

## **The Great Summons**

### **Exodus 3: 1-17**

**Rev. Kit Ripley**

**June 27, 2010 – Chiang Mai Community Church**

A summons to a quest! Enter knights on shining, white steeds. Many of the great stories of history start with a summons to a quest. Our hero, Moses is minding his own business, searching out good pastures for his flocks, when he comes across the angel of the Lord in a flame of fire. First it's an angel, then a flame, then the voice of God calling out to him in the first person, "I am the God of your father". What did Moses actually see? I wish we had more details. Was it like some magical Sirius Black from Azkaban, talking to Harry Potter as a floating face from the fire in the hearth? I don't think so. This fire, and the voice of God that Moses heard was not some Hollywood-ized fantasy. It was real! The Jewish Talmud suggests that the angel was there to ease Moses into this encounter, to warn him that something divine was going to happen, so he wouldn't just up and die of the shock. How appropriate that there was a fire. Throughout the Bible, God's glory is portrayed as a fiery splendor or a shining light, known as the "shekinah", or "glory" of God. We see that same fire that does not destroy hovering over the heads of believers again in the book of Acts at Pentecost. Whatever Moses saw, it was clearly the presence of the Lord, in some form. A divine encounter. A summons to a quest.

And then the Lord tells Moses to stop and remove his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. I think my Thai friends would approve of this shedding of shoes to honor a sacred place. So the ground itself is holy. What makes something holy? In the scripture there were holy places, holy objects in the temple, and holy people. These things are "set apart" and distinguished from ordinary things. These places, things and people are special in some way. And the thing that makes them holy is an infusion of the presence of God's Spirit. So God's confers holiness on things and people and places. One might say that holiness has a "contagious" quality. We "catch it" from being around God because God is holy. In fact, God even instructs us: "Be holy for I am holy". (Lev 19:2; 1 Peter:1:15-16) What, then, does it mean to say that God is "holy"? Really, the word, "holy" is a squirrely kind of word. It resists pinning down. We know what it *feels* like though, don't we? When we encounter "the holy" in a particular moment, we have an inner sense that there is something unique about this moment in the relationship, this beautiful sunset, this birth of a child. There is a denseness to it. But how does one *describe* God's holiness? One writer states that, "Holiness is the shining brilliance of all God's attributes blended together into a whole." (V. M. Sinton) Well, what's that supposed to mean? In the Lord's Prayer, we say, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..." which in common English would be, "Our Father who is in heaven, your Name is holy." We also know from scripture that the holiness of God and immorality are mutually exclusive. The holiness of God cannot exist in proximity to evil and immorality (see the book of Leviticus; Heb 12:10-11) because God's holiness destroys that which is immoral. It is a cleansing, purifying force. So perhaps the term holy describes God's constant moral goodness and integrity. But even still...I'm not so sure that captures it completely.

I find the concept of "holy ground" confusing too. How is it that the Spirit of God indwells and breathes in all created things, and yet, there are some things, or places or people that are more holy than others? The Celtic Christians of 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century Britain and Ireland had a special

love of nature and experienced God in natural things. They talked about a concept of what they called “thin places” ... geographic places that are particularly holy, where the veil between God and humanity is thinner, and more permeable. (Peter Creagh) “Thin places.”

Chris Ediger describes them as

...the places in our lives where the divine and the natural worlds come so close together that we can catch a glimpse of God. For the Celtics, these places were very real places within creation where we could physically go. The thin places in our lives are those moments where the space between us and the Kingdom is thin, when we are introduced to a greater glimpse of who He is through our experiences and through the stories of others.

Few of us will have a chance to experience God in a spectacular manifestation like a burning bush that is not consumed by the flames. But perhaps the holy presence of God is closer than we think?

So God comes to Moses and declares that he has heard the cries of his oppressed and enslaved people in Egypt. This is a merciful Lord. One who pays attention to the suffering of his people. And God says, “I am going to respond to their cries. So come, I will send YOU. And Moses’ response is, “Huh!!”, “Who do you think I am? I’m not equipped for this job. Really! Is there a Master’s of Slave Emancipation degree I could pursue first, perhaps?”

How many of you who live and work in Thailand have been handed a task and thought, “You want me to do WHAT?!” Those of us who have lived here for more than 5 minutes usually discover that job descriptions are a figment of western imagination designed to torment and confuse. Something akin to the double yellow line in the middle of the road. These things are just suggestions in Thailand. And more often than not, we are called to live just a little bit outside our comfort zone – to remind us that it’s really God who’s in control.

And poor Moses is about the experience some serious “on the job training”. “Come, I will send you”. Moses, of all people, is in a position to understand exactly what he’s up against. By all human standards, this is a very unfair power differential. And Moses, having grown up in the palaces of Egypt, knew it all too well. So I imagine, Moses is beginning to get a sinking feeling that he’s been enrolled in a suicide mission, if there ever was one. This God intrudes into his nice, safe, sheep-herding life, completely unannounced and says, “I will send you.” What is remarkable about this event is what only begins to dawn on Moses over time. He is not going to do this job alone. God is going with him. He’s about to have a lesson in divine algebra.

Person + God > Pharaoh + armies + chariots + all the forces of evil, all rolled into one.

God is establishing a new partnership with humanity that will tip the power differential in Moses’ favor.

And God says that there will be a sign. Verse 12. The NRSV, and most other English language texts translate: “And he said, “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.” Well, that sounds like a pretty backward kind of sign to me... “You will find, by the safe accomplishment of the task, that I have sent you.” I don’t know about you, but I would rather have the proof *before* I commit myself to a task like that! Interestingly, the Hebrew in

this text can be interpreted in another way. And since Hebrew does not have any grammatical sentence markings, it's hard to know which one is right. The TANAKH, which is the translation done by the Jewish Publication Society translates this verse as, "And He said, "I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain." So in this translation, God's presence itself is the sign. And the returning home safely is a bonus. Some things translators will never know. But it is an interesting point to consider.

In any case, Moses is still unconvinced, and eventually God does his miraculous staff-into-a-snake trick. But the point is this: it's all intended to prove that God is, in fact, WITH Moses on this adventure.

And now we get into the real meat of the text: Moses asks God what to say when the Israelites ask for God's name. And God answers "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh." This verse is arguably the most debated translation issue of the entire Old Testament because the Hebrew is so obscure. In fact, it's so obscure that the Jewish TANAKH refuses to even translate it, and just leaves it as "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh".

Alternative translations are: "I am who I am", "I will be who I will be", "I create what I create". One of the translations that I particularly like says that the verb "to be" in this context implies "being WITH", so the translation would say "I will be with you, as who I am".

I believe the phrase is intended to comfort Moses and assert God's steadfast presence over time. "I have been, I am, I will be with my people Israel, over time, in the same consistent way."

He then continues on. So tell them, "**I am** has sent me to you." What a unique way to identify God. The Israelites had lots of names for God, describing His attributes, but this was a new one. And nowhere else in the Old Testament is God referred to as "I am". This is the only place. Jesus picks up on the concept and in the New Testament is heard to use this phrase regularly to identify himself, so that people who knew the Old Testament would know that God was revealing himself in Jesus Christ. "I am the light of the world. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life." John picks up on this, and uses it as a theme in his gospel.

Next, God finally comes out with his actual Name. The letters are written Yod-He-Waw-He.

יהוה  
יהוה  
יהוה

Archaeologists have even found an ancient scroll, made of silver with the name of God engraved in ancient Hebrew script on it. And scholars have amazingly been able to determine

that the most likely pronunciation for this term is “Yahweh”. It’s a breathy sort of sound – very similar to “Ehyeh”. For those who attended the last “Refresh” service, Rob Bell gave an outstanding video message on this topic. He talked about the Name of God, “YHWH”, as the mimicking the sound of breath, reminding us of the action of God’s Spirit, breathing life in and through all living things. I’m not going to cover that topic today. So if you haven’t heard it, it would be worth a re-showing of the video some time.

Exodus 6:2-3 says, “God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make myself known to them by My name, יהוה”. So when Moses hears it, this is a new moment of self-revelation of God. If so, how does having this name give Moses credibility with the Israelites? They may not have known the name either. So God goes on to clarify, “You know...the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And this becomes a familiar formula for describing God throughout the Bible.

In Thailand, naming is a very interesting thing. At the New Life Center, where I work, people have several different names, which I find terribly confusing. We have one staff person whose Lahu name is “Feh-leh”. Her English name is “Fairy”, but she shortens it to “Faye” so that Farangs can remember it. Her Thai name is “Warapon”. But most everybody just calls her “Pee-yai”. Everybody seems to have at least 2 or 3 first names, and I’m not smart enough to keep track of them all. Thais sometimes change their names for various reasons. But you can’t change your name just because you want to, or because nobody can pronounce it. You have to have a good reason to change your name, such as...I had a car accident, and then I got sick, and I went to a fortune teller, who said that because I was born on a Monday, the name my parents gave me is bad luck for people born on Mondays, and so it caused me to have this car accident and get sick – so I *have* to change my name. Then the officials will let you change your name because everybody who’s anybody can have compassion for such a terrible predicament. But in the end, if you don’t remember someone’s name, you can always politely call him, “Khun”, or “Ajahn” or “Nuu”, and get away with it.

In ancient Hebrew culture, names were a sacred thing. You would not tell your name to just anyone. Because names are special. When you tell someone your name, you grant that person a certain claim over you. They can then call out to you in the street to get your attention. They can talk about you to others. One’s name is a deeply personal thing. Coming “in the name of” someone meant that you were a representative of that person. So to declare that you came “In the name of...David, King of Israel” was to assert that you were a messenger with a great power, and people had better listen to you because you were representing the King. Likewise, when we baptize someone, we do so “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”.

So it was a very special and unique privilege that God gave Moses His name. During the second temple period, around 500 BC, the name of God came to be considered SO sacred that the public pronouncement of it was legally prohibited. And even up to today, most Jews will not pronounce the name of God. When they see יהוה, they say “Adonai”, meaning “my Lord”, or “Ha-Shem”, meaning “the Name”. And as we also know, there IS power in calling on the name of the Lord! The name of the Lord is sacred, it is holy.

This calling of Moses is truly a summons to a great quest. But it might never have happened if Moses had not been paying attention. Verse 3 says, “Then Moses said, ‘I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.’ *When* the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush...” God waited, and did not speak to Moses until after He saw that Moses had “turned aside”. When I read that text last week, I wondered, “How many times have I missed the opportunity to encounter God because I did not have the curiosity to ‘turn aside’?” What if Moses had said, “Look...I have STUFF to do...I’ve got these sheep to take care of, and the fire will probably scare them to death. So I had better lead them away by another path, and avoid the hassle of that weird, scary thing.” Too often, the urgent tasks at hand seem to drag us forward at breakneck speed. But God simply stands there, waiting for you and me to stop and notice him. Are you paying attention? Am I?

In the West, we like to talk about “listening” for the whisper of God. We focus on the auditory experience: sermons and lectures. But in the Orthodox tradition, they like to talk about “gazing upon the Lord”. And they do so using icons. Orthodox believers say that through these icons, God uses paint and wood and the artist’s skill to draw us into contemplative prayer and openness to God’s immediate presence. We can’t show what God actually looks like, but God did come to us in flesh and blood through Jesus Christ, and so looking at these pictures is intended to remind us of the Lord we love, and the stories of what he did on earth. (St. John of Damascus) One theologian goes on to say that “All people are made in the image and likeness of God. In a way, then, the Saints are “living icons” of Christ.” (Fr. Michael Plekon)

Attentiveness and contemplation on God are ways we can directly encounter Him. Different people have different ways that they like to contemplate on the Lord. But I would venture to say that few of us feel we have enough of it in our lives. So I would like to encourage you to take an hour some time this week just for prayerful contemplation. When we fix our eyes on the Lord, we become changed by what we behold. That most contagious holiness of God begins seeping into our souls, and we are transformed.

And secondly, I would like to invite you to cultivate a curiosity about God. Just like Moses...he was curious about this strange fire he saw, and so he “turned aside”. And after God saw that Moses had turned aside, he called to him. You, too, are being summoned to a quest...the quest become attentive to the Lord. The quest to “know Him and enjoy Him forever”. (Heidelberg Catechism) Take courage because He will be with you on this journey. It’s a journey that takes place within the Great Narrative of God’s overarching redemption of the earth. And in order to participate in this story, you must pay attention. Turn aside from the urgent tasks that drive you forward. Cultivate curiosity! Be so forward as to ask God directly... “So what, exactly is your name, Lord? And how can I understand You? And how can I follow You?” You are being summoned to a quest for the greatest treasure. How will you answer the call?