final verses of Malachi say this, before that day comes, God promises to send one final great prophet, someone who will transform hearts, someone who will finally make it possible for God's people to be holy as He is holy.

And several hundred years later, 400 years later, a man named Jesus from Nazareth begins His public ministry. Now He's from a small backwater town.

People say, can anything good come out of Nazareth? And yet somehow, this Jesus begins to do things no one has ever done before. He begins to heal the blind and the sick, people who can't walk, they can now walk.

[23 : 51] He begins to raise the dead. But even more amazingly, He begins to forgive sin. He says, I healed your paralysis, that you might know that I have the authority to forgive sin.

A much greater ask. He touches those who are unclean and they become clean. This is in a society where if you even got near someone who was unclean, you would become unclean.

Uncleanness was contagious, but not so with Jesus. With Jesus, it's the opposite. Cleanliness is contagious. Holiness is contagious. When you come near Him, you are made holy, you are made clean simply by being in contact with this man.

Wherever He goes, those who come in contact with Him, the outsiders, the rejects, the outcasts, they are welcomed in and they are made clean and holy. And then at the climax of His ministry, He allows Himself to be taken and to suffer a bloody and gruesome death.

And all of a sudden, it begins to make sense. It all starts to fall into place. The mystery of the burning bush, the Abrahamic covenant, the one-way covenant, the entire Old Testament comes together.

[25 : 03] God made a promise that if His people failed to uphold the covenant, He would pay the price. And then we see hundreds of years, thousands of years later, Jesus going to the cross to pay that price by spilling His own blood to save God's people.

How does He save them? Through faith. Through faith in the finished work of Jesus. God's people are made holy. Not because they finally got it together and started taking it seriously.

Not because of the moral reform efforts that finally succeeded. It is a holiness that comes by faith, not by works. The Apostle Paul, who all his life had been more scrupulous than we can possibly imagine, finally realizing it comes through faith, not through works.

Through faith, I've been made holy. Through Jesus, we now see the church as the fulfillment of the promise of the burning bush. We see a community of people who are filled, who are engulfed by the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit of God and yet somehow we are not consumed.

Because Jesus Christ has made us holy. Not one day you will be holy has made us holy by faith. And it's all because God is gracious.

[26 : 32] So this is what it means to go from believing in God some concept to actually knowing that God personally. It's only possible, first, because God is here.

Friends, He's trying to get our attention. And second, we have to be confronted by the fact that God is holy and the absolute distance between that God and us on our own.

And only then, only when that recognition of God's holiness crashes into God's grace, only then might we come to know this God personally when we begin to realize it is God who fulfilled the covenant by shedding His blood to make us holy so that we can know Him intimately, so that we can be like the burning bush filled with His presence and yet not consumed.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord, Lord, we tread on the edges of great mysteries too vast for us. We recognize that we are attempting to articulate in words eternal mysteries, plans that have unfolded over thousands of years across hundreds of cultures, articulated in dozens and dozens of languages.

your great unfolding plan of redemption. Lord, we ponder things that can only be true if you are here and if you desire that we would know you.

[28 : 10] I pray for us all now as we gather around in prayer, as we celebrate these baptisms, as we gather around your table, we pray now for encounter that we would experience your presence, that you would press these things into our hearts, that we might respond and turn aside and hear you.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.