
The Heart of God

I'm talking today especially to those of you who are new to Duke. (I, you understand, have been here all of two weeks, so I'm one of the veterans.) To begin life at university means to wear every item in your wardrobe for at least a few minutes during the first week; it means to go from being profoundly ashamed of your family to missing them desperately in the time it takes to cross the quad; it means to listen to endless people telling you to be yourself and relax while inside you've no idea any more who yourself is and you're about as relaxed as a violin string.

Your family, friends and former teachers will have all sorts of hopes for you. I have only one: that here you will meet God. Your new friends and new teachers will have all sorts of expectations of you. I have only one: that you open your eyes and come face to face with God. What does it mean to meet God? That is what Exodus chapter 3 is all about, and I want to explore four dimensions of what it says to us about God with you for a few minutes this morning.

The first discovery is that God has a name – and knows yours. Moses says, 'People will ask, what is your name – what shall I tell them?' You know this kind of conversation: I was once in a restaurant when half the great Liverpool soccer team of the 1980s walked in and sat down at the next table. I said, 'You couldn't sign this menu, could you – not for me, you understand, but for some of the kids in the youth group'. Moses says, 'of course, I don't need to know your name, but a lot of people will, so you couldn't just tell me, could you?' And God says 'I AM WHO I AM'. Not your average name, clearly. But it tells us some very important things. God is personal. God isn't just a vague sense of meaning, a guarantee of some abiding truth, or a hearty feeling of wellbeing. God has a name: God has an identity; and God communicates with us.

There is a tendency in public circles to talk of God as if God was a grand if old-fashioned way of referring to noble ideals – 'freedom, justice, democracy ... Gohhddd' Or in other circles God is used as a kind of enormous number, somewhere way beyond a billion but just short of infinity – a bit like the way I used to address letters to my friends – 37 London Road, Bristol, England, United Kingdom, The World, The Solar System, The Galaxy, The Universe – and then you could add Gohhddd just after the universe. Or God becomes a word for a profound experience, the kind of thing you shout out when you make love or see the Grand Canyon for the first time. Gohhddd. But this isn't the God who meets Moses. The God who meets Moses is a particular and personal being, who loves to talk with us, and who won't be pushed around by our categories. I AM WHO I AM.

The second discovery is that this communicating God won't take 'no' for an answer. Moses says 'This is unreasonable. You're asking too much of me. I can't save a whole people. You're setting me up to fail, you're going to make me look ridiculous, I'm new to this, I'd never have enrolled in the Freshman Exodus class if I knew it was this much work, I'm going to take you to the Dean, the Provost, the President, this is so unfair...' And God just raises an eyebrow, like a primeval Clint Eastwood, and says, 'We'll do it together'.

Now in my experience when you join a new family or a new club – when you meet your boyfriend's parents, when you turn up at the first lacrosse practice, when you settle down for your first orchestra rehearsal or when you enter the class called 'Khaled Hosseini and Tom Wolfe as prophets of the new American Century' – whatever it is, you spend your time in one of two ways. Some of the time you're thinking 'I feel a fraud: I wonder if anyone will notice how nervous I am, how gawky I look, how pathetic are my social skills; how long till someone realizes I'm really here because I fancy the conductor, or that I've never read a modern American novel, or that I have an eating disorder, or that I'm a virgin. I'm lucky to be here: I wonder how long it will last'. That's some of the time. But the rest of the time you're thinking 'Actually I'm not as spotty as that guy over there; at least I didn't emit an involuntary bodily sound like that geek beside me; and I got a decent grade for my first assignment. Actually I think they're lucky to have me here, and I'm beginning to get a bit bored of the company they've provided me with.' Half the time we're not good enough for the university; half the time the university isn't good enough for us.

It's the same with God. Half the time we feel like trash, and we're astonished God hasn't yet wiped us off his hard drive; the rest of the time we're thinking 'I'm a pretty regular kind of guy, and that God's pretty lucky to have me on his team'. Moses spends half his time cowering from God and half his time saying 'Go on, if you're so special, prove it'. But what Moses discovers is that what he thinks of himself doesn't matter that much. God

isn't that interested in what Moses thinks of himself. 'I will be with you'. That's all that matters. God wants us to believe in him, for sure: but what really matters is that he believes in us.

Moses discovers a third thing when he meets God. God wants to set him free. The book of Genesis begins with the central discovery that God is a creator God, that everything traces its source and purpose to him. The book of Exodus is a new beginning because here we discover that God is a liberator God, who longs to set his people free. And that combination is still almost too much for our imaginations. We're used to the idea of a God who shaped the mountains and rivers, who made the tiny microbe and scattered the Milky Way. And we're getting used to the God of protest, that when the downtrodden call for justice and the heartbroken call for mercy God is in their struggle. But the notion that the creator God is the liberator God, that God makes us this way because he wants one like us *and* comes into our lives to set us free – wow. It's not surprising it was too much for Moses: it's still too much for us.

God wants to set you free. God wants to do to you what he did to Moses: he wants to dismantle your fears, foibles, and folly, to expand your imagination so you can take in the wonder of what he has in store for you, to give you a new job to do in his strength not your own, and finally to make you a part of the way he is setting free all the oppressed peoples of the earth. This is why we go to university: the better to be a part of the way God is setting his people free. The greater your imagination, the greater your understanding may become of the wonder of God. The more skills you learn, the more confidence you may have in playing your part in this great tide of liberation. The better you know the world, the deeper your grasp of the subtle ways people remain in chains. In chains to family ghosts, in chains to sibling cruelty, in chains to addictive substances, in chains to consumer choice, in chains to sexual greed, in chains to small electrical devices we have to check every five minutes to be sure we're still popular.

So this is what Moses discovers when he meets God: God is a real being, with a name, identity and a longing to communicate with you; God has a purpose for your life and won't take no for an answer; and God's purpose is to set you free, and set you to work setting others free.

And there's one more discovery. God begins his conversation with Moses by burning in a bush that blazes but is never consumed. Here is a God who loves his people with a burning passion, but a passion that is never exhausted. Here is a love that is on fire, but a love that does not destroy. Here is a God who shapes that burning passion in such a way that it will catch our attention, bring us into relationship with him, transform us, and set us free. That is how God works in Jesus: but, long before, that is how God was already working in the burning bush.

God is on fire with love for you. That is Moses' fourth discovery. It's not just that God is a personal being, with an unshakeable purpose to set you free: more than that, the reason for the story, the dynamic at the heart of creation and salvation and Bible and Church is this: God is on fire with love for you. This is the discovery that makes sense of all the others. The burning bush is not just some visual aid, some highway road sign advertising burgers or fries on a wayside griddle. Neither is it a warning of hell or a threat of agony for the unwary. It is a picture of the very heart of God. Moses discovered the truth at the center of the universe. God is on fire with love for you.

May you feel this fire today. May it draw you without consuming you, embrace you without destroying you. May it give you identity and purpose, and may it set you free. And, while you are at this university, may you catch fire with love for God, that your heart too may blaze with love for people and longing to set them free, until the time when, ablaze for God as he is for you, you become all flame.