

Reading: Exodus 3:1-15

Some things in this reading might confuse us. What's that about a burning bush anyway? Why would a burning bush be important? Why would God set fire to a bush anyway?

I'd like to start by saying that these questions were even more confusing to Moses than to us.

When Moses is mentioned ... we naturally think of a picture like this. (Poster for Cecil B. DeMille's "The Ten Commandments").

- An old but powerful man.
- Flowing robes.
- Big white beard, muscular (a bit like the modern caricature of God?)
- In tune with God, carrying the Commandments on stone tablets.
- Having authority; pronouncing God's judgement.
- Somehow associated with bolts of lightning!

But that's not how he was at the time of our reading.

- He was a young chap, trying to find his place in the world.
- He'd had a mixed-up upbringing in Egypt. Found in the river Nile, rescued by an Egyptian princess but cared for by his real mother in the palace.
- Egyptian education, but still feeling affinity for his people, the Israelites.
- Fled from Egypt as a wanted man after killing an Egyptian overseer who was beating an Israelite.
- Fled over 200 miles to Midian.
- Settled down, married, got a job as a shepherd. Was glad to get away from it all.

What did Moses know about God?

- Almost nothing; he would have been very confused.
- In the Egyptian court he would have learned about a great variety of Egyptian gods. Heads of birds and animals were popular!
- He would have been aware that the Hebrews had their own very different conception of God. This would be without visual imagery; the Hebrews didn't have that.
- He would have thought of gods as local, associated with their own peoples. So having moved to Midian, he would have to look for new ideas.

So in our reading, Moses would have been thinking, "What's that, a burning bush? Why is a burning bush important? Which God among all the ones I've been told about would set fire to a bush anyway?"

But then God graciously reveals Himself to Moses. He introduces Himself as "the God of your father, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob".

This isn't just a formula. It means...

- The God your father served. The Hebrew God; the only One. Not any of those animal-headed Egyptian ones.
- The God who revealed Himself and made huge promises to Abraham.
- The God who Isaac served and who Jacob gradually got to know in his wanderings.
- The God who renamed Jacob as Israel, the one the Israelites were descended from.

So God is immediately saying to Moses that He's the one trusted in by his Hebrew ancestors, not an Egyptian alternative or anything local from Midian.

Moses has no idea why he's encountering God, but he quickly finds out. The reason for his flight was probably from his concern about his people's slavery. Now God says that He knows all about this and will change the situation, using Moses to do it.

Moses doesn't want this!

- Moses is completely unqualified for any such job! He knows he is, but God doesn't need anyone's qualifications. The whole thing is going to rely on God's power, not anything Moses can do.
- Moses is comfortable in Midian. He's got married, got a job and settled down. He's "busy" with good things.
- He raises a series of objections. He says he's not good at public speaking. He doesn't want to go.
- This comes to a head comically in Exodus 4:13: "Please send someone else!", he begs. But reading with hindsight, we see that there's no way out for him.
- It all happened as God said: "when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." – and this place which Moses had stumbled into with his sheep was actually the place where God would much later give him the Ten Commandments for the Israelites.

Moses still needed to clear up who God is: "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?'" Then what shall I tell them?"

He's asking because he doesn't know, and he needs to know.

God gives him two clear answers:

- “The God of your father, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”
- “I Am”.

“I Am”, is the translation of Yahweh or Jehovah from Hebrew (written Hebrew didn’t have vowel sounds).

- It means “the real God”. Not any idea of ours about God, but the One who is actually real; the One who exists.
- Not any of those animal-headed gods or any alternatives from Midian.
- Not even any of Moses’ ideas about the unseen Hebrew God.
- The real One!

Some of these things may happen in our lives.

- Sometimes God takes hold of us and shows us that He has a task or role for us, even though we think we’re unqualified, or we’re busy or we just don’t want to go. In that situation, asking Him to leave us alone or send someone else isn’t going to work. We need to rely on His power and guidance to get the job done.
- Sometimes we have to ask who God actually is. Just like the Egyptians, our society will throw lots of ideas about God at us, sometimes sarcastically asking, “Among all these ideas, which is the real One?”
- In that situation, we should ask God who He is and what He wants of us.
- The right answer is: the real One; the One who reveals Himself. The “I Am”, who is beyond all our ideas about Him and who can reveal Himself and intervene in our lives.
- Moses had little to go on, but today I can point us to the New Testament. Jesus said, “He who has seen me has seen the Father”. Now, if we want to know who God is and what He’s like, a good start is to read about Jesus, learn about Him and try to be like Him.