

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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GOD OF THE BURNING BUSH

Exodus 3:1-15

Following his hasty departure from Egypt, Moses would spend the next 40 years in exile as a shepherd in the desert wilderness of Midian. All the royal privileges he enjoyed in Egypt, along with the dreams of his youth, would become just a distant memory. For four long decades, he would hold the exact job he had been taught as a boy in Egypt to despise. How the mighty have fallen!

Yet, as we discover here in Exodus 3, God is not finished with Moses. God has not forgotten about Moses. In fact, God has been using Moses' humbling experience and hard life to prepare him for what would be Moses' true mission in life.

Moses, by this time, is no longer a young man. That is an understatement. He was 40 years old when he had to run for his life from Egypt. He spent the next 40 years in Midian. He may think it is about time to put himself out to pasture, but in reality, he is finally ready to be used by God.

A DAY LIKE ANY OTHER

He is out with the sheep, doing what shepherds do. Verse 1 says that "he led the flock to the far side of the desert." Do you know what "the far side" is? (Not the comic strip.) For the Israelites and other ancient peoples, the far side (or back side) referred to the west side, toward the setting sun. They would always use the east as their point of reference when orienting themselves or giving directions. So the far side meant the west. In the search for decent pasture, Moses has taken the flock to the west, going as far as Mount Horeb, which, as we discover later, is another name for Mount Sinai, where Moses will receive the law from God following the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt (see God's promise to Moses in 3:12).

The day it happened was just like any other day. As far as Moses could tell, there was nothing unusual about it. It was "just another day at the wilderness office" (Swindoll, *Moses*, 95). Just a routine, ordinary day. Until it became anything but ordinary.

WHEN CHRIST RETURNS

It is not unlike what the Bible says about the day of Christ's promised return. The Bible says it will be just like it was "in the days of Noah.... For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away" (Matthew 24:37-39).

It will happen, as Chuck Swindoll points out, on an otherwise ordinary day. People will be getting married and buried. There will be the usual headaches and frustrations. Some people will be driving buses. Others will be riding them. Some will be standing in slug lines. Some will be on their way home from work, tuned in to WTOP or their favorite music station. Others will be at the grocery store or the gym. Some will be changing diapers or sitting in a doctor's office. Others will be planning their next weekend getaway.

And suddenly, the Lord Jesus will come. There will be a flash in the sky, a shout in the heavens, the blast of a trumpet, and in the twinkling of an eye it will happen. No neon signs in the sky. No previous warning (other than those given in the Bible). It will take place on an ordinary day. A day just like today. (Adapted from Swindoll, 95-96).

ARE YOU READY?

Are you ready? Are you sure? Just as there are things you must do to get ready for a hurricane when it is bearing down on you, there is something you must do to be ready when Jesus returns to establish His rule over the whole world and all of creation. What must you do to be ready? You must simply surrender your life to Jesus as Savior and Lord. Admit that you are a sinner who needs a Savior, and that you are helpless to save yourself or to make yourself good enough to deserve God's favor. Acknowledge that your only hope for salvation is found in Jesus alone. Repent of your sins (which means, turn away from them) and receive the gift of God's forgiveness. Trust in Jesus alone for your salvation. Ask God to make your heart His home and to live in you from now on. And resolve, with His help, to live for Him from now on.

That is how to be ready when the Lord Jesus returns. Or to be ready for the day when your life on this earth will come to an end. The day it happens will seem like an ordinary day, just like any other day. If you're not ready, the time to get ready is now. Today. Because you never know when it will be too late. I want you to be ready.

"A STRANGE SIGHT"

Moses had no inkling this day would be different from any other day since he began tending his father-in-law's sheep 40 years earlier. Until he saw something very much out of the ordinary. We call it "the burning bush" (3:2). He noticed that "though the bush was on fire it did not burn up." The bush was burning without being burned up. It was consumed with flames without being consumed by the flames. The fire just kept going and going and going. It was, as Moses thought to himself, a "strange sight" (3:3).

It is not every day that you see something like this. There was nothing unusual about the bush at all. But the fire – that was a different story. God chose to use this ordinary thorn bush to get Moses' attention and to reveal Himself to him.

Which is how God sometimes operates. Sometimes, in the common, everyday circumstances of our lives, God does something entirely out of the ordinary. Not always, but sometimes. As

He did with Moses in this instance, God may use some extraordinary event or circumstance to get our undivided attention.

There are all kinds of ways that God can get our attention. Sometimes He does it through the birth of a child. It may be by an unexpected blessing or providence. It may be by His protection or rescue from catastrophe, when we are spared from some calamity. It may be through some disaster or tragedy or bad news, like a hurricane or an earthquake. It may be the death of a loved one. Or a diagnosis of cancer. Or some other life-threatening illness. God can use all kinds of means to get our attention when He wants to. The important thing is for each of us to live moment by moment in a constant state of God-awareness, so we don't miss out on any message or mission or blessing He may have for us.

ANY OLD BUSH WILL DO

Luis Palau tells how this biblical event changed his life. A chapel speaker talked about Moses' encounter with the burning bush when Palau was in Bible college. The bush was probably just a bunch of dry, ugly sticks, the speaker said, but Moses had to take off his sandals. Why? Because God was in the bush. God, the speaker said, was telling Moses: "I don't need a pretty bush or an educated bush or an eloquent bush. Any old bush will do as long as I'm in the bush. If I'm going to use you, it won't be you doing something for me, but me doing something through you."

Do you hear that? Any old bush will do, as long as God is in the bush. Which means that God can use any of us. He could still use Moses. He can still use you. He can still use me. He can use any of us, as long as we will let Him.

The Lord had a mission for Moses, but it was not Moses who would deliver the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt. It was not Moses who would bring them through the wilderness and lead them to the Promised Land. It was God who would do it. He would do it *through* Moses. Moses would be the human instrument through whom God would redeem and rescue His people from their oppression in Egypt.

GOD CARES

I want you to notice the striking similarity between verses 7-9 and what it says at the end of Exodus 2 (verses 24-25). In 2:24-25, we read that:

- 1) God heard the groaning of his people;
- 2) God remembered His covenant with their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob;
- 3) God looked on the Israelites; and
- 4) God was concerned about them.

God heard. He remembered. He saw. And He was concerned. He cared about what was happening to his people.

Then, in Exodus 3:7-9, the Lord Himself says:

- 1) I have seen the misery of my people;
- 2) I have heard them crying out;
- 3) I am concerned about their suffering; and
- 4) I have come down to rescue them.

God saw. God heard. God was concerned. He cared about what was happening to them. And He had come to rescue and deliver them.

AN APOSTOLIC COMMISSION

How would God do it? Through His chosen servant Moses, to whom the Lord gives this “apostolic commission” in verse 10. The word “apostolic” fits perfectly here, because the word apostle means “one who is sent out.” Like the New Testament apostles who were chosen, trained, and sent out on their mission by the Lord Jesus Christ, Moses was chosen by God, equipped for service through 40 years as a shepherd in Midian, and then sent by God to carry out a specific mission in God’s service. Verse 10 defines the mission: “So now, go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

Do you know how Moses responded? He said: “Well, it’s about time, Lord. What took You so long? This is what I wanted to do, it is what I started out to do, 40 years ago when I killed that Egyptian who was mistreating one of the Hebrew slaves. Let’s get on with it!”

Is that what Moses said? No. It was more like: “Um, with all due respect, Lord, You must be crazy. I’m not Your guy. I thought I was the man 40 years ago, but look how that turned out. I used to be the Prince of Egypt, but that was a lifetime ago. I’m just an ordinary shepherd now. Who in their right minds would listen to me, or follow me?” Moses had eaten a lot of humble pie in the last 40 years, to the point that now he thought himself unqualified to do what God was asking him to do. He figured his failure 40 years earlier had disqualified him.

Have you ever felt this way? Not that God has ever given you or me a task of the same magnitude as the mission of Moses. But maybe you have sensed God calling you to some ministry in the church or community, or some challenging position in your vocation, and you have felt totally inadequate for it. Or maybe the memory of some failure in your past keeps haunting you.

Maybe you have been asked to serve in a particular ministry – as an elder or deacon or teacher or ministry leader – in the church for which you feel unqualified. You may have heard it said: “God doesn’t call the qualified; He qualifies those He calls.” You may have heard it, but you’re not sure you believe it. Believe it. And believe this, too: The only ability God requires is availability. If God is calling you to some mission, whether it is large or small, your availability in the form of a willing heart is the most important ability you can bring to the table. God will give you what you need to accomplish your mission, just as He gave Moses what he needed for his mission.

To Moses’ objection that he (Moses) was inadequate for the job God had for him, the Lord

simply said: ‘I will be with you’ (3:12). It was the promise of God’s personal presence with Moses and the exercise of His power in Moses’ life that would enable Moses to be God’s instrument in bringing the people of Israel out of Egypt. *I. Will. Be. With. You.*

Do you know that this is God’s promise to you and me as well? Whatever He calls you to do, wherever in this world He sends you, whatever challenges you face, whatever your circumstances, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, God says: “I will be with you.”

ONE GREATER THAN BUBBA

John Ortberg is one of my favorite storytellers. He tells this story about walking past a bar in southern California with two friends from his church. There was a fight going on inside the bar, and it spilled out into the street, just like in an old western. Several guys were beating up another guy, who was bleeding from the forehead. Ortberg says: “We knew we had to do something, so we went over to break up the fight. I don’t think we were very intimidating. [All we did was walk over and say:] “Hey, you guys, cut that out!” It didn’t do much good.

“Then all of a sudden they looked at us with fear in their eyes. The guys who had been beating up on the one guy stopped and started to slink away. I didn’t know why until we turned and looked behind us. Out of the bar had come the biggest man I think I’ve ever seen. He was something like six feet, seven inches, maybe 300 pounds, maybe two percent body fat. He was just *huge*. We called him Bubba (not to his face, but afterwards, when we talked about him).

“Bubba didn’t say a word. He just stood there and flexed. You could tell he was hoping they would try and have a go at him. All of a sudden my attitude was transformed, and I said to those guys: “You better not let us catch you coming around here again!” I was a different person because I had great, big Bubba. I was ready to confront with resolve and firmness. I was released from anxiety and fear. I was filled with boldness and confidence. I was ready to help someone who needed helping. I was ready to serve where serving was required. Why? Because I had a great, big Bubba (with me). I was convinced that I was not alone. I was safe.”

Then Ortberg says: “If I were convinced that Bubba was with me 24 hours a day, I would have a fundamentally different approach to my life. If I knew Bubba was behind me all day long, you wouldn’t want to mess with me. But he’s not. I can’t count on Bubba.”

Well, here’s the thing, and it is the whole reason John Ortberg tells the story: There is One who is greater than Bubba, and He is with you and me 24/7. You don’t have to wonder if He will show up, because He is always there. He *is* with you and *will be* with you, just as He was with Moses. You don’t have to live your life in doubt or fear. The God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and promised to be with him is with you and me, too. You don’t have to wonder if He is with you. If you have opened your heart to the Lord Jesus in trusting faith, God *is* with you. And you can be sure that He *will be* with you, regardless of what the future holds or where the Lord takes you in this life.

THE LORD WILL BE WITH YOU

Listen to me, everyone: Whatever challenges or opportunities or struggles lie before you, whatever serendipities or disappointments you may experience, *the Lord will be with you*. He will not leave you to deal with them alone.

Students and teachers: When you go to school tomorrow, *God will be with you*. All through your school day, *He will be with you*. You can count on it, because you can count on Him.

Military and government people: When you report to work tomorrow, *God will be with you*. He will give you what you need in every situation you face.

Professionals in the public or private sector: Know that God *is* with you and *will be* with you.

Moms and dads, sons and daughters, grandmothers and grandfathers: In the ordinary and not-so-ordinary events of life, *God will be with you*.

Elders, deacons, teachers, ministry leaders, members of the church family: Whatever your mission or ministry role may be – and God has a place for every one of us to serve – *God will be with you*.

He will not leave you alone. He will not leave any of us alone. He has given us His word. He has promised that He will never leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6; Hebrews 13:4). He – the One who is greater than Bubba – is with you at every moment. And He will give you what you need to serve Him at every moment. Just as He did with Moses.

The God who revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush – the God of Moses' father Amram, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – is the great "I Am." Without the strength and help He provides, we are sure to fail in whatever mission He has for us. We can only succeed if God is with us, and if we are with God.

Know that the God of the burning bush still lives. Know that He will be with you every step of the way in your journey through this life. And let Him have your life. He can do more with it than you can (D. L. Moody).

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.