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Exodus 3:1-14
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In our Year Through The Bible, today we make the turn out of Genesis into Exodus and we come upon the larger than life character of Moses. An extraordinary story. We're in ancient Egypt now, and tourists today go and tour the marvels of ancient Egypt. We forget often, don't we, the many of the wonders of the world that we admire and photograph were built on the backs of slaves. The capitalists, the cruelty of the poor, as those who are powerful took advantage of those who would build their projects so that they could brandish their power before others. Moses lives in such a place. He's born, he barely survives. His mother puts him in a basket, it floats down river, winds up growing up in Pharaoh's household. Tomorrow night we'll look at this in some detail and in some depth. For today, I want to think about this moment that we have just heard where Moses is. He's out of Egypt. He is where every Israelite guy would want to be. If you're a young Israelite man, the last place you want to be is Egypt because your life may be in danger, and if you're not dead, then you are subjected to cruel labor constantly. Moses has gotten out of Egypt, and there he is. He's not kneeling in prayer, he's not asking God, Show me your way oh, Lord. He's at work. He's tending the flock of his father-in-law, and we may want to make some joke there about what it would be like to work for your father-in-law. They chuckled earlier. Work with me today. And Moses, he's at work, and God invades his existence. And God says, Why don't you go back Egypt. The very place that he's got to be glad to get out of. And I wonder what Moses thought at this point. Did he think, How did my life get to this point? What is my life about? How am I in such a place?

You know, I told you a couple weeks ago that I'm now on Facebook. Some of you are older, you may not know what Facebook is. At the time, I thought I was the oldest person on Facebook, but I found three or four more decrepit people that I know on Facebook. You know, you go on the Internet and you say, I'm James, I was born here and this is my birthday and I went to this college and there are three or four pictures of yourself. What's interesting is people. They see that you're on there. People that you haven't seen in forever. And so I start hearing from them recently. Oh, we were in high school together, or this old college girlfriend or somebody like that. And so then what happens is, you get this message, will you "friend?" It's a verb. Will you friend this person? They know you've asked, so you've got to say yes. Yes, I will friend. And then you know you have this connection across all these years. So somebody bites first. Sometimes it's been me, sometimes it's been the other person. Tell me, tell me about your life over all of these years. And so you start typing...How did I get from where I was when I was 19 and you saw me last to age 53. Is this the life that I chose for myself? Is this the life that I dreamed for myself when I was 19? How do we get where we are? How would we ever explain ourselves? How did Moses explain himself?

There are several men I know in our church who are reading Richard Russo's novel, The Bridge of Sighs, and on one of its really eloquent pages, there's an exhortation of what it means to move from youth into older age. He says this, that what happens with young people is they get up in the morning and there are a hundred doors to choose from and you just pick one. It doesn't matter because even if one of them's locked, there are 99 other doors. And then you pop through that door and there are a hundred more doors to choose from and you scan the horizon and it's just infinite

possibilities. The whole world is open to you and you just think you're just free as a bird and you can choose all kinds of things. You suspect that some day you'll come to the door and you'll open it and it will contain the secret, the mystery of life. But you're in no rush because you're young and there are hundreds of doors in front of you, and you're young. He said that as you get older, what happens is that you do not see as many doors in front of you any longer. You begin to notice more and more doors that have closed and locked behind you, and as you look forward, there aren't all that many doors anymore, and you think, How did I come to this place? Did I choose this life? Was it chosen for me somehow? As he puts it at the end of this page, The man that I've become, the life that I've lived, what are these but dominos that fall not as I would have them fall, but simply as they must. What is your life? Is it the life that you chose? Is all of it exactly what you would have dreamed up when you were 19 years old, or do you experience something of what is called the thrownness of life? Did you ever sense that I was thrown into this life. Yes, I chose some of it, but other things were chosen for me. Other things just happened. I've got to deal with them. What is the meaning of my life? What was it for Moses?

The story that we just heard about Moses, it's not my biography and it's not your biography. Most of us have not seen a bush on fire that was not consumed and had God tell us to go to Egypt. It is not our story, but it tells us quite a bit, I think, about God and the nature of God's activity in the world, and the nature of God's interaction with us down here. As I thought about the right image to explain God's activity in the Book of Exodus, I was reading a commentator this week who used the following verb. He used the verb "orchestrating." He said God is orchestrating events. I don't know what the author meant by that, but I thought a lot about orchestrating and an orchestra, and it occurred to me that in some level this might be the perfect image for what God does. The orchestra conductor does not control everything. The orchestra conductor does not manipulate everything. I've never personally conducted an orchestra. I'd like to do that one day. That would be great fun. And I can imagine that if you're an orchestra conductor, you've practiced with the people and they've got their parts, but all kinds of stuff must go wrong that you and I don't notice out in the crowd. You know, he's conducting, and then it's time for the bassoons, and he turns to the bassoons and the bassoons guys, he's texting somebody or he's not paying attention, so the bassoon doesn't come in. And then it's time for the flutes, and most of them are fine, but one of them uses the wrong pitch. Do you think about this? Now you may be used to the New York Philharmonic or something where it's generally right, but have you ever been to a middle school orchestra concert? It's just like an adventure. But even at the middle school orchestra concert, the conductor is still in charge. A lot of stuff goes on that should not go on, and it's not all beautiful, but the conductor's still conducting and they still have the music and the music is still headed in the same direction, which is where the orchestra conductor wishes for it to go. It's still going to the end of that piece. Maybe that's how it is with God. A lot of stuff happens that God doesn't really want it to happen. We're snoring, we're napping. And God wants you to come in, but you don't come in. Come in on the wrong pitch. What you're doing isn't that good, but yet God keeps the score moving along and it is going to God's good end. God acts, but we are free, but yet we have a sense of being thrown, and yet God is still taking us somewhere. How does that work?

God is involved in everything. Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote a poem called Aurora Leigh, very, very long indeed. One of its good lines is this, "Earth's crammed with Heaven and every common bush afire with God," and she's thinking about Moses and the Burning Bush. "Earth's crammed with Heaven and every common bush is afire with God." When I first read that, I was troubled. I wanted to say, Now Moses' burning bush, it's not just every bush. This was an unusual bush. This is God speaking to Moses through a bush. But I think she had some wisdom.

Every bush is afire with God. God is everywhere. God is in all things. Sometimes we put God off, don't we, because we're waiting for the flashing neon message that I've not seen. A bush on fire that is not consumed. If God speaks to me one day, then I shall try to listen, but Earth's crammed with Heaven. Every bush is afire with God. Do we sense God everywhere that we are?

I love the way the passage was read. It was read exactly as it occurs in the Bible. Sometimes I worry if the authors of the Bible left out something, and in this case, what I wonder that they might have left out is Moses' reaction to God saying I know the affliction of the people of Israel. Moses knew the affliction of the people at Israel. He lived there. He'd seen it. He knew that the people there were treated cruelly by the Egyptians and they were forced to make beyond reasonable quotas of bricks, and if they didn't make them, they had the living daylight's beaten out of them. He knew what life was like for the people. Here God says, "I've heard the cry of my people," and God says to Moses, "And I have come down to deliver them." And I imagine Moses' reaction had to be, Well, good, or, It's about time; as we all would say. But the problem is, God has this annoying habit, doesn't God, of saying, "I have come down to deliver my people." And we're happy about that. And then God says, "And the way I am choosing to deliver my people is I'm going to use you." We'd rather God just say, "I'm going to go rescue the people." We say, "We'll stay here and pray about it." And then God, when you deliver your people we'll be the first to stand up and say Hallelujah, our God is a great God. But God comes to Moses and says, "I'm going to deliver the people, and the way I wish to deliver them is I'm going to send you." And you and I think, It's good that God sent Moses, but God's word to us today is I'm going to send you. Not somebody else, but you. And you may think, I'm not very good at that kind of thing. I'm better at other kinds of things, but God is not much interested in Moses' ability. You know, as the conversation goes on, God says, "I want you, Moses to go and speak to Pharaoh," and Moses says, "I've got this stammer, I can't really speak." And God could care less. All God wants is us to be willing to go. All God wants is for us to show up.

You may think you've never seen a burning bush, but I'll bet we've all seen some fires, and what do you do when there's a fire? You show up. When I was a little boy, my grandparents in some fit of madness agreed to keep me and my sister all summer long at their home with them. It's crazy. And we would go there and we just had the time of our lives with cousins and living out in Oakboro, a little town out in Stanly County, and it was lovely. And I remember one night when I was a little boy there was considerable commotion. There's all this racket and it's usually peaceful and calm in Oakboro, and something was going on so we spilled out of the house onto the front lawn. And the house catty corner to my grandparents' house was engulfed in flames. It was on fire. And there was no fancy fire department to call. The fire department would be the other men who happened to live in Oakboro, and they all came as best they could and they gathered, and they fought the fire gamely, but at the end of the day they were not successful. That house burned totally to the ground. The only thing left standing was the charred brick fireplace. It's interesting what happened the next day because I guarantee you all of the men of Oakboro had something to do the next day. They had crops to tend to, maybe you were a smith and you had some iron to work, maybe you needed to go visit your mother, maybe you planned to go play a round of golf. I don't know what all they had planned to do. Whatever it was, they did not do it. They came back to that yard the next day and they began to work. They had little boys, like me, to come and help, again to clear the charred debris, to carry it away. This went on for days until the lot was totally clear. Those men kept coming day after day. When there's a fire, you just show up. Once the lot was clear, they came with wood and hammers and they began to rebuild their neighbors' house. When

there's a fire, you just show up. Some are good at one thing, and some are good at another thing, but all together, you notice the fire and you come and you show up.

You may say to me, I've never seen a burning bush, but there are fires all around us all the time. There are fires in this room right now. There are people in this room... You've done well today, by the way. I want to compliment you. I've complimented you before, but you just keep outdoing yourselves. You got up this morning and you got dressed, and your clothes match. Well, mostly. And you got yourself here. Your hair looks good and your suit looks good and your dresses, they are lovely. And you looked at yourself in the mirror and you thought, Good. And you should have noticed that you looked good in the mirror. When we come here, we know how to say, "How are you doing?" "Fine, I'm fine." "Yeah, you fine?" "Yeah, I'm fine." "We're all fine." But there's some fires in this room. We have a lot of people in this room who are profoundly hurt because of what's going on in the economy. They're scared to death, think they're going to lose everything they've worked their whole lives for, and that's no small thing. And there are people in this room that there's a fire today, and it's not because of the economy, it's because somebody's done something terrible to that person, or they've done something terrible to somebody else, or they've done something terrible to themselves, and they're hurting. And it's why we say it's important to be hospitable. If you're passing somebody and you don't know them, you're in a hurry, you can just waltz on by or you can just notice that somebody exists. And that matters to you. Maybe you extend a hand and you care and there's frivolity, but yet there's attention to the fact that there's somebody around you all the time who's really, really hurting. God's come down to save his people. God wants to do it through you.

The hurting's not only in this building, it's outside the building. We talk about this all the time. We're never going to stop talking about it. There are four or five thousand children every night in your town, see in Oakboro that night this one guy's house is on fire, everybody came. In your town, there are four to five thousand children who do not have a roof over their heads and they sleep under a bridge or in a car someplace. It's a fire. And the question is, Do we come? Do we come? All kinds of hurting out there. And the question is, God says I'm coming down to save my people, and the question is how can God use somebody like us, and the answer is God just wants us to come. God just wants us to come. It's about God.

I know I'm about to talk too long, but I want to mention two more things, and then I'll be done. One of the beauties, I think, of the Year Through The Bible, we hope, is that you'll learn to see each passage of the Bible as part of a much longer story. Sometimes you just read a Bible verse and it's just kind of... It's in its own little silo, but that's not right. We need to understand the whole scope of God's work throughout the Scripture. It's very interesting. When God speaks to Moses through the burning bush, Moses says, "Who are you? Who are you?" That's our question of God, isn't it? Who are you? And God's answer to Moses is interesting. God doesn't say, I'm the God who... I'm just brand new down here today. I've never been here before, I may never be back again, but here I am today. I am the now God. But instead, God's answer is interesting. God says, it's me, I'm the God of Abraham, and I'm the God of Isaac and I'm the God of Jacob. And you and I hear those as so many names, but to Moses and all the Israelites who heard it, when they heard the name, "The God of Abraham," they go, Oh, yeah, God called Abraham to leave his home and to wander into a faraway land, and Abraham always had doubts and wasn't faithful and he was getting kind of old, but God used him anyway. And then Isaac and Jacob, Jacob, boy what a knucklehead he was, but God stayed with him and God... Oh, that God! That's the God who's speaking to Moses from the bush. You see what happens to us so often, God says to Moses, I'm the

one who was and I am and I will be. God's story is a big story. And I mention this to you because sometimes something happens in your life and it just seems all encompassing and it seems bigger than it needs to seem. I mean, I came home the other day and I had something really ugghhh happen late in the day, and so when I came in the door, Lisa, she was there, and she looked at me and she must have read something in my face. I think I said I was fine, like you say, you're fine. I said, Oh I had a fine day. And she said, no, really, what's up. And I said, Oh, this thing. And I started talking about it. I was frustrated and I was agonizing over it. It just seemed huge. It seemed to be defining me... This happens to us, don't we. If something happens, it feels like I was lost. Or something lovely happens and we think, Oh, life is delicious! And they're both wrong, because you see, the real key to life is understanding that any one chapter, it's just a chapter in a much larger story. Even your whole life is just part of God's longer story. It's our privilege to be part of something that's much bigger than me and what happened this afternoon or even just me any my life. We're part of something much larger than that, and I think that helps us to calm down a little. I think it helps us to trust God. And then the second thing in this is the following: Since it's the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses and Peter and Paul and Saints and Martyrs and my grandparents; it's that God who's been busy at work all through history. It changes how we think of the little things that we ask you to do. We're constantly, if you think about it, asking you to do a little thing. We say bring a canned good. Take an hour and serve lunch at Trinity's Table. Go and read to a child for one hour. It's just a little thing. It's just one little thing, and sometimes I know we're probably tempted to think, Well, it's just one little thing. I mean, if you look at poverty in the world then, I mean, one canned good isn't going to make a difference, and until we can really make a difference and we're sure that it will count, then we stay on the sidelines, but it's very interesting. Each little act is part of God's big story of coming down to try to save the world. Even if it's just a little thing. You know Mother Teresa once said, "Every time I feed a child that's hungry," she said, "It's just a drop in the ocean." She said, "But without it, the ocean would be one drop less." And what is the ocean after all but a whole lot of drops together? So each time we do something for God, it's just a drop, but it's a drop. And then there's another drop, and another drop, and it's not just my drop that makes the ocean, it's all of the drops together. God has come down through God's people through the ages and there's not only a big scope to that, that God's work is so big and it's a privilege to be part of God's big world. There's also a time element to it. I love the thing that Reinhold Niebuhr says about nothing worth doing can be accomplished in a single lifetime. Even I tend to ask anything worth doing, I've got to be able to get it done this week. But Niebuhr said nothing worth doing can be accomplished in a single lifetime. What he's saying is that it is liberating and it's joyful to look at one little act. It's a canned good, it's reading to a child, it's serving soup, it's whatever it is when we have said yes to God. And it's something that you can't do it in a lifetime. It's God working across time. And then, when we see this, we realize that there's really only one door, and you don't have to open it or pull on it. That one door is already open, and you step through it, and there's the Kingdom of God, and there's a bush and God's calling us and we're moved, and we step back and we take off our shoes and then we say to God, "Here I am. Here I am."