

**Exodus 3:1-15** <sup>1</sup> 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 Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up." <sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." <sup>6</sup> God 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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to 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> Now go, I am sending 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> 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 serve God on this mountain." <sup>13</sup> 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." The Lord 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 forever, and this my title for all generations.

Exodus 3:1-15

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"Holy Ground"

Rev. Amy Terhune

For more than a decade, a sitcom ran on CBS called "The Big Bang Theory". It records the sufferings and successes of four post-doctorate, somewhat nerdy scientists, and one very cute waitress-would-be-actress named Penny in the apartment across the Hall. Sheldon is a somewhat narcissistic theoretical physicist with an IQ off the charts, but he has a lot of difficulty navigating the everyday challenges that go with living. Leonard is his long-suffering roommate with an inferiority complex. Rajesh is their friend from India who can't talk to women, and Howard rounds out the pack with an engineering degree from MIT, living at home with his very Jewish mother. In one arc of the storyline, Howard has the opportunity to fulfill a life-long dream.

He bursts into the apartment excitedly and announces to his friends. "I've got great news! NASA picked my team's design for the deep field space telescope that's going on the international space station this spring!" As his friends offer congratulations, Howard says, "Wait, it gets better. See, someone has to go up with the telescope as a payload specialist," he says, "and guess who that someone is?"

And Sheldon immediately pipes up, "Mohammed Li."

The rest of them all sort of gape at Sheldon for a moment, because of course, the answer is obviously Howard. Howard says, “Who is Mohammed Li?”

To which Sheldon responds, “Mohammed is the most common first name in the world. Li, the most common surname. As I didn't know the answer, I thought it gave me the mathematical edge.”

[From *The Big Bang Theory*, Season 5, Episode 5 “The Russian Rocket Reaction”.]

Alright then. If you ever need to guess a common name, apparently Mohammed Li will give you the mathematical edge.

But as we turn to our lesson for this morning, I want to talk about an uncommon name – a name so rare, so singular, so holy that only God can bear the name. Adherents of Judaism believe the name to be so holy that it isn't spoken aloud. When it's written, it's only four consonants YHWH. In fact, more often than not, adherents of Judaism will not even write out Lord or God. They put an underscore in the place of the vowel, as in G\_d, to show respect for the holiness of God's name.

A couple of years back, a professor named Matthew Richard Schlimm from the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary in Iowa wrote a book entitled *70 Hebrew Words Every Christian Should Know* [Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2018, pg. 30-32]. I find it to be enormously helpful when studying the Old Testament. He writes in depth about God's name, reminding us that ancient Hebrew had no vowels, only consonants. In medieval times, Jewish scholars developed a series of dots and dashes to add in vowel sounds around the consonants, and so we have some idea of how the language was pronounced in ancient times. But those vowel sounds were never added to God's name, so we can only guess at its pronunciation.

And we can only guess at its meaning. The name of God is thought to derive from the Hebrew verb *Hayâ*, meaning ‘to be’. That may indicate that God causes things to be, referencing the ongoing work of creation. Or it may mean that God is, referencing God's presence with us, God's timelessness, and enduring character or unchanging nature. Or both. All of which begs the question: How are we to understand this revelation from God? I AM WHO I AM. Schlimm, and countless other scholars, suggest that the key to understanding God's Holy Name is found in the scripture itself.

Remember with me how Moses got here. He's born to Jewish parents in Egypt in a time when the Jews were oppressed as slaves to the Egyptian Pharaoh, or King. The Pharaoh has grown concerned about the number of Hebrews being born, so he orders a partial genocide – all male babies born to the Jews are to be drown in the Nile. It's a horrific chapter. When Moses is born, his mother hides him until she can't anymore, and then she puts him in basket and floats him along the Nile to the spot where Pharaoh's own household comes to bathe. And sure enough, Pharaoh's daughter sees the baby in the basket, has compassion, and adopts him. Now, I don't know how she gets away with it. I guess Pharaoh is willing to give the princess what she wants. And I don't know what that experience is like for Moses. By the time he's a teenager, he must know he's an outsider, a Hebrew child being raised with Pharaoh's children and grandchildren at the heart of national power. Imagine how conflicted he must have felt growing up – seeing the posh lifestyle all around him, knowing that thousands of baby boys died while he lived, seeing his people enslaved in the cruelest manner, knowing what his life should have been. Maybe he suffers from a kind of survivor's guilt. When he sees an Egyptian guard beating a Hebrew, the scripture report in Exodus 2:12 that he looks this way and that and seeing no other Egyptians, he kills the guard and buries him in the sand. He does it on purpose because he thinks he can get away with it. And my guess is that he thinks the Hebrews will like him for it. But instead, they fear him. I think that even then, Moses felt a call to help his people. But he doesn't yet know how to go about it. Knowing that he'll be condemned for his crime, Moses flees Egypt, wanders the desert a while, and eventually lands in Midian, where he marries a local girl and works as a shepherd for his father-in-law, Jethro, one of priests of Midian.

And that is where Moses finds a measure of peace for a while. He finds purpose and connectedness through the family he joins. He learns something of his people's faith from Jethro. He experiences a simpler life. And God begins to work on him.

You see, in Moses' life story – a Hebrew raised among Egyptian elites; a compassionate man who sees the suffering of his people and it makes him angry – God has laid the groundwork for one uniquely positioned to liberate his people. As he walks through his ordinary life tending sheep, he sees a bush on fire but not consumed, and he turns aside to really examine it. And this is when God calls to him. This is the point where Moses comes face to face with the holy, the divine, God. His running, his hiding, his easy, comfortable go-nowhere life is challenged. His excuses are turned aside, and Moses has no choice but to become what God asks of him. It's a story many of us know well. If nothing else, we've seen the Prince of Egypt Movie. We know it's an important story for understanding our history.

But for most of us, that's where it ends. We don't see many burning bushes. Few of us will be called to lead an entire nation of people out of slavery. And so we miss it. Friends, with the exception of the gospel accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection, there is no other story in Scripture that more succinctly and powerfully reveals to us who God is. And discovering who God is may be the key to losing and finding ourselves. Here we, with Moses, encounter a God who is holy, a God who is intimately connected and concerned about human welfare, a God whose name—whose very identity—highlights His presence and timeless creative force. And here we, along with Moses, are invited to step onto Holy ground and become part of God's story of deliverance.

When Moses turns aside to see this curiosity—this burning bush—he is told to remove his shoes, he is standing on Holy Ground. What makes it holy? The fact that God is there? No. God is everywhere. What makes something or someplace holy?

“Author John White wrote in *The Fight* the images that came to his mind when he thought about holiness: thinness, hollow-eyed gauntness, beards, sandals, long robes, stone cells, no sex, no jokes, uncomfortable clothes, frequent cold baths, fasting, hours of prayer, wild rocky deserts, getting up at 4 a.m., clean fingernails, stained glass, self-humiliation. Is that the mental picture you have when you think of holiness? Many do. It is almost as though holiness is the private preserve of an austere group of monks, missionaries, mystics, and martyrs. But nothing could be further from the truth.

[adapted from <https://insightforliving.org.uk/sin/moral-purity/>.]

Mother Teresa was holy, but not because she set herself apart, but because she got her hands dirty in the intimate connection and care of God's people. Her love made her holy.

I'll tell you what I think. I think God uses that burning bush as a symbol. I think God wants Moses to model his heart after that bush—a heart that is on fire, but not burned up or burned out—a heart consumed with God, but still whole and alive. And I think that is what makes something holy—anything or any place can be holy if it ignites our hearts and our wills with the fire of God's love.

In *Loving God*, Chuck Colson reminds us, “Holiness is the everyday business of every Christian. It evidences itself in the decisions we make and things we do, hour by hour, day by day.” [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983, pg. 131.] Holiness has to do with purity of heart. God is holy because God is love—his heart reaches depths of purity and compassion and righteousness we cannot fathom. We are holy when our love for God and for God's people is what motivates our will and our behavior.

And I think God tells Moses to take off his shoes, not because they bring dirt or dust. Remember, God created us out of the dust of the earth. I think God tells him to take off his shoes in order to connect. It's symbolic. Let go of the things that protect you, keep you from getting hurt, keep you from feeling the forces beneath you. Let something touch you, move you, drive you to your knees.

And Moses does it. He puts himself in God's hands. He's got a thousand excuses. I'm not strong enough, I'm not eloquent enough. I don't know you well enough. And his excuses seem altogether reasonable, but God dismisses them as unacceptable. When Moses protests he is inadequate for the task, God does not assure him that he—Moses—is adequate. God only assures him God is adequate. Though not stated directly, Moses responds to God's call with fear. He is not assured courage; He is only assured that He won't be alone.

And he isn't. God says to Moses: "I have seen the affliction of my people in Egypt, I have heard their cry; I know their suffering." Mark Trotter points out, "...that Moses could have said the same thing. That is what was on Moses' conscience. "I have seen the affliction of my people." Moses could have said that. "I have heard their cry." He was there. "I know their suffering." He was witness to it. Moses could have said that. Which doesn't mean that God didn't say it. God saw, God heard, God knows. God does not block out the suffering of humankind. He is indeed here and now. The point is that God doesn't tell Moses anything that Moses didn't already know. What happened was, God said, "Do something about what you know." [from "Where's the Fire?" by Mark Trotter, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

And that is where the rubber hits the road. In order for Moses to do something about what he knows, he must confront his baser self – the part of him that tried to go it alone once upon a time and failed. The part of him that's afraid. The part of him that doesn't want to leave behind a good thing for an unknown. He remembers how he tried to show solidarity with his people, killing off a cruel guard, only to be feared and held suspect by his own people. How is he supposed to explain to his people who has sent him? To this, God gives him two important pieces of information. First, God gives him a lineage – I'm the God of your ancestors, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But even more, God gives his name: "I Am who I Am. Tell them I AM sent you". I AM the one who created you. I AM the one who hears, who sees, who knows your suffering. I AM the one who goes with you. So go. Because there is no unknown where I AM not already there.

In the care of his wife's family, Moses had learned a life of appreciating the moment for what it brought. He had learned the rhythm of the simple life – prayer, work, family, meals. And he needed that because he's going to liberate a people who have been enslaved for generations – a people consumed by fear, a people who have no idea what it is to trust tomorrow, a people who haven't dreamed in centuries. Like Moses, they must learn to connect with Holy Ground. And so they pass through the water on dry land. Holy Ground. They wake up, morning by morning, to find food covering the earth. Holy Ground. The wander through the wilderness learning to live free, to take one day at a time, to form community, to live in covenant. Holy Ground.

It is not lost on us that like Moses, Jesus' infant life was marked by the slaughter of innocents around him at Herod's orders. Like Moses, Jesus fled to the wilderness, faced temptation and encountered the divine. Like Moses, Jesus called people to a journey – one that required vulnerability and sacrifice and trust. Like Moses, Jesus faced disappointment, betrayal, and brokenness. And just as Moses had before him, so Jesus introduced us again to a God who comes down; a God who sees, hears, knows, calls, and frees. If you want to know who God is, take off your shoes. If you truly want to experience God, let down your defenses. Open your spirit. Embrace the journey. See the misery. Hear the cries. Know the suffering. Love the other. Risk vulnerability. It's not easy. It's not safe. It's not painless. It's not.

But it is holy.

Amen.