

## **A New Name, A New Relationship**

**Exodus 3:7-15**

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There are times we are confronted with the question “Is the God of the Old Testament the same as the God of the New Testament?” And, “If Christianity didn’t begin until after Christ, then what do all the people of the Old Testament have to do with us as Christians, anyway?”

Keep these questions tucked in the back of your mind as I tell you first about a woman I met a few years ago, and then the story we’ve all heard of someone who lived thousands of years ago, before Jesus was born.

A woman I’ll call Bea struggled with addiction to cocaine most of her adult life. She lost her children and her husband, and she made some bad choices that landed her in prison. After her release, she was offered help through a prison ministry program; one which offered her God’s love through community and the gifts and self-giving of others.

Today, Bea works with women who are in similar situations and are wanting help. When I spoke with Bea, I asked her what made the difference in her life; what was that light that she finally saw that gave her hope and the desire to change. After all, she had lost everything – even herself in a way. Bea told me about a woman from the prison ministry who offered to help her. Bea said she felt a huge burden lifted from her as she was given the chance to share her story with someone who truly cared. She knew that she had been heard. This woman stayed by her side through very difficult parts of her recovery and did not give up on Bea, even in her darkest moments. Bea told me that in looking back, she somehow knew that God was with her when this woman was by her side.

Bea’s life parallels in many ways the events in and surrounding our scripture passage. Before I read this passage in Exodus, though, I would like to talk about its bookends – the events on either side of the text which provide support for what’s in the middle. They give clarity to the message and help point toward truths evident in the larger picture, the truths we come to know through the word of God in scripture.

Exodus 3:1-6 is our first bookend. I know you remember the familiar story of the burning bush. Moses is going about his everyday job of shepherding and comes to the mountain called Horeb where he suddenly encounters God in the burning bush. God calls out to Moses warning him to remove his sandals, “... for the place on which you are standing is holy, sacred ground.” God says “I am the God of your fathers: of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I am your God.” This holy revelation by God marks a new beginning in the life and faith of God’s people. This is our first bookend.

The bookend on the other side begins God’s redemption of the Israelites in the story of the Exodus. The Israelites are led by Moses from their lives of suffering and oppression in Egypt to new life in the land promised to them by God through the covenant with Abraham.

During this journey the Israelites encounter hardships of hunger, thirst, despair, even fear of abandonment by God. And after forty years and many trials, they finally arrive in this new land where God’s promises are fulfilled – the Promised Land, the land

of “milk and honey.” This is the story of God’s grace and God’s redemption of the Israelites.

So here are our bookends: the sacred ground on which God’s revelation to Moses takes place, and the story of freedom from bondage, of grace and redemption, the Exodus. Listen now to what is between the bookends in Exodus chapter 3 verses 7-15; listen for the holy word of God that sustained Moses and the Israelites in the desert times, and the word that continues to sustain us today. Here, Moses has encountered God and has now hidden his face from God in fear. **READ**

**Then the LORD said (to Moses), ‘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,<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.<sup>10</sup> So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.’<sup>11</sup> But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’<sup>12</sup> He (God) 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.’**

**13 But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you”, and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’<sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’\* He (God) said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “I AM has sent me to you.”’<sup>15</sup> God also said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, “The LORD,\* the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you”:**  
**This is my name for ever,**  
**and this my title for all generations.**

For sure, this is a story of Moses’ call by God – his call to go to the Israelites and lead them to the Promised Land. But it is also a story of compassion and new relationship; and in it, we hear the heartbeat of God’s word, the substance that keeps us alive both then and now, for we find the very essence of God, of who God is, and that sacred ground in the midst of human brokenness, the beginning of a new and intimate relationship between God and God’s people.

Here is Moses, standing in fear before God, yet talking directly with God – Moses, one who was in exile for murder - a very broken human being. And here he stands, face to face with God, being called by God to go to Pharaoh and lead God’s people out of Egypt. This is a pretty awesome task for someone who has committed such a horrendous crime.

And Moses understandably resists this call, questioning God. “Why should I be the one you send to Pharaoh?” Perhaps Moses senses his own inadequacy for the overwhelming task, or maybe he is all too aware of his own sinful past. But God doesn’t back down, and instead encourages Moses by assuring him “I will be with you.” Moses still resists saying to God “they’re not going to believe me if I don’t give them a name. If

I go, who am I going to say has sent me? What is your name? Which of the many gods I've heard about are you?"

And then something happens that has never before happened. God does reveal to Moses God's very own, personal name. God says "I AM WHO I AM. Tell the Israelites that I AM has sent you." Interestingly, this is the passage where we first hear the name Yahweh - its first appearance in Hebrew scripture. This is the name that even today Jews consider so sacred that it is not spoken aloud.

Understand, too, that a name at this time in history held particular significance, perhaps more than today. It was a way of letting someone know something about you. There was history in a name, and giving it was also a sign of hospitality. Knowing someone's name was a sign of a relationship. As God gives this divine name to Moses, connection with his ancestors is affirmed; and yet, it is also the beginning of a new and sacred relationship, one that continues faithfully from generation to generation, throughout all time. The Hebrew verb "to be" which is used here, tells us that God's name not only says I AM, but I WAS, and I WILL BE, always.

God's presence with Moses and with the Israelites is revealed in ways they and their ancestors have never before experienced. God tells Moses clearly "these are MY people. I know their suffering and pain, and I have come to take care of them." This is Yahweh: holy, active, intimate, and nurturing in the lives of the Israelites - in the midst of their strengths and in their weaknesses, and persistent in the desire for their redemption.

Today we know this continuing intimate relationship, this loving and compassionate presence in a way that came to us two thousand years ago, the burning bush we know as the gospel; and the flame, Jesus Christ - the new name, Emmanuel, God with us.

In the gospel of John there are familiar passages we know as the I AM passages - the words which point to God through Jesus Christ. Jesus says "I AM the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry." "I AM the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved." "I AM the good shepherd." "I AM the true vine and you are the branches." "I AM the way, the truth, and the life." "I AM the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Assurance, compassion, and everlasting faithfulness.

This is the self-revelation of God that is our gift, the new name and the intimate relationship that is, was, and always will be; sustaining us through the desert times of our own lives. Our cries whether loud, or barely audible, are heard. We are forgiven, nurtured, redeemed, and given new life. We know the compassion, encouragement, and claim upon our lives that the Israelites knew during the Exodus. It is the burning bush we find and the sacred ground we stand upon as the gospel is proclaimed and lived, among us and through us today.

Now, go back with me, if you will, to the bookends; and consider that the story of Moses and the story of Bea may also be our own story in a way - perhaps different particular situations, but the same in many ways. I invite you to reflect on your own bookends - the holy ground you know, the exodus times you have experienced, and then to what is in the middle. Think about the places in your life that have been sacred for you - where you have felt the heat of the burning bush and the call of God in your soul; a time when you have felt God's holy presence with you.

Bea felt the flame when the woman offered her help. She heard Bea's pain and knew her suffering, and was there on sacred ground with Bea. And from what Bea told me, she feels that flame, a rekindling of it, each time she helps someone in the midst of their difficulties – encountering the warmth of Christ's active and loving presence.

And I invite you to think about times when you have experienced the Exodus in your life – dark times when you have known pain and heartache and despair, yet somehow had hope for healing. With help, and resistance at times, Bea worked through painful memories of what she had done to her family and to others, and also memories of difficult circumstances throughout her life that had been beyond her control. She worked through a hot and sandy desert toward redemption, new life, the Promised Land.

During these difficult times, we are called to look to what's between our bookends – to God's love for us, our love for one another, God's persistence and compassion - the love that is revealed to us through the great I AM, God's only son who lived, died, and was resurrected for us, so that we might be delivered from Egypt. We are carried through hot and barren sands of the desert, redeemed so that we might enjoy new and abundant life in the land of milk and honey, in new relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

It is in this new relationship that we are able to live in community, in relationship with one another, caring, forgiving, nurturing, and loving others as Christ has loved us. And we go through each ordinary day of our lives, living the Exodus toward our ultimate redemption in and with Jesus Christ, praising God for the covenant of grace given to us through the name that is above every name – the Word that was with God in the beginning, the same God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the great I AM that is with us today – our Lord Jesus Christ. In his name, Amen.

