

The Burning Bush

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[0 : 00] We see in the slide there on the screen the heading, the sermon heading, simply the burning bush. This will be the first of two sermons in the burning bush.

And the points, as you see there again on the screen, the points to follow, God's preparing his servant for service, as we're going to see in that episode of Moses meeting with God at that burning bush.

And then we might say God's unexpected intervention, and Moses' least expected God to step into his life. And then thirdly and finally, God's word of identity, God identifying himself to Moses, telling him he's not the God of the dead, the God of the living, the burning bush.

Well, I'm sure as most of you know, the burning bush really has been an icon of a, really has been an integral feature of reformed Protestant churches for many centuries.

And of course there are many and varied artistic representations that indicate what we read there in Exodus 3 of the burning bush.

[1 : 11] Suppose one of our, ones that we use in our denomination, one representation of the burning bush, even the one we use in our own congregation, very much tells of that burning bush, the sweeping, well, very much simplifies sweeping of these three shapes to indicate the burning bush that we read there in Exodus 3.

Now, of course, in some of our older buildings, many of you sure have been in our older church buildings, from the pulpit, there's a cloth with the representation of the burning bush, the representation to indicate God's abiding presence, God being with his people, God not forgetting his people, God communing with his people, God showing his love towards his own.

Telling us, telling us, telling us, the symbol of the burning bush, telling the Lord's people that God is with us, ever with us, that he's the Lord of his church, that as he was, he is, and ever shall be.

In my library, in my little library, I've got a little booklet called The Burning Bush in Carleway. It was written in 1984. It was to celebrate the centenary of that church building.

And the title of that little booklet telling us that God had not and has not forgotten his people there on the west side of Lewis, just as God has not forgotten his people here in West Lothian.

[2 : 45] Nor had God forgotten his people there in Egypt as they groaned under the burden of their slavery under a cruel and oppressive Pharaoh.

The people of Israel in Egypt had suffered, and suffered to the point when they cried out to God, and cried out in pain to God as we were thinking just last time.

God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel, and God knew. As we were thinking just last week, God heard.

God remembered. God saw. And God knew. God knew the circumstances of his people. God was concerned for his people. And God would address the people's concern and do it in a most remarkable way, even in that great deliverance under the leadership of one man under the leadership of Moses.

Yes, God is in control. God was sovereign even in the circumstances there in Egypt. And God would deliver his people from that oppression under that Egyptian regime.

[4 : 01] But God would use human agency, as God continues to use human agency, to do his will, to do his bidding. And God would use Moses, send Moses, to lead his people out of Egypt.

And that commissioning Moses, that commissioning Moses to be God's servant, to lead God's people out of Egypt, that commissioning, to lead his people out of Egypt. That commissioning is done in the most, we might say, the most unusual of circumstances, through that phenomenon of the burning bush.

And as we consider this great event, this very much this turning point in Moses' life, turning point in the lives of the children of Israel, God speaks to us today.

God speaks to us today, yes, not through a bush that never was burned up, but God speaks to us, God speaks to you through his word that never changes.

And God is still calling his people to serve him. And God will intervene to call you to serve him. And he'll do that for the sake of his church, just as Moses was called for the sake of God's people there, there in Egypt.

[5 : 22] And that's with Moses, so with you. You hear God's voice. It's for you to respond in obedience to our holy and righteous God, who is God alone.

But what of God's preparing his servant for mission, God preparing his servant for service, as we read right at the start of chapter 3? Let's read these words again.

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. The last time that we saw Moses before his exile from Egypt was when Moses was 40 years old.

This was a man still relatively young, a man who was very much in full possession of his mind. He was very vigorous in his body. By all appearances, in his latter upbringing, he was an Egyptian prince.

But of course, in his heart, he was still a Hebrew, still an Israelite. He'd lived a very privileged life in the royal palace. He lacked for nothing, nothing that the grandeur of the Egyptian palace could give.

[6 : 37] But now, 40 years on, he's a relatively old man. For these 40 years since he fled from Egypt, he's been living his life not as an Egyptian prince, but as a shepherd.

He's no longer that self-confident, impatient man who, who more than one occasion tried to exert his own authority, trying to take the law into his own hands.

No longer does he have all the trappings of wealth and privilege, because for 40 years, Moses has lived the life of a wandering shepherd, a nomad in the Arabian wilderness.

He's now become married, he's got children, and by all accounts, very much settled in his new way of life. And for 40 years, it would have appeared to Moses that no longer would he have any part to play as an Israelite in Egypt.

For 40 years, it would seem to Moses that God would not direct him to do anything for God's people there in Egypt. For 40 years, Moses has been separated from his people in Egypt.

[7 : 50] For 40 years, it would seem that God is not going to use Moses. But God's plans for Moses, God's plans for his people, would be carried out in God's perfect timing.

And this, when Moses is 80 years old, and he might have thought that his, many ways his best years were behind him, Moses was called by God to do something great for God.

To lead his people out of Egypt. And these 40 years that Moses was spending there in the area of Midian, the desert area, for these 40 years, we would have to say, were years of further preparation that God was giving Moses when Moses would come to the point to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Because in these 40 years, Moses would learn patience. He'd learn self-control. He'd learn to wait on the Lord. So 40 years to prepare for the next 40 years.

And in that 40 years, traveling through the wilderness towards the promised land. So far from these 40 years that Moses was a shepherd, far from these years being wasted years, these were formative years.

[9 : 13] These were years that God had given Moses to strengthen him, to prepare him for that great act of service that God had planned Moses to undertake.

And remember this. No years are wasted in God's service. No years of preparation are wasted when God has given you these years to prepare you for God's work that he's given you to do.

And remember this also, the years that God has given you while you have breath in your life. The years that God's mapped out for you won't always be years when there's constant direct activity.

It won't always be years of planting and plowing and reaping. There has to be a time of preparation. There's got to be times of preparation when God calls you to a particular work that he's given you to do.

No athlete, no sportsman simply goes into an event without perhaps years of training. No soldier goes into war without times of preparation and training.

[10 : 32] And so no Christian, no Christian will be thrust into the heat of battle without first being prepared for the role that he or she has been given to do in their God's leading.

Maybe you're thinking even through this pandemic that your life's on hold at the moment. Maybe you might be thinking that there's some kind of pause button being pressed. This is no wasted time in God's timing.

While you have breath, God will give you work to do for him. And that works often involving work in relation to others. Even in these lulls of so much direct activity that the church ordinarily is engaged in, these are times that God has given us to mature in him, to learn, to grow, and to remove those things that have so hampered our effectiveness as Christians and our witness.

And so we thank God for these times of preparation. I mean, if Jesus could be given 30 years of preparation before he embarked on his three years of public ministry, who are any of us to dismiss the times of preparation that God gives us as God guides us?

But then, as we see in the passage, we see God's unexpected intervention. And for Moses, as that shepherd in all the years that he's been shepherding there in the various parts of that peninsula, he's been doing what he's been doing.

[12:09] He's been tending the flocks of his father-in-law. But on this occasion, we're told that he goes or he leads this flock to the far side of the desert.

And we can suggest that this was an area that he didn't normally go to, the area that we know as, the Sinai Desert, and very far south at that.

And so, we can see from the passage that Moses is actually going long distances to find pasture for his flock. And he comes to Mount Horeb, the other name for Mount Sinai.

And this he's been doing all these years. He's just minding his own business. His mind is in the care of his flock. And then God intervenes in the most unforeseen and unexpected way.

As we read there in verse 2, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. Now, whether this was a pre-incarnate revelation of Jesus, we can't say for certain.

[13:15] But what we can see is it was this phenomenon of this desert bush burning and not being consumed by fire. That's what stopped Moses in his tracks to look at what was the most unusual phenomenon.

And with that angelic form in the midst of the fire, well, as later we see in verse 4, identified with God the Lord. But it was that sight of the burning bush and the angel in the midst of the burning bush that stops Moses.

He's intrigued. I mean, never in his 40 years had he seen such a sight. The fire that burned a bush that wasn't reduced to ashes. It was, as we read in the passage, a great sight, or as other translations tell us, a strange sight.

And from that strange sight, he hears a great sound. It's the sound of the voice of God the Lord calling to Moses, calling his name twice, Moses, Moses.

And in great fear, Moses can only utter one word in his original language, the words that we translate, here I am. I mean, this is a life-changing conversation that is happening between God and Moses.

[14:40] And it's important to realize this, that God hadn't spoken to his people for, really, since the time of Jacob, some 400 years before this, this happened. But now he's speaking to his people again directly.

And he's speaking particularly to his servant and to his prophet, Moses. And it's God who initiates the conversation, God who sets the tone of the conversation.

And the manner by which God speaks indicates that Moses must approach God in that manner of reverence.

Just as the fire and the bush there emphasize God's purity and holiness, so Moses has to approach God realizing the purity and holiness of God.

And to do that, God tells him to take his shoes off, take the sandals off his feet, that indication of reverence, that mark of respect, because as God tells him, the ground in which he's standing is holy ground because the presence of the Lord is there.

[15:47] God tells him to take the fire. And so the sight of the fire and the sound of God's voice and that command to take his sandals off his feet, this all adds up to what Moses realizes is the majesty of God, God in his holiness, God in his purity, God in his purifying presence, God in his eternal power.

And surely this should bring before us a great truth, that there can be no casual, presumptive attitude in coming before God in worship.

It was the late Professor John L. Mackay who wrote these words, It is a solemn and awesome privilege to say to one's fellow beings, let us worship God. because how each one of us approaches God is crucial. It's crucial in our meeting with him. God is holy.

Therefore, we must show God that respect, that reverence that's due to him and to him alone. And there can't be any room for a lackadaisical, half-hearted worship.

[17 : 03] Even at this time of lockdown, you know, when you're meeting in worship and the familiarity of your own homes, you're still to worship God with that reverence that it's due to his name.

This is an act of worship. And so, we must regard this worship in calling upon God, in being in his presence, in recognizing who God is as we come before him in worship.

Because we can't have a casual, sort of carefree coming into God's presence. This is worship. Bear that in mind. This is worship.

And all that worship means in approaching the living and true God, as we do that through the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus, who made it possible for you to come into God's presence.

Jesus, who made it possible by his death on the cross. It's only through his death that we've been able to approach God. Jesus has opened up that way so that you might stand in God's presence and be declared right with God.

[18 : 12] And if we fail to realize the cost that Jesus paid for your coming before God, and Jesus not being consumed by the fire of God's wrath, then we're going to fail to realize the solemnity that must be in our hearts as we come before God and worship Him.

Because we stand before a holy God. He demands reverence in His presence. Even as we seek to revere Him and revere His name, as we realize who God is as we come before Him in worship.

And that, recognizing who God is, well, God informs Moses who He is. God's words of identity that we read in verse 6. So Moses is approaching God.

He's approaching God with that reverence that he recognizes that this is God who's before him.

And as Moses stands there barefooted before that burning bush, God speaks to him and says, tells Moses who He is.

Verse 6, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. God was introducing Himself to Moses to make it absolutely clear who He is.

[19 : 36] He's the covenant-keeping, covenant-making, covenant-keeping God. God whose promises, whose covenant promises were given to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

These promises that concern the land of promise, the promised land, the promise that God gave to these fathers of Israel, the promise that God would keep.

And when Moses heard God speak to him of who He is, the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, then surely Moses would have remembered what he'd been taught as a child, remembered what his parents had taught him about Abraham, about the promise that God had given to Abraham, that God would make through Abraham's offspring a great nation.

And these words that God gave to Abraham, to your descendants, I give this land. Moses would recall these words. And Moses would remember what his parents had told him when God declared to Abraham's son Isaac, that I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands, and in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. And Moses would have called to mind that God had declared to Isaac's son Jacob these words, I am God, the God of your father. Do not fear to go down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there.

[21 : 13] You see, God had made himself known to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He made himself known as the God who makes his promises, his covenants, and that they'll be fulfilled.

And now the same God's approaching Moses and speaking of who he is in relation to the promises that he'd made to Moses' forefathers. And Moses would know that truly the God of Israel was speaking to him.

The God, God who'd remained silent before his people Israel for 400 years, God's now revealing his intention to fulfill his covenant through Moses.

The people of Israel have become a great nation and they're about to be sent out of Egypt towards the land of promise. And before we consider Moses' response to God when God made himself

known to him, then I think we do have to pause at this moment because, listen again to these words, when God spoke to Moses and God made himself known as the God of your father. You see, Moses is part of the great heritage of the Lord's people. Moses has been connected directly with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These were those through whom God had formed a great nation.

[22 : 42] Think of yourself, you who are in Christ, you who know him by faith. You are connected with every saint of the Lord, the Lord's saints, past, present, and yet to come.

You are part of the great body of believers and you're secure in the love of God. Why? Because God is faithful. Because you're his possession, you'll never be taken away from his love because God is faithful to his promises, his promises that have been fulfilled in the Lord Jesus. God is the God of the living. He's not the God of the dead. That's what we read there in Matthew 22. God's the God who calls you to himself and who promises that you can never lose your salvation because he is the God of the living.

He's the God who's faithful. And surely then that has to elicit in yourself a response, a response of godly fear towards God.

God. Remember this, that you deserve nothing of God's love, nothing of God's grace. So what's your response then to the truth that God is your God and that you can rejoice that you are connected with all who are his?

[24 : 00] Look at Moses' response. Look at Moses' response when God called to Moses and spoke of himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. How does Moses respond?

He covers his face. He takes his cloak and covers his face because he's afraid to look at God. Moses is aware that he's in the presence of the God of Israel.

Moses is aware that he's in the presence of holiness. And being aware of being in the presence of holiness, he's aware of his own sinfulness.

the more that we realize in whose presence we've come, the more we realize whom we are worshipping. Yes, the more we realize and come to know the true sinfulness of our own hearts. And Moses realizes that and he hides his face. He knows that he can't look upon the radiant glory of God without being punished by death. Many hundreds of years later, Jesus told of a tax collector who went to pray in the temple.

[25 : 10] Remember the words of the parable, but the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. And the tax collector, like Moses, he knew he was a sinner before a holy God and such he wouldn't even raise his head towards heaven.

such was his humility before God. We might not hide our faces with our coats, with our jackets, whatever, when you approach God and worship.

But surely, even by our very posture, even by our very attitudes, we come to realize that we're in the presence of a holy God. And when we have times of prayer, we bow our heads.

In other persuasions, there's times of kneeling before God. And whatever our manner and posture are approached to God, let's do it with the utmost awareness of God's holiness and at the same time our sinfulness.

So we come before him with that holy fear, that fear that recognizes who God is so that we must show him due honor before him because of who he is.

[26 : 30] And Moses certainly showed that fear of God because there he is standing before the God of his Father. He's standing before the covenant-making and covenant-keeping God of Israel.

And may you too be aware of the holiness of God. Yes, in our times of worship, but even in your everyday lives. let's just go back one more time to worship because times of worship are precious times.

These are times spent in God's presence. These are times even a foretaste of our being in the eternal presence of God. When in heaven you will behold the face of the Lord Jesus, you'll see him face to face.

And you'll bow before him. you'll bow before the one who saved you. Even now you rejoice that you are coming near to God through the Lord Jesus, that you who are a sinner can approach a holy God and live.

And just as God called Moses by name, he calls you by name and he calls you to serve him and he calls you to proclaim that name that's higher than any other name.

[27 : 48] and he calls you to proclaim the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of lords and King of kings as you proclaim that by your word and your witness.

And so may God bless to us these words, these thoughts from his word. Let us pray. Our Heavenly Father, forgive us for the many times when we have approached you in that casual manner.

Forgive us, Lord, for the many times when we have not come before you with that awareness of your holiness. Help us, Lord, we pray, to live in the light of your presence and to worship you, to call upon you, to live before you, you who are worthy of all praise, all reverence, all glory.

hear us, Lord, as we continue in worship before you now and we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.