

Divine Calling

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[0:00] You can turn to it in your brown pew Bibles there. It will also be on the screen. Again, like we have a couple of weeks ago, we're taking a little bit bigger chunk of scripture this morning. That's hard to break this up and we want to get a feel really go there and get a feel for this encounter between Moses and the Lord.

So starting at Exodus 3 verse 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 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. Moses said, here I am. Do not come any closer, God said. Take off your sandals for the place you are standing is holy ground.

[1:34] 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 the 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'm 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.

[2:40] 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. Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them, the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob appeared to me and said, I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt.

And I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt, into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.

[3:58] The elders of Israel will listen to you. Then you and the elders are to go to the king of Egypt and say to him, the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us.

Let us take a three-day journey into the desert to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God. But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him.

So I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them. After that, he will let you go.

And I will make the Egyptians favorably disposed toward this people, so that when you leave, you will not go empty-handed. Every woman is to ask her neighbor and any woman living in her house for articles of silver and gold and for clothing, which you will put on your sons and daughters, and so you will plunder the Egyptians.

Moses answered, What if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, The Lord did not appear to you. Then the Lord said to him, What is that in your hand?

[5:04] A staff, he replied. The Lord said, Throw it on the ground. Moses threw it on the ground, and it became a snake, and he ran from it.

Then the Lord said to him, Reach out your hand and take it by the tail. So Moses reached out and took hold of the snake, and it turned back into a staff in his hand.

This, said the Lord, Is so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.

Then the Lord said, Put your hand inside your cloak. So Moses put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, it was leprous, like snow. Now put it back into your coat, he said.

So Moses put his hand back into his cloak, and when he had took it out, it was restored, like the rest of his flesh. Then the Lord said, If they do not believe you, or pay attention to the first miraculous sign, they may believe the second.

[6:07] But if they do not believe these two signs, or listen to you, take some water from the Nile, and pour it on the dry ground. The water you take from the river will become blood on the ground. Now, Moses said to the Lord, O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past, nor since you have spoken to your servant.

I am slow of speech and tongue. The Lord said to him, Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute?

Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, I will help you speak. And we'll teach you what to say.

But Moses said, O Lord, please send someone else to do it. Then the Lord's anger burned against Moses, and he said, What about your brother, Aaron, the Levite?

I know he can speak well. He is already on his way to meet you. And his heart will be glad when he sees you. You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth, and I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do.

[7:17] He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him. But take the staff in your hand so that you can perform miraculous signs with it.

Then Moses went back to Jethro, his father-in-law, and said to him, Let me go back to my own people in Egypt to see if any of them are still alive.

Jethro said, Go, and I wish you well. Now the Lord had said to Moses and Midian, Go back to Egypt, for all the men who wanted to kill you are dead.

So Moses took his wife and sons, put them on a donkey, and started back to Egypt. And he took the staff of God in his hand.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So how can you not love Moses?

[8:17] See if I can get these going here a second for you. Here we go.

How can you not love Moses? I like Moses. And when I was a pastor in Canada, one of the guys in the church was going through cleaning out his basement, and he found this down there.

And for some reason, he thought of me. And he presented it to me. And I took it. It's a little weird.

It's a little strange, this figurine of Moses.

But I kind of like it. And mostly I like it because I like Moses. Moses. He was a distinguished man, a hero of the faith, and also very, very human.

And I'm looking at this, I'm seeing the stone tablets in his hand that he got from Mount Sinai, you know, written on with God's own finger.

[9:30] And I'm remembering what he did with those stone tablets, how he smashed them on the ground, right? I mean, he had good reason to be angry. The people of Israel were worshipping a golden calf, but still Moses.

Chucking those things on the ground? Moses. Very distinguished hero of the faith. Also, very, very human.

So when God comes to him and says, go and set my people free, what does Moses say? Send someone else.

Right? That's our big, strong hero, our guy, our deliverer. There he is. He's full of courage, ready to go, ready to serve, take on the world, right?

Not exactly. No. Exodus 4, 13. Oh Lord, please send someone else to do it. And if it's been a while, since you read that story of the burning bush, you might even be a little bit surprised to find all of this in here about Moses.

[10:48] Sometimes we, in our minds, recall the burning bush story as this glory, this moment, moment where God hears the cries of his people, calls to Moses, and Moses answers the call, and marches off to Egypt, but it wasn't quite like that.

It was a little bit, maybe a lot bit messier than that, actually. The reality is, the reality is, in the midst of all the glory of that moment, there was some real messiness, and a kind of messy exchange. Maybe you noticed, probably you noticed, that our reading for this morning just kind of kept going on and on and on. It's because Moses, in his response to God, kept hemming and hawing and going on and on and on, with his questions and his objection.

In the midst of all the glory of the bush, and the holy ground, and all of that, there was quite a mess. You had the holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty, present there in that place, but then you also had Moses, with all his baggage in tow.

Now Moses, I should say, he did start off well. Maybe you noticed that, the first thing that Moses said, here I am. Lord, here I am.

[12:10] Like young Samuel in the temple, like the prophet Isaiah, like Martin Luther, here I am, Lord. You want me, you called me, here I am. That's the beginning of the exchange.

Moses really, at this point, doesn't really have much of an idea of what's up. He knows God is calling, he hears God calling, so he answers. You know, maybe God has something for him. Maybe God wants to pay him a compliment, perhaps.

Maybe God just kind of wants to check in, hang out. All right. Moses isn't sure. He does know God, and he likes the idea of spending time with God, so he goes over to the bush.

Everything starts off well. Here I am, Lord. He's there. He's intrigued. The more he learns, though, the more he hears, and the more he learns about what God's got up his sleeve, the more he, well, starts backing away a little bit, maybe a lot bit.

He goes from eager and open to reluctant and closed. And there's this progression, right? It starts off, here I am, Lord, but then he says, who am I?

[13:24] Who am I that I should go to the Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? Who am I? And I suppose there's some humility in that, and that humility is a good thing, but there's also already here some resistance.

A bit later, Moses says, 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 should I tell them? He's concerned that he doesn't know God well enough, and he's concerned that the people of Israel maybe don't know God well enough either to let him lead them and to let this happen, to go along with it.

Will they even be open to the Lord, Yahweh, saving them? All these questions. A bit later, Moses says, what if they do not believe me or listen to me and say, the Lord did not appear to you?

Moses is still concerned that it's just not going to work. They won't believe him. They won't listen to him. And then a few verses later, Moses says, oh Lord, I have never been eloquent.

This feels a little more authentic, right? I've never been eloquent, Lord. I'm slow of speech and tongue. God, I'm not good with people.

[14:45] I just don't have an easy time connecting. I'm not a good speaker. I can't talk well, Lord. And I don't know about you, but I've certainly said things like that.

Excuses, statements, misgivings like that, I've voiced that. And often I've felt alone in my weakness in these moments.

It seemed like everyone else had no trouble talking and connecting with people and I was the only bumbling idiot out there. And you kind of feel alone. It can feel intensely personal, these moments. Like it was kind of uniquely my issue, my problem, and it's kind of lonely, that experience. And then I find that same experience right here in Scripture in those same misgivings right here on the lips of Moses.

He's nervous. He just doesn't feel like he has what it takes. There's no way, no how. Not me, Lord. Oh, Lord, please send someone else to do it. So there's a lot of things about Moses that I can't relate to.

[15 : 58] The way he spoke with God and that relationship, how he dealt with all of that grumbling all those years in the wilderness, right?

How he picked up a live snake. No, thank you. That's not for me either. I can't relate to those things, but I can relate to that feeling of inadequacy. I can relate to that, and perhaps you can too in different ways.

I remember preaching on this text, the Running Bush text, one time at a church during Mission Emphasis Month. And I remember kind of resonating with Moses' hesitation.

and his sense of inadequacy. As I was preaching in the midst of this Mission Emphasis Month, because the week prior, we had a missionary come speak, a missionary from Uganda, and come talk about all the ministry they're doing with the kids there in the village and the training of local pastors and all the retreats and rallies and lives being changed.

The week before that, there was a prison chaplain who came and talked about his work behind bars and his work with ex-cons and how he has a church full of ex-cons on fire for the Lord.

[17 : 19] And it was all really good. This Mission Emphasis Month, week after week, it felt really good. I was really inspired. It was good. And at the same time, I felt a little bad, too.

This mix of good and bad, too, at the same time. And that little bit bad part was me feeling like, boy, I just don't measure up here.

What do I have to offer? It's not the sort of impact I'm having. All those missionaries, I can't compare.

And why am I not having the same effect as them? There are lots of needs and lots of people need the Lord and I just don't always know what to do or what I have to offer.

Even as a pastor, often I feel inadequate. Maybe especially as a pastor, often I feel inadequate and not up to the task. But I'm thinking maybe there are others of you who can relate, can relate in your own way.

[18 : 26] We see a need. We even perhaps sort of hear a call to do something. And maybe it's not a burning bush, but maybe it's sort of a burning in your spirit deep down.

And then we look around and we see so many others who are so much more capable than we are. of answering the call, of responding, of making a difference. We look at ourselves and our abilities and just kind of shake our heads and we see how much we have on our plate already and what we bring to the table ourselves and then just kind of shake our heads.

Inadequate. And that sense of inadequacy is just one thing that can tend to keep us on the sidelines. Truth is there are lots of other reasons too, lots of other reasons why we don't answer the call.

Fear is a big one. And sometimes related to that, we hear the call, but our faith isn't really strong enough and so we check it out. Sometimes we're so busy and distracted that maybe we don't hear God's voice in the first place.

Maybe we sell God short and just don't quite believe in the power of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit to really change lives and bring new life and transform situations and people and communities.

[19 : 46] Often too, honestly, it's just old-fashioned, run-of-the-mill self-centeredness. Right? We simply kind of put our own needs above others. We're addicted in different ways to comfort and we don't like to make sacrifices so much.

In Moses' case, it seemed like he did really enjoy spending time with God and knowing God and having God know him, but God calling him to give up some stuff and step out into the unknown, well, Moses had a little harder time with that.

Kind of like how being the church is harder than just coming to church. Like how sharing and living the good news is harder than simply hearing the good news.

Like how being salt in the world is harder than being salt in the salt shaker. And a big part of it is that we, well, we just feel inadequate.

So a while back, I read a news story about a pile of lumber that made its way from Wisconsin to Washington, D.C. It was sent to Washington for the Capitol building to repair the doors and the trim that were damaged back in January 2021.

[21 : 08] It's kind of a neat story. So this wood is over 100 years old. It's old growth mahogany, the sort of wood that you just can't find anymore.

It's special wood, but all these years it was just kind of sitting in a back corner of a basement in a storage room. Pretty much forgotten.

So apparently there's this lab in Madison that got the wood during World War I for a research project of some sort or another and the project never got off the ground.

It never ended up happening and so until recently, all this time, it's just been sitting there and then someone saw the damage to the Capitol on TV and remembered those boards and connected the dots and made the arrangements and now they've got a purpose.

That old pile of wood, that old pile of lumber is being transformed and being put to good use. Well, Moses, you may recall, he had a piece of wood that also went through quite a transformation, his staff.

[22:21] There's a lot of things we could focus in on on this story, the burning bush account and that exchange, but I want to focus in on the staff for a few moments. I know it's tempting to think of that staff as some sort of magic wand or something or just kind of be creeped out by it, turning into a snake.

But what if we saw that staff as kind of a parable or as a picture of what our God does, a picture of the sort of thing that God does with a sort of person like Moses or a sort of person like me or a sort of person like you?

Just think about that. Let's go back and read again about that staff. Beginning of chapter 4, Then the Lord said to him, said to Moses, What is in your hand? A staff, he replied.

And the Lord said, Throw it on the ground. So Moses threw it on the ground. It became a snake and he ran from it. Love the little details in here. Then the Lord said to him, Reach out your hand and take it by the tail.

So Moses reached out and took hold of the snake and it turned back into a staff in his hand. This, said the Lord, is so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to you.

[23:39] So it was an ordinary staff and what did God do? He transformed it, right? And used it in a powerful way. Used it as a testimony, as an instrument, as a sign. One author put it this way.

God used the stick to show Moses how he can use something ordinary to accomplish an extraordinary purpose. By giving this sign, God was saying, Look, Moses, if you have your doubts, let me show you what I can do.

That stick there, let me show you what I can do with that. Later, God used Moses' staff to bring plagues on the Egyptians, to part the Red Sea, to bring water from a rock.

If God could do all that with a stick, imagine what he could do with Moses. And imagine what he might be able to do with you, with us. That staff, it went from being a staff to more than a staff.

In Exodus 4, verse 20, that's the last verse that we read in our text for today, kind of the turning point there, we find Moses going. We find now he's finally going, and he's obeying.

[24:46] He's on his way to Egypt. And then what does it say? He took the staff of God in his hand. That's what it's called, the staff of God. It's referred to as the staff of God.

He took the staff of God in his hand. A preacher long ago put it like this. He said, Consider the mighty ways in which God used that dead stick of wood.

God so used a stick of wood. That could be a banner, written on a banner, on a name tag, on our forehead for each of us. Though we are limited and weak, entail in physical energy, psychological strength, we are not less than a stick of wood.

But as the rod of Moses had to become the rod of God, the staff of God, so that which is me must become the me of God. Then I can become useful in God's hand.

The scripture emphasizes that much can come from little if the little is truly consecrated to God. Moses, he hemmed and he hawed, he raised objections.

[25:52] God was patient with him. Eventually he went. He answered the call. It says, Moses took his wife and sons, put them on a donkey, started back to Egypt, and he took the staff of God in his hands.

He took the staff of God and really, in a real sense too, he became the staff of God. Moses. Instrument of God. He became the staff of God because God made him that.

Right? He made him into that. And what we've got here and what we're really following throughout this series, this sermon series, is not so much the story of Moses or the story of the Exodus.

It's the story of God. Our Redeemer God. Right? It's the story of God calling and using an inadequate man to be a part of his mission, to be a part of his work in this world. Chapter 3, verse 12. Moses, he hesitates. And what does God say in Moses' hesitation? He says, I will be with you. A couple verses later, verse 14, Moses hesitates again.

[27:01] And what does God say this time? I am who I am. This one who calls us and sends us, he's in fact the great I am. The one who's promised to go with us and to remain with us is no less than the great I am himself.

That's the good news. The great I am. Just think about that. He's full and complete in and of himself. He is being. He is life. He is.

He is. He's kind of like the burning bush, actually, if you come to think about it. That burning bush. Fiery glory. Potent light. Just burning, burning, burning.

All sufficient in and of itself. Not needing any fuel. Never going out. That's our God. All sufficient in and of himself.

I am who I am. That's the one who goes with us. He doesn't need us. He doesn't need anything. He doesn't need anything from us, for sure. But he chooses to be with us.

[28:03] He wants to be. To go on mission with us, too. Do life with us, too. I will be with you. That's the promise. And so it happened.

Centuries later, he comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ. He comes. And Jesus, before his ascension, what does Jesus say?

He says, all authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. Great I am. All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore, go.

This is the burning bush moment. This is the call. Therefore, go. Make disciples of all nations. And surely, I am with you always to the very end of the age.

The great I am. He came. He walked among us, among us. He died on a stick of wood that God transformed into an instrument of salvation.

[29:06] And then he rose from the dead to live for us and to lead us on. He did. And he comes to us, too, and he says, go. Like I called Moses, I'm calling you. I'm appearing to you.

I'm calling you. Go and make disciples and the promise, surely I am with you. The great I am with you always to the very end of the age. He calls us to salvation.

Right? In our lostness, in our sin, he calls to us in all of our messiness, with all of our baggage, he calls to us and he woos us and he softens us and he opens us, opens us to respond to him for us to respond to.

Here I am, Lord. And then he calls again, the relationship grows and he calls again and he calls us into service to be a part of his mission, to be a part of his work in this world and that call, it goes out to all people.

It's not just for a select few or for some special ones. Really, the message here is that there are no special ones. We're all just sticks, really. Inadequate.

[30:13] Ordinary. But the thing is, we now know what our God can do with ordinary sticks. We know.

He's shown us. He's done it. He's revealed it to us. And he's the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together. Lord, thank you for wanting us and for calling us and for equipping us and also for giving us what we need to follow you, follow this call, gifting us with your presence, especially, Lord, so grateful.

And we pray that you would break down our resistance, Lord, and show us ways to be involved in your work and ways that really fit who you made us to be, who you've equipped us to be, and we might serve just where you've placed us.

We offer ourselves to you, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen. I'll see you next time.