

REALLY?

Wild (Part 2) | Exodus 3 & 4

Have you ever been surprised by a call to go do something that was so outside your expectations that the only thing you could say was, **"REALLY?!"**

Maybe you liked this guy or girl when you were in school and your heart leapt when they asked if they could talk with you after class and then you discovered that what they wanted to say was: "Can you introduce me to your best friend?" And you thought: REALLY? Or perhaps you were called into your boss' office for what you feared was going to be a reprimand and instead it turned out to be a promotion. And you thought: REALLY? Or you're sitting in the doctor's examining room waiting for him to explain why your back is aching and he says, I'm afraid the tests say "Cancer." And the breathe goes out of your body as you gasp, REALLY? Or you're sitting on the team bench in a tight sporting contest and the star player is suddenly injured right before the critical foul shot or penalty kick and the coach looks down the line, points at you, and says "You're in. You've got this." And you think: REALLY?

Life contains some REALLY WILD moments, doesn't it? We have our minds set on how things usually work or ought to work or we want them to work and then there's this wild curveball or slider and it throws us utterly out of sorts. And what's really WILD is that GOD seems to specialize in throwing breaking balls. Have you ever felt that? We all live consciously or unconsciously with certain suppositions or assumptions about how God works or should. He ought to show up in consistent, predictable ways. He ought to do what makes common sense. He ought to ask what I am comfortable with, what I am gifted for, what I am ready to do. But then God allows or causes, asserts or commands things that confound our expectations and leave us saying: REALLY?

I have this theory that part of our struggle around all this is that we're not entirely happy with having a real GOD in the first place. A Divine Therapist... A Cosmic Concierge... a Heavenly ATM... a Spiritual Charging Station we can plug into and out of when we're low... that's OK. But, if God is truly GOD (and not just applying for the job) then, by definition, he is entitled to his own rule set. He doesn't have to base his actions, decisions, and strategies on customer satisfaction surveys or polling results or on my need to have him act in a previously established way. He can put a fence around a certain tree and say, "Don't go there" or he can rouse us out of our slumber and say, "Get up and go where I tell you."

At all times and in all places, God – if he is REALLY God is utterly free to work out HIS providence according to his will. That is going to be important to remember as we study more of the Book of Exodus today and in weeks to come and stumble across things like plagues and the death of kids and other wild things, where we're only naturally going to say: "REALLY? I don't get that." But, then, we... are not... GOD.

I had an epiphany when I was in my late twenties that has altered my thinking about all this. I had been watching this documentary where scientists were explaining how mind-bogglingly BIG the known universe is and how the human brain struggles to take in the vastness of just what we're able to detect with our human instruments. The program also talked about how matter on both the micro and the macro level is actually the result of forces of attraction and influence between subatomic particles that keep stupefying and staggering the people who study them because they seems to be able to be in more than one place at one time and stay in relationship with their partners across almost incalculably vast distances.

About that time I read a Bible text in which God said to the prophet Isaiah: **As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isa 55:9)** and I GOT it. I thought: "If there actually IS a BEING who created this vast universe of such mysterious and magnificent energy and interconnections, who am I to second-guess that GOD." As some of you have heard me say before: "I am like an ant shaking his little fist at the Great Genius behind quantum physics that he hasn't arranged things more to my liking." God must look at me and think: REALLY?

That doesn't change the fact that as God continues to do things HIS way, human beings are understandably shocked. Along these lines, one of the most famous stories of the Bible records an encounter in which God comes to a human being in an utterly unprecedented way and asks him to do a completely unanticipated thing. When we meet him today in Exodus chapter 3, Moses – the one-time Prince of Egypt – is living in exile in the Arabian desert of Midian. Once an heir to the throne of the world's greatest human kingdom, Moses has spent the last forty years in the wilderness. He's had a lot of time to think and grow wiser. He's had the active mentorship of a very good father-in-law. Moses has been enrolled in for four decades in the Character Academy we commonly call "marriage" and that has likely matured him considerably.

Exodus 3 begins: **Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.** It bears mentioning here that Mount Horeb and Mount Sinai are thought by most scholars to be one and the same place. It became known as "the mountain of God" because of not only what we're about to read but because of another very important encounter where God speaks to human beings. We'll get to that later in our Exodus journey.

The text goes on and says that: **There the angel of the Lord appeared to [Moses in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."** You may be interested to know that there's been a fair amount of speculation through the years that "the angel [literally,

messenger of the Lord” described here is the same being who centuries later will appear unscathed within the flames of Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace in Babylon (Daniel 3:25). In both instances, scholars have suggested that the one we are meeting is the pre-incarnate Son of God we will come to know as Jesus.

Up to this moment, however, Moses’ interest in the bush is not theological but phenomenological! Moses doesn’t associate what he is experiencing with God. He just thinks this thing he is seeing is WILD! He has never heard of GOD using flaming shrubbery to appear to people or speak to them! There’s no prior occurrence of this and God never again repeats this M.O., which suggests one good TAKEAWAY for today.

God can surprise us with the way he appears or speaks to us. I have had a few instances where I believe I’ve heard him speaking audibly in my head an unexpected message. Many people testify to having particular words or texts from the Bible suddenly become so luminous to them that they are convinced God is personally addressing them. I’ve known people who experience the Lord speaking to them through the words of their children, or through the patterns they see in the Creation, or through recurrent text on signs. One of my dear friends became certain that God used his cancer to appear to him and redirect his heart.

I caution you to check what you believe God is saying with mature believers and for its consistency with the instructions God gives in Scripture. If you hear him calling you to do something destructive to yourself or others, that is not God speaking. But one lesson from this text is that God has a way of meeting us in the normal flow of life. Jesus said that he came to address those with the eyes to see and ears to hear (Mark 8:18). Let’s get our eyes off our screens and engage God’s presence in the world around us. As Vickie Bare used to say: Every day can be a God Hunt.

Time is tight, so I’ll summarize the next part. As Moses approaches the burning bush, God calls him by name and tells him: **“Do not come any closer... Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”** This is only the second time in the Bible the word “holy” appears. It’s the word that most describes God’s transcendent purity and power. God introduces himself as the God who worked in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the great patriarchs of the Hebrew family and Moses hides his face in abject humility and awe before this presence.

But God reassures Moses that while he is holy he is also loving. **I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.** Can you imagine Moses’ excitement here? How many times over the past forty years do you suppose Moses had prayed for his family back in Egypt enduring the ruthlessness of their overlords? And here’s God saying, I’m not only going to rescue

them from bondage, I'm going to take them to a Promised Land. I'm taking them from prison to Disneyworld, only better. Moses probably says: REALLY? (only in the good kind of way)

And then the other shoe drops. **So now, go. I am sending YOU to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.** How many times have I prayed: God, would you please fix that problem... deliver that solution... supply the financial resources... heal the relationship... never considering that maybe he has a major role for me to play in his answer to that prayer. It's striking that when God first speaks in this text, Moses steps right about and says: **Here I am, Lord!**" But when it becomes clear that God is not offering something but asking something, Moses has a response that is not quite the "Send me in, Coach Lasso!" kind. **But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"** I mean, God, me? REALLY?

I said earlier that one WILD thing about God is that he can surprise us with the way He appears or speaks to us. But even wilder can be what He asks US to do to advance His purposes. He can call and challenge us to do things that feel incredibly risky, difficult, or beyond our gifting and Moses models for us here how it is so easy, maybe even normal to react. We don't have time to go verse-by-verse but if you read on in chapter 3 and 4, you will hear Moses explaining to God all the reasons why accepting this assignment clearly won't work. It's a case of the ant telling the author of quantum physics that he obviously hasn't thought this thing through, but because it is so human and we can probably all relate to it, it's worth paraphrasing.

First of all, Moses says: *I can't go because I don't know your name.* So God says: Tell them "YAHWEH" has sent you, a sacred Hebrew word that means **"I AM WHO I AM and always will be."** By the way, in John's Gospel, Jesus claims this same title for himself (John 13:19). When God bypasses his first excuse, Moses says, then: *I can't go because the Egyptians are way more powerful than me.* So God says: It's OK, I'm going to strike the Egyptians with so many wondrous shows of power that they'll not only do what you say on my behalf, they will provide you with supplies for your journey on your way out of Egypt. So Moses shifts tactics a third time: *I can't go God because nobody's going to listen or believe that you actually appeared to me.* I've got that covered, too, says God. I'm giving you three supernatural tricks you can do to demonstrate that I have delegated my authority to you. They involve a staff that turns into a serpent, a leprous hand that becomes healthy, and water that will turn into blood. Trust me, people will have a hard time ignoring you. So, finally, Moses digs deep and offers one last reason to refuse his calling: *I can't go because I'm a terrible public speaker.* God, you need somebody who can speak well to the Israelites and the Egyptians. **Please send someone else.** The text says that at this, God's patience nearly ran out. **The Lord's anger burned against Moses and he said, "What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well."** I'll send him with you. But I still want YOU to go.

As we move to a close today, I want to say that it's not a mystery why Moses or any one of us would want to resist the call of God to go and do things that are risky, difficult, or beyond the giftings we feel we have. A lot of what God calls us to is so counter-cultural and so contrary to our sinful human nature that to say "REALLY?" to God's call seems pretty common and natural. What is uncommon and supernatural is when the call of God comes to someone and they end up saying a heartfelt, "YES."

I think of when God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their established life in Ur of the Chaldees and go off to a land that God promised to show them – and without actually knowing their destination, they picked up and went. I think of Mary and Joseph in the New Testament and how each of them accepted a calling that came through surprising means and asked them to do very difficult things. I think of what Moses and Zipporah ultimately did in the Exodus story.

So here's the question: What made the difference for them? What gives anyone for that matter the courage and grace to say "YES" when God's surprising call asks a lot of us? The answer, I'm convinced, is embedded in verse 12 of chapter 3 of this story. Moses asks God: "**Who am I?**" to fulfill this calling. And God says, in effect, "Wrong focus, Moses." Focus on who I AM, because "**I will be with you.**"

David did not face Goliath because he was unusually gutsy or had perfect confidence in his slingshot aim. Moses did not face Pharaoh because he thought he'd have cred from his former life or could go to Political Persuasion School. Mary did not agree to bearing the Messiah and enduring all the suffering that would go with that role because she thought, "I am woman. I am strong!" The main asset each of these persons relied upon was that GOD would be with them.

As we head out from here today, I know that some of you are in a challenging place of decision. Through some burning bush, God has gotten your attention and called you to be part of his redemptive action. There's a part of you that's saying "REALLY?" and a part of you that is tilting toward saying "YES, Lord, I will go." I will face this sin or compulsion or blindspot in my life and find your power for change. I will speak the truth in this relationship that is broken and work for a new day. I will walk this journey with illness and crawl through the valley of the shadow of death and not give up faith, hope or love. I will train to develop the new capacity I need to be of greater service to you, Lord. I will rededicate myself to parenting this difficult child or dealing with this difficult parent. I will confront this bully or injustice. I will go to EGYPT, God, and be your servant there, not mainly because of my strength but because of your strength at work through me.

What's your Egypt? What is God's burning call for you to do there? How can you keep reminding yourself that He is with you?