



Dr. James C. Howell
Exodus 3:1-15
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I know that after the service, once you've had a little more time to contemplate the aesthetically pleasing hanging of the plastic behind me and the strategically placed blue tape descending, you'll want the name of our decorator. And something else that you can't tell, the choir can tell this, is that because of everything being renovated and moved around, there is right now at my feet a fire extinguisher. I suppose that if I ignite, Dawn Jenkins can come out of the fire and douse me.

It's a story today, is it not, of someone being ignited. A bush being ignited. There's a bush that's on fire, but it's not consumed. And God speaks to Moses from the bush. And God, among other things, reveals his name. This is something for us to think about. God having a name. God. How does God have a name? In the ancient world, there were many Gods. The question is, What is the name of the God that you serve?

As in our world, there are many preachers, but I'm the preacher named James. Although some Southerners like to treat Preacher as if it is my name. It's fair to warn you that if you call me Preacher, I may call you Lawyer, Banker, whatever.

Israel's God is named Yahweh. And what does Yahweh mean? It seems to mean I am. God is. It seems to mean I cause things to be. God is the one who causes things to be. Most importantly, the name seems to mean I will be. God is the one who will be. The other Gods with the other names from those names, Osiris, Ra, Horus, Marduk, they are not called on by anybody any longer, but Israel's God is the one who will be. It's a promise that God made, it's a promise that God kept. The God who will be.

Now when I went away to seminary, God had not spoken to me from any kind of burning bush to say, "James, go to seminary and be a minister." I didn't know what I was doing. I was in college. I was kind of confused. I kept changing majors. Everybody had a different opinion of what I ought to do. I didn't know. I kind of liked religion classes, so I kind of backed into seminary. I wasn't really sure why I had landed at such a place. And the very first paper that I was assigned when I went to seminary was on this passage, Exodus, Chapter 3, the Burning Bush. I didn't know anything about it, so I read everything that I could find in print in the English language on Exodus Chapter 3 and wrote a ridiculously long, boring paper on it. Among the things that I found was a poem that you might have read in the 9th or 10th grade and forgotten about by Elizabeth Barrett Browning called *Aurora Leigh*. In *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning says, "All of Earth is crammed with Heaven. And every common bush afire with God. Only he who sees takes off his shoes. Everyone else sits around picking blackberries." Now at my spiritual state in those days, I loved this saying, "Every bush is afire with God." I didn't have much sense of God or God's presence in the world, so to say that every bush was on fire with God, I liked that because you see a bush, you see the beauty of nature and you can say, "Ah, God made the bushes." And that's a very comfortable kind of theology, isn't it? Except, according to Exodus Chapter 3, this isn't just any bush. Out of all the bushes in the world... How many bushes must there be in the world? Millions, billions of bushes. They're everywhere. Out of all of those bushes, one of them

one day caught on fire and it was not burned up and God spoke through that bush . This is unusual. This isn't nature as we know it, it is God invading our space. It is God rocking our zone, not leaving us alone, showing up where we least expect it. Moses was not kneeling in prayer saying, "God, teach me your way." Moses had not gone to church to say, "God I wish to know your will, please bless me." Moses was at work. He's tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro. He's earning a living. He's tending to family matters, and it is in the middle of this that he quite unexpectedly sees a bush on fire and instead of running away with the animals he turns to see. He turns to listen.

What that means for us, that's something now, isn't it? It means that you're never safe out there. I know that a lot of us compartmentalize our lives. You come to church. This is the God hour. This is God's time, and then the rest of the time is my time. It's work time, it's play time, it's family time. But what this story suggests is that God may invade your family time, God may invade your work time, God may be and probably actually will speak to you out there when you least expect it or are ready for it. It could happen at work. How does that work? God calls you at work. Maybe you're at work one day and you do something and it's just so amazing and you look at yourself and you say, "Man, I am good." And maybe somebody else notices that you did something that was extraordinary, and maybe they don't notice, but you know, and you're flexing your vocational muscle inside you and you're saying, "I'm glad I do this." But then you notice over your shoulder, whoa, there's a bush on fire there. And God is speaking to you. If you listen, what God's saying is, "What you did there is cool. My question to you is, Do you do that just for you and just for your company or whatever that is in you, can you use that for me?" Hmm. At work they give you some money for going to work. And you've got that money and you're there with other people that are getting money at work and they start grouching. Some of them are grouching about the price of gas, "Oh yeah, it's going up. Yeah, it's expensive to drive. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah." And other people are grouching about, "You know, the United Way, what to do. Terrible." And you're tempted to grouse, but there's something warm over there and you turn around and there's a burning bush in your office and it says you may be tempted to join in the grouching about the gas prices and the United Way with everybody else, but I the Lord, your God, am suggesting that you remember that these are hard times, especially for the poor. And you've got some money and really the best thing to do is just go ahead and hand it over to James Howell. He will know what to do to help those. Maybe you're hanging out with your family. Jethro is tending the flock of his father-in-law. Maybe you're hanging out with your family and you're like everybody else in the world. You're saying how can we have fun today or how can my children begin to pile up achievements so that when the time comes you can get in a great school like Duke University, you know, whatever you think. But instead of thinking that, there's right there in your den a burning bush. And you want to go pick blackberries, but instead you listen and God says, "Instead of asking what are we going to do to have fun and how can my kids get ahead, you ask, How can my children become wise or how can we do whatever it is that we do today and tomorrow and the next day and the next day so that when my kids are grown, instead of saying what do I want to do, they'll say, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" And they'll notice their own burning bush. God calls us.

When I wrote that paper in seminary I discovered something that I'd never heard of. I had no clue about this. It's really fascinating. There's a pattern in Scripture. When God calls somebody to do something over and over and over, the exact same thing happens. God comes, God calls somebody and they begin to tell God reasons why they can't do what God wants them to do. Sound familiar? God comes to Jeremiah. Jeremiah says, "I'm too young." And God comes to Isaiah and Isaiah says, "I'm not good enough." And God comes to Jonah and Jonah says, "I don't even like

the people you're asking me to go and help." God comes to Mary and says, "You're going to be a mother." She's got the air tight excuse, doesn't she? I haven't even slept with a man. We always have our reasons, and I understand this. It makes all the sense in the world, reasons to God why we can't do what God wants us to do. Because we suspect that if we listen and we do what God wants, everything will change, won't it?

Joseph Heller wrote a lovely book called *God Knows*, in which he imagines Moses ducking and bobbing and weaving, trying to avoid God's call and then finally he can't do it any longer, and as Joseph Heller put it, "Moses took off his shoes and there went the rest of his life." Moses took off his shoes and there went the rest of his life. Or as I've told you before... "If an angel ever says be not afraid you'd better look out because a big assignment is on the way." When the bush burns and God speaks, it is not so that God will come and pet you in your prearranged existence and make everything a little more pleasant for you. No, you take off your shoes and there goes the rest of your life. A big assignment is on the way.

But we have to think about this. It is, after all, about God. It is about God. It's not about us, it's about God. If God calls you, do you want to be the one to ignore what God is calling you to do? And one of our responses may be, "God, I can't do what you're calling me to do." Imagine how Moses felt. Moses is a shepherd. I'm not sure how hard it is to be a shepherd. Sheep are really recalcitrant. They wander off, they're difficult, indeed. But this is Moses' skill. He's a shepherd. And God says to Moses, "What I want you to do is, I want you to go to Egypt," the largest nation in the world in those days, "to the Pharaoh, the most powerful man on the planet, and I want you to get him," the most powerful, scary guy that everybody trembles at the very thought of. "I want you get him to let several hundred thousand slaves just wander out of Egypt and not work on his building projects any longer." And you can image Moses saying, "Me?"

We're never up to the big tasks before us, are we? They always seem too big and so we're always able to duck and bob and weave and say that the task is too big. We're talking about feeding the hungry. We're talking about helping the poor. It's too big, it's too big. I've got enough on my plate, Lord. I am not able to do this that you have asked of me, but ...

I thought of a clever little thing this week. God does not depend on your ability, God just needs your availability. I never think of things like that. I was so proud. But it's so true. God does not count merely on your ability, though God will take them and use them. What God really needs is simply your availability. Moses is available, and God does actually use him to set, oh, a few hundred thousand slaves free from the most powerful man on the planet.

We don't hear God speaking to us from the bush. There are lots of reasons for this that we can get into, but one is this: God speaks to us through the voices of those who are hurting. The story says that the cry of the people went up to God in Heaven and God heard. And God didn't just hear the cry and say, "Oh, that's a shame. That's a shame." Instead God acted and God through Moses went into action to do something in response to the cry of the people. Our problem is we shelter ourselves from the cry. I don't blame us for this.

On Sunday morning, every Sunday morning at 8:00, the clergy gather in my office. It's like the little huddle before the football play begins. You check signals. You got this service, you got that. Yeah, OK, OK. Ready. Break! And we break and we come out and do church with you all day. And it's usually a lighthearted affair. We close in a little prayer and we usually ask, "How's

your weekend going?” “Yeah, it’s pleasant enough.” We joke around. It’s a nice time. Last Sunday, though, it was a little bit different because several of us trickled into my office and we were doing the usual. We were making small talk, kind of checking in. “How are you? How’s your weekend? What did you guys do last night? Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.” And then Kevin Wright came in. You may have met Kevin, he’s our new Minister of Missions. Kevin is an upbeat, positive, cheerful, chipper person. He’s always got a smile on his face. Very positive. Spring in his step. He’s wonderful. I mean he is just flat-out wonderful. He came in my office. He was hanging his head. His eyes had bags under them. He didn’t have any spring in his step. He looked like his best friend had died or something. And I knew why he was the way he was. Because the night before, he had flown back here to Charlotte from Haiti. He’d been down there with our first run of our medical mission people and what he saw there was not one, but dozens and dozens and dozens of children who were very hungry. The bellies are distended. The beginning of that trademark change of the color in their hair because of malnutrition. Many of them have to sleep on the ground. And there’s so many of them. And we feed as many as we can, but there’s so many there. And they came back with Kevin. He was carrying them in his heart. And see, see what happens to us is that we shelter ourselves, don’t we? Somewhere in Southeast Charlotte, where we only see other people who are like us and they’re doing well because what we enjoy doing above all else, don’t we, is when we see other people in the morning we like to say, “Hey, how you doing?” And we like to be able to answer, “Fine. How you doing?” “Oh, yeah, fine. You doing good?” “Yeah, doing fine.” We love to do that. We’re so good at it. We are the masters of being fine with each other. And if you go hear the cry of children in Haiti, something happens. You don’t walk in a room chipper anymore saying, “I’m fine. How are you?” Instead, you hang your head and people have to say, “What’s with you today?” And you say, “I saw a hungry child. Hungry children, so many of them in Haiti.”

You don’t have to fly to Haiti, do you? The cry goes up right here. Cross the tracks in Charlotte. Go find children in Charlotte. The cry is going up. Whether you want to shelter yourself from it or not, be very clear. God hears the cry of God’s children who are hurting and if you would be close to the heart of God you must hear the cry. You must hear the cry, and a funny thing happens. When you hear the cry of those who are hurting, if you’re paying attention, you notice in that an echo of your own cry. You see somebody who’s hungry and you discover, I’m empty, too. Somebody who cries out in loneliness and you begin to notice even though I go to rounds of parties and lots of smiling and laughter and cocktails and having a grand time and dancing together, I harbor a loneliness in my heart. You see someone who’s hurting and it makes you realize you’re hurting.

The name of Israel’s God was Yahweh. The name of our Savior is Jesus. And the name Jesus in Hebrew is Yeshua. And the name Yeshua means Lord help. Lord help. Jesus is not only the cry of those who are hurting, it is also the answer of the cry of those who are hurting. And when we hear the cry do we respond?

I was in a meeting the other day and somebody said something so helpful to me. We were talking about getting people involved in the church and how are we going to coax more people to do more stuff around the church and get folks involved. And not just because we need stuff done, because we know that you need to do stuff. And this guy, he’s a lawyer, very bright. He hit the nail on the head. He said everybody I know is good natured. They’re good people. They’re not bad people, they’re not evil people. He said everyone that I know they have very good intentions that one of these days they want to serve God. That one of these days they want to get involved with a

needy child. That one of these days they want to hammer on the Habitat house. That one of these days something. He said what they lack is a sense of urgency. They're always thinking, well, when I retire or when things settle down at work, or when my children get a little bit older, or after we get into our new house, or whatever. Fill in the blank. However you want it to be, we're always delaying, we're always ducking and weaving. We're always parrying. We're setting God at some distance and we think I'm a good person, I will get around to that one day. We don't have a sense of urgency. And be very clear, those hungry children that Kevin Wright saw in Haiti, they do not have the luxury to say I'll wait 'til he retires. I'll wait 'til things settle down in their family. Then I will eat. No, these children are hungry today. And the urgency is not only with them. The urgency is in the heart of God. And the urgency is in your own heart. Don't you feel it? You've been walking around with this two-bit hollow life long enough, and you didn't even know what it was. You thought it was something else, and what it is, is a bush burning. But you've been picking blackberries instead of taking off your shoes and saying Lord, what do you want me to do?

I want to close with a story. I have to begin by confessing. I do not know if I've told this before during my five-plus years as your pastor. I'm sure if I have told it before one of you will inform me of this. My son actually does this for me sometimes. We go to lunch every Sunday after church, and he'll say, "Dad, you told that one before." And I'll say, "Was it in the last month?" And if not, it's OK. So here's a story, and when I thought about it this week it seemed to really fit this sermon. The cry goes out, God answers. And I also tell it because I told it one time years ago and a guy heard it and he was really moved by my story. And on the way out of church he said, "I loved that story." It's a story about Habitat for Humanity. He said it's so good, he said my question is, Are you planning to build a Habitat House next year? And I said, Yes I am. He said, I'd like to pay your for that. So I'm going to tell it today. Someone in this room...OK. So here's how the story goes. Now this is years ago. Charlotte, in terms of Habitat for Humanity, was just getting its legs under itself. We're just starting to build major projects here and we had this big event that was hosted by Mecklenburg Ministries. I was the president of Mecklenburg Ministries then. We hosted this big event for Habitat. Church leaders, business leaders, it was at Providence Baptist Church right over here. And we invited Millard Fuller to come. Now Millard Fuller, he's like the hero of Habitat. He founded the thing. He's this multi-millionaire, gave his money away, famous guy. And he's coming to Charlotte. And since I was president of Mecklenburg Ministries, I got to pick him up at the airport and ride around with him, and we were buddies, you know. And I was just strutting, feeling good. And I knew we were going to introduce him at this big event, and I thought, Who better to be on the stage with Millard Fuller to introduce him than me, right? And I planned in my mind what I would say. I'd say something witty, but then something profound, and it would be great, except my board got this funny idea that instead of having a preacher introduce him, they would get somebody who lived in a Habitat house and I said, "It's a mistake. It's a mistake. You should get a professional." But I couldn't really say that, and they insisted this, so instead of being on stage I was side stage for the most amazing thing that I've ever seen. The woman's name is Melissa. And the time came for her to introduce Millard Fuller. And she went up to the dais of the microphone and she fumbled and stammered. She was not an experienced speaker. She was trying to tell about his education and where he lived and worked and his family, and it wasn't going all that well and she was looking embarrassed and then she just stopped, and she lapsed into this thing where she saw Fuller, he was sitting in the front row, and she just spoke to him. She said, "Millard Fuller, you're the answer to my prayer. When God told you to give all your money away and start Habitat, you became the answer to my prayer." She said, "I grew up here in Charlotte. I lived in a tenement. There was violence, crime, and I knew that I would never be nobody and I was fine, but then I grew up and I had my little boy and I realized he was growing up in a tenement where there

was violence and there was crime and drugs. And I knew that he wouldn't never be nobody, so I fell on my knees and I said, God, I will do anything. I will even give up my life if you'd just give my little boy a chance to be somebody." She said, "Millard Fuller, you're the answer to my prayer."

"I learned about Habitat for Humanity and I was amazed I qualified for a house. And the day came for it to be built and I went there not half knowing what to expect, and Millard Fuller, you came and worked on my house. And President Jimmy Carter came to Charlotte and worked on my house. I never dreamed I would have anything like a house."

She said her little boy was amazed by this and the time came for them to move in the house, he was five years old, and she said he came in, and she said he had never smiled much in his life. He was very withdrawn. But he came in that house and his eyes just flew wide open and he smiled. He never thought he'd have a house to live in. She said he'd had a hard time in life. He's started kindergarten and the teachers had said he's a poor learner, he's behind, he'll never catch up, you're always going to have problems with him, he's always going to be a challenge for all his life. Just brace yourself, it's going to be hard with this little boy. He's so far behind, he has so many difficulties. But she said that day we moved in that house, things changed. She said he's in the third grade now, he's making straight As in school. And she said he came to me the other day and he said, "Mama, do you know what I'm going to be when grow up." She said, "No, honey, what are you going to be?" He said, "I'm going to be a doctor." She said, "Millard Fuller, you're the answer to my prayer." Then I think she thought she'd talked too long or something so she said, "Well without any further ado, I present to you Millard Fuller." And she came over to the side where I was standing. The crowd leaped to her feet and they applauded thunderously. When she got to the side, she turned to clap for Millard Fuller. And fortunately I was there. I put my arm around her and I said, "Melissa, they're not clapping for him. They're clapping for you." Millard Fuller, you're the answer to my prayer.

I want to ask you a question. Can you imagine anything, anything better in this life than looking up one day and somebody saying he/she was the answer to my prayer? Tell me something better? A big promotion at the bank, joining a country club, buying a new car, moving into a new house. Tell me something that's better than living in such a way. Responding to God's word through that burning bush, that if you'd just turn you'll notice it is there. Tell me something that is better than responding to that and having someone say you're the answer to my prayer. Are you going to take off your shoes and listen to God or just sit around picking blackberries? God is calling you. God is calling us. You've delayed way long enough. You've ducked, bobbed, weaved, had something else important to do. There's an urgency in the cry. There's an urgency in you to hear. Hear the cry, be the answer to prayer.