

God is With Us

Exodus 3:1-12

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. 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, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" 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."

At the end of day one of Vacation Bible School, we talked about "God Sightings." We asked the kids to keep their eyes open this week, looking for things, events, or people that remind them of God. Everyone got a green bracelet that says, "Watch for God." At first, the kids struggled with this as an abstract concept. They said they saw God in the Bible, or in heaven. But after a few days, they started to understand. They found God in yellow flowers,



Our VBS theme this year followed Moses – from his calling at the burning bush until the crossing of the Red Sea. In our Scripture reading this morning, Moses finds God in a burning bush. You may be surprised to learn that burning bushes were not all that unusual in the wilderness where Moses tended sheep. It was a dry, hot environment. A burning bush probably wasn't enough by itself to really get Moses' attention.

If you read our Scripture closely this morning, Moses doesn't really get interested in the burning bush until he realizes that it's on fire but not burning up. If you were out in the wilderness tending sheep, how long do you think it would take you to notice that? Tending sheep can be a pretty monotonous, boring job. Maybe Moses noticed quickly, because the fire was

more exciting than the sheep. On the other hand, a bush on fire was nothing new either. Maybe Moses glanced idly at the bush in the morning, and then several hours later, when it was still burning, walked closer to investigate the curious event.

Of course, it's not really key to the story how long it took Moses to notice the bush. The only key thing here is that he did notice the bush. And when he noticed it, God spoke to him. And once God has Moses' attention, he speaks for a while. Until he finally lets Moses know the reason for this dramatic conversation – God wants Moses to go to Pharaoh. Moses is reluctant at best. And so God tries to reassure him by saying, “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.”

Okay. Knowing that God was with me would provide a pretty good helping of confidence. But I think God needs to go back to the drawing board this morning. The sign that all of this is coming from God is that Moses will worship God on this mountain. If you've just told Moses that, it's not really much of a prediction, is it? It's kind of like me telling you to go on a mission trip to Panama, and telling you that you will know it was God who sent you, because when you leave Panama, you'll return to Waunakee.

This doesn't seem to bother Moses at all. He's more concerned about other details. But if it were me, this would be a point of contention. In our culture, hearing voices out of flaming bushes that don't burn up is not exactly considered normal. Frankly, it wasn't even normal for Moses. I'd be less worried about the details of approaching Pharaoh and more concerned that this voice giving me instructions was really the voice of God. What else have you got Lord? What other signs can you offer us that you are with us?

Let me try to answer that by first raising another question. As God is explaining his mission to Moses, he talks about the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt. And God says, “The cry of the Israelites has now come to me.” Their cry has only come to you just now? Really? Before this week, their suffering wasn’t bad enough to get your attention? Well, if you back up just a few sentences, we hear God say, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters.” That’s all past tense. What we are witnessing here is a twist in the Hebrew language that doesn’t really exist for us in English. When we want to say that an action started long ago in the past and has continued up to and including this moment and is continuing, we need to string multiple verbs together. But Hebrew allows for a conjugation that indicates just that – an event that has been happening and is continuing.

So what God is saying here is not that he’s only just decided to get involved. God is saying I have been with my people all along. It is only now that God is sending Moses, but that has more to do with Moses and his readiness to listen than it has to do with God. God isn’t just with Moses as he approaches Pharaoh. God has always been with Moses. God has always been with the Israelites.

But it sure didn’t feel that way to the Israelites. Whenever life gets desperate, it’s hard for us to feel or believe that God is with us. God didn’t give the Israelites signs that he was with them in Egypt. And even when God did give them signs – manna in the wilderness, water pouring from a rock – they were quick to lose their faith.

God needed a new plan. A new way to prove to us that he is with us. God needed a way to be present with people in a way that people could recognize. And I know that I’m probably the only person in the room who has been doing any Advent or Christmas preparations this month,

but do you all remember what Emmanuel means? It means God With Us. One of the names Jesus has isn't really a name at all. It's not really a title. It's a description of who Jesus is. Jesus, from his birth to his death, was Emmanuel. He was God with us.

The incarnation really is an amazing thing when you think about it. What better way to really let people know that God is with them than to actually show up – as one of them. By being fully human and fully God, Jesus was able to be present with people in a way God had not yet been able to convey. Because Jesus didn't just hear the suffering of people; he lived among those people. He understood their pain, because he experienced the range of human experience. Jesus celebrated at weddings and grieved when his friends died. He told stories to children and got angry with adults who didn't listen. He knew joy, but he also knew disappointment and betrayal. In Jesus, Emmanuel, we know that God is with us.

Or, at least, that God was with us. Part of the reality of Jesus being fully human was that he was born, he lived, and he died. While he walked the earth, Jesus was with the people of God in a very direct kind of way. But what about us? It doesn't really feel like Jesus is any closer to us than God was to the Israelites in Egypt.

Well, in the Gospel of John, after Jesus has died and been resurrected, he tells the disciples about God's next brilliant plan. A plan to send an advocate – the Holy Spirit – to be with the people. Jesus says,

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.

In other words, we will not see this advocate the way the disciples could see Jesus, but this Spirit will be with us in the same kind of daily, direct way that Jesus was with the disciples.

We know the early church was really aware of this presence. While Jesus was alive, in all four gospels, he mentions the Holy Spirit 24 times. But after his death, when the Holy Spirit is the presence of God in the world, the Scriptures mention the Holy Spirit 65 times. Romans 5 says God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Second Timothy says the Holy Spirit lives within us.

We may never see, or hear, or touch God the way the disciples did. But the Holy Spirit is just as present in our lives. It took our students a few days of Vacation Bible School before they really could explain where they saw God. And it may take us some practice to see and feel the presence of the Holy Spirit. But if we're paying attention, we'll learn to see God everywhere.

Another thing we practiced this week at VBS was our theme phrases. You see these on the walls. Whenever someone said one of our theme phrases, the kids answered by enthusiastically shouting out, "Fear not!" God is with us. FEAR NOT. God is powerful. FEAR NOT. God gives us life. FEAR NOT. God cares for us. FEAR NOT. So keep your eyes open. Watch for God. Because God is with us. (FEAR NOT!) Amen and amen.