

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Two Sides of the Same Bush”
Exodus 2:28-3:15
October 1, 2017

The last couple weeks we've heard stories about Jacob.
The story of Jacob's ladder,
reaching from his wrestling soul into the heavens.
The story of Jacob marrying both Rachel and Leah.

One of the stories we didn't hear is the story of Jacob wrestling with God and being given the name Israel. It's important because this same Jacob has 12 sons by that point... 12 sons that became 12 tribes known as the Israelites.

One of Jacob's sons was Joseph. You might remember from Sunday school or from Broadway, that Joseph was given an **Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat** or at least, that's what the musical calls it.

Through an unbelievable set of events, Joseph became second in command over all of Egypt, and eventually all his brothers and dear old dad moved to town. That's how Genesis ends.
The descendants of Jacob,
all 12 tribes, the Israelites,
are there in Egypt.

The book of Exodus picks up with their story 400 years later. This family of foreigners has continued to multiply like rabbits, and it makes the locals nervous.

You know how it is. When outsiders, another ethnic group, another tribe, say, come to town and start to multiply... and you get real nervous that they might just change your culture... your way of life. They might start to get too much power.

Can't have that, right?

We don't want their religion, and their stories, and their beliefs to take root here.

So, the Egyptians do what we're always inclined to do one way or another: **use violence to keep them in their place**. That violence can take all kinds of shapes and forms in our time.

But for Jacob's descendants, the Israelites, it takes shape in the form of forced slavery. Their dark-skinned bodies are used to build the economic power, and the military power, and the political power of the Egyptian Empire.

The Israelites... are enslaved...

That's where the book of Exodus picks up.
This morning we have this story of the burning bush where **all the action really gets going** in Exodus.

And from this story in particular, there are two things I want to invite you to see. Two things, like two sides of the same coin.

Two truths that have to be held together.

One without the other will most certainly lead you astray...

But when you hold them together, ***all the action really gets going.***

And to get at these two truths, I want to invite you to think about...

Abraham Lincoln...

or his face at least.

You've seen it a thousand times I'm sure, because it is there, up close and personal on one side of the penny. In fact, if you have a penny in your pocket, pull it out. If you don't, just try to imagine. I've got one here. Let me get it out.

On the penny, Lincoln's face is up close and the detail is pretty impressive. Maybe you've never taken the time to stop and notice, but you can really see a lot.

His hair and his beard.

His ears, the shape of his nose. Those cheek bones.

You can make out his tie, and his collar, and jacket.

And if you look really close...

you can even see that his eyes are open,

and lips are together,

and that famous chin's sticking out.

All this detail...on the face of a penny,

up close and personal, and so very familiar...

That's the first thing Moses discovers... on the surface of this bush. God, up close and personal. Here, breaking into your life... more present than you know.

Of course, that would be pretty hard for the Israelites to believe at this time.

400 years, remember? They are enslaved.

And they cry out to God. And I imagine they wonder if God can hear them, or if God cares.

Things get worse

and they cry out,

and time passes,

and they cry out ,

and generations pass,

and they cry out...

and maybe they start to wonder if God is even real.

I imagine Moses has wondered that from time to time. After all, he may have grown up in the Pharaoh's household, but he knows he is one of the Hebrew people. And decades ago he had to flee Egypt, and now he's become a shepherd, out in the desert, a long, long way from either of the families he once knew...

a long, long way from any of the gods he once knew.

Was any of it ever real?

I imagine... *we all wonder* that at times.

Life gets messy. Our relationships fall apart. Or those we love seem to keep suffering.

The marginalized in our community seem to keep suffering.

Their cries seem to fall on deaf ears.

Hopes dwindle.

And you wonder, where in the world God is anyway?

...Or maybe...

God has *always been* a distant idea for you.

Some impersonal force at best.

Something you're supposed to believe in, but something that doesn't make any sense.

Maybe you wonder if God is just the leftover rumors of your grandparents and their grandparents.

I imagine that's how God seemed to Moses.

But one day, something happens.

All that distant, impersonal force... comes breaking into Moses' life in one personal, concentrated place... a bush that's on fire.

Moses turns aside to see what this strange thing is, only to encounter the very God he thought was a myth...

up-close and personal... and so familiar.

Did you notice that the first thing God says... is his name? **"Moses, Moses."** The sound of the wind, the stirring of the leaves on the ground and the flames flicking Moses.

It's like that moment in the garden, and Mary Magdalene is weeping because she wonders who has taken Jesus' dead body...

and some gardener whispers her name,

"Mary, Mary I'm right here..."

"Moses, Moses..."

God calls to him out of the bush... and God calls to him by name.

God knows Moses.

And not only that, God knows Moses' ancestors...

And not only that... God knows the plight of Moses' people.

God looked at them, and heard them, and God knows they're suffering...

and God's coming to them.

We heard that more than once in our reading this morning. That litany of verbs.

This is a very personal God.

A God who knows... ***your*** name...

and knows the cries of ***your*** heart...

and knows ***your*** family...

and knows ***your*** deepest longing.

In theological terms, we call this **the immanence of God**. God's nearness.

It's part of what we talked about last week. "God is more intimate to me than I am to myself," Augustine said.

And that's the first thing I want you to see this morning.

For some of you, that feels easy. It seems obvious, and I'll get to you in just a moment.

But for a lot of you, the idea that God is so personally involved in your life is about the hardest thing in faith your pastor could ask you to trust. I know. Truth be told, it is hard for me to trust at times too.

But I'm asking you to believe it anyway.

Not because it's obvious, but because it's what Jesus seems to believe.

He challenges us to trust in God's nearness and God's care over and over again. "If God takes care of the lilies and the grass of the field, will he not much more care for you? O you of little faith..." he says in Matthew 6. "Your heavenly Father knows your needs."

Jesus spoke as if God was near.

Prayed as if God could hear him.

And died as if God was holding him... *"Into your hands I commit my spirit"* he said with his last breath.

And this moment in Exodus... this great salvation story of the Old Testament... we see this same God is up close and personal... as up close as Abe Lincoln's face on the penny.

God **is** present to your life.

Whether you've ever stopped long enough to turn aside and see the mystery of the burning bush, or not... God **is** there.

God is looking, noticing, hearing, coming.

And who knows, in a holy moment, one day...

you may just hear God whisper your name.

For others here today, believing that may not be so hard. In fact, maybe you're used to talking to God, and about God, and with God, without ever giving it a second thought. It just comes naturally to you.

You trust God's presence in all things... all the time.

Know that this trust you have is a gift... one that not everyone has. So be gentle with your assumptions and with the way you speak about it.

But also know that your familiarity with God... **can be**
just as dangerous as another person's distance from God.

That's the other side of the same bush, so to speak. As soon as God says Moses' name, God tells him to "Come no closer. Take the sandals from your feet. This is holy ground" you're walking on.

In other words, there is a danger in being too familiar. There is a holiness to God that cannot be handled lightly. And so Moses immediately has to turn his face away. A certain distance must be maintained.

It's important we catch that subtly here. It's a reminder that:

God will not be reduced to our way of seeing.

God will not be reduced to our definitions and perceptions.

God will not be reduced to our experience of God's nearness.

God is holy other beyond you.

This is what theologians call **God's transcendence**. God is beyond our language, beyond our understanding, beyond our handling... and beyond **our naming**... and we must not forget that.

So, when Moses asks for a name God simply says,
"I Am, who I Am"

This word in Hebrew here, is actually hard to translate because it isn't a name at all. It's the verb "to be."

And so it holds a kind of **fullness of meaning**:

It means:

"I Am."

and "I AM that I AM"

and even "I will be what I will be."

Which is also a way of saying, God is being itself. The ground of all existence.

God won't be reduced to a familiar name.

God simply is.

"I am, who I am."

This is the sacred name of God... being itself, beyond naming.

And if you begin to glimpse that, you'll understand just how much humility we must have when handling the holy.

Be careful...

Be careful not to be so casual with your God language... and God talk...

Be careful... about the assumptions you make about

what God is and isn't doing...

what God is and isn't like...

what God is and isn't saying... to us at any given time.

Be careful, because there has been a lot of damage done by being too familiar with God...

Meister Eckhart, a medieval mystic and pastor once said, "God becomes... and God unbecomes." And what he means is that God **becomes** concrete for us, but just as we start to think we understand God... just as we get close enough to see God... our image of God "**unbecomes**."

Because God is bigger than that... and beyond that... and so much more holy than you can imagine. "God becomes... and God **unbecomes**." always

So be careful here. This is holy ground you're walking on.

Be careful here. Not every passing thought, circumstance, or intuition is God.

A profound sense of humility is needed here.

A profound humility with one another

and a profound humility before the great I AM.

That's the other side of the same coin I want to invite you to see this morning. If you flip the penny over, what is there?

Do you remember?

It's not Lincoln's face, but the Lincoln monument... an image from a great distance... the distance of time and space. You cannot see Lincoln's face at all. In fact... you almost don't even know Lincoln is there.

At least I never did until this week.

But if you look... really closely... at the center of the monument on the back of your penny, you can see it.

You might need a magnifying glass, but it's there.

Faint, subtle, but there:

Lincoln on his throne,
distant... and majestic... and massive...
and almost imperceptible.

All these years of casually handling a penny, and I never knew it was there. But it was... all along. Hidden and distant.

It's the other side of the same coin. And when you can hold both sides together, then something beautiful and profound begins to happen. That's where the power is. That's where things begin to break open. That's where the action gets going.

For Moses, it began a great journey back to Egypt to face the power of the Pharaoh, and through 10 plagues, and across the Red Sea, and leading God's people on this journey in the wilderness for 40 years... A Journey with God to unknown places.

It all beings here... in the personal encounter... and the personal awareness... of the Holy Transcendent God-Beyond-Us.

"God is more intimate to me than I am to myself."

"God becomes, and God un-becomes."

Both are true.

Both are essential.

God is there beside you, and so far beyond you.

If you're only seeing one side of the penny, you're missing its value all together. Both sides of the coin are essential.

So, if you're someone who tends to think of God as near, as personal, as close... then know that that awareness is a gift... but it is also only half the truth.

Be careful that you are not trite with this God.

And, if you're someone who is used to this distance, this mystery, this unknowing... in your relationship to God... know that your humility before the Divine is a gift... but by itself, it can also be a death.

Because this same God who is so much larger and beyond us... is a God that hears your cries... the deep cries of your soul.

And this God knows you...

and knows the very ground on which you stand.

This God is holding you... and calls you by name.

As distant as God may seem to **you**,
you are never distant to God.

Remember our great story?

"In the beginning, was the word. And the word was with God and the word was God..."
grand and mysterious.

And this same word... "became flesh and dwelt among us," John, chapter 1.

And then in Colossians: "Christ was before all things and in him all things hold together"
grand and mysterious. And later in that same letter, "Your life is now hidden with Christ in God."
this personal up-close reality.

Jesus came and said,

"Before Abraham was, I Am" He is the transcendent one.

And also the One who says,

"Abide in me and I will abide in you.

"Remain in me, and I will remain in you."

So, as we prepare to come to his table today, I want to invite you to wrestle with whatever
side of the coin you have a hard time with.

Do you need to repent of your familiarity?
of handling the Holy too casually?

Or do you need to repent of your skeptical distance... of being unwilling to turn aside and
see the burning bush, right there beside you?

Let's take just a moment, close our eyes in silent prayer.

In the silence... of the next moment... ask God to help you see the other side of the coin
today:

Prayer: (silence)

Holy and Mystery God...

Divine presence holding us,

The intimate lover of our souls...

We come to you now...

In this bread and in this cup... fill our deep emptiness.

We open ourselves to the fullness of your mystery...

We humble ourselves before your refining fire...

In the name of the One who taught us to pray, saying...