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Rick Myatt

THE NEON BUSH
Exodus 3:1-15

Our daughter and son in law are in New Mexico this morning driving through the desert on their way here. Thinking about that reminded me of a time when I made a similar trip. Many years ago before I was married I was with a group of friends driving from Austin, Texas back to Southern California. There were 8 of us divided among 2 cars. It was the middle of August. Our plan was to drive all night through Arizona and eastern California in order to avoid driving in the blistering heat of the day in that desert. In the middle of the night somewhere in the most desolate part of Arizona the engine of the car I was in suddenly just stopped. We had been driving 70 miles per hour down the freeway when the engine just quit. We were following the other car, so they did not immediately know what was going on. This was long before cell phones so we had no way to tell them that we had a problem. They just kept driving down the freeway.

We didn't know why the engine died so suddenly. We got out and looked under the hood, but we had 2 problems. First, we didn't have a flashlight, and second, even if we had one wouldn't have helped because none of us knew much of anything about engines. One of my friends asked, "What do you think is wrong?" I pronounced, "It's broken." That was all I had. We tried starting it again, but the engine just ground away without ever actually starting up. At that point I didn't like our situation at all. We were stuck in the absolute middle of nowhere in the middle of the night with no way to get help. We hadn't passed any signs of civilization for many miles. The only thing we could do was start walking down the freeway ahead in the hope that we might fortuitously happen upon some random outpost of humanity in that empty wasteland. It was warm even then in the middle of the night. I began thinking about what it would be like when the sun came up if we were still trudging through the desert looking for help in the blazing heat. I had visions of movies I've seen of people stranded in the desert, staggering through the sand, dying of thirst and heat. It wasn't a pretty picture.

Fortunately our friends figured out there was a problem and came to the rescue. We found a place to stay that night and got the car fixed in the morning. Then we resumed our journey, thankful that we didn't end up dead out in that heat blasted wilderness.

That experience occasionally comes to mind when I read stories in the Bible that took place in the deserts of the Middle East. The wilderness is a common theme in the Bible. On a number of occasions God's people spent long periods in deserts as hot and foreboding as the one I feared I was going to be stranded in. For 40 years Israel wandered in a desolate wilderness after escaping Egypt, David spent considerable time in the wilderness hiding out from murderous Saul and even Jesus had a sojourn in the wilderness. Lately it has seemed to me that an unusually large number of people in our church are going through difficult trials of various kinds. They are having wilderness experiences where they are in tough places and the hard times don't seem to be ending very quickly, if at all.

In the Bible the wilderness seems to be a place where important things happened in the lives of God's people. So in the next few weeks I want to look at what happened to some people in the wilderness to see what we might learn from it. We will start with Moses' unusual experience in the wilderness in Exodus 3:1-15.

MOSES HAD TO GET OVER HIS PREVIOUS LIFE

I will briefly remind you of some of the significant points Moses' life. He was born to Jewish parents at a time that was perilous for Hebrew baby boys. The Jewish people had been reduced to slave status in Egypt, but they had become a large minority that made Egyptian leaders nervous. They feared a slave rebellion. So the leaders ordered that all Hebrew baby boys should be immediately killed in an effort to limit their population.

Moses' parents tried to protect him by putting him in his own little life raft floating in the Nile River. He was discovered and eventually adopted by one of Pharaoh's daughters, who fortuitously hired Moses' own mother to be his nanny and raise him. Moses grew up as the adopted grandson of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, making him a member of the most noble family in the nation.

He was fortunate to have the teaching of his own mother about the God of Israel, but he lived in a polytheistic society. That was an ancient analogy to today's pluralistic society. Everyone could have whatever gods they chose to believe in. There were dominant supposed Egyptian gods like Ra, the sun god, Osiris, Ptah and many others, but if someone chose to believe in some other gods that was just fine. There are lots of establishments in our area that sell pizza. Of course there are the chains like Domino's, Papa John's and Pizza Hut. But there are also local places like Pizza Port, Manhattan Pizza, Borelli's, Bestawan, and countless others. Do you have a favorite? Probably you do. You might even be passionately loyal to your favorite pizza, insisting it is the best. You might argue with someone who has

a different favorite pizza. But you allow them their opinion. In fact, in a pinch you will eat just about anyone's pizza because they are all pretty good. That's kind of how pluralists are about gods. You can have whatever favorite you choose. Maybe you have several favorites. Maybe you decide you don't have any gods at all, sort of like someone who chooses not to eat pizza. It's your choice.

Moses knew some about the God of Israel, though it may have been a little limited. Remember that after Moses led Israel out of Egypt he spent 6 weeks on Mt. Sinai receiving revelation from God. He knew none of what God revealed to him there prior to that experience, and that includes what we know as the Ten Commandments. He did not know, for instance, that God said it is wrong to commit murder. That lack would play a role in his life because he did murder someone, and that led to him fleeing Egypt and going to the wilderness.

In part because of his lofty position as a member of the royal family Moses seemed to have some sense of personal destiny. I believe he had a sense that he needed to protect and save his people, Israel. Exodus 2:11 says one day he saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating one of the Hebrew workers. Verse 12 says, "Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand." The next day he tried to break up a fight between two Hebrews. These incidents show that he thought he needed to take care of his fellow Jewish people and lead them. Early on he had some idea that he was supposed to deliver them, he just didn't know how.

Moses had to get rid of some fuzzy or wrong ideas about who God really is. While he was correct that he was destined to deliver Israel he needed to lose the idea that it was up to him to make it happen. Years of living in the wilderness tending sheep took care of any notion he had of being a great deliverer for the Jewish people.

GOD CONFRONTED MOSES IN THE WILDERNESS

The wilderness experience helped Moses in a couple of ways. He fled there when it was learned that he had killed an Egyptian and as a result he ended up on Egypt's 10 most wanted list. He then spent the next 40 years out there tending sheep. Let's be clear that the wilderness where he ended up was not a desirable locale. This was not the land of milk and honey. It was far from the civilized Nile region of Egypt. This incident takes place near Mt. Horeb, which is another name for Sinai. There is today a traditional location for Sinai, really a range of mountains in the Sinai Peninsula, which is a rugged, mostly barren and desolate area. However, there are many who believe Sinai was actually east of the Gulf of Aqaba in what is today Saudi Arabia, an even more desolate region.

Either way Moses roughed it out in a sparsely populated, difficult and unpleasant area. It was a pretty good stand-in for Tatooine. This was several long steps down from being one of the princes of Egypt, the superpower of that day. That's like going from being a mover and shaker in Washington D. C. to living in a rusting old double wide in Barstow, with some lovely tumbleweed landscaping. Rather than being a ruler of others, maybe a heroic savior of his people, he took care of sheep. This could not have been his dream career. He ended up living in a wilderness of resignation. I suspect that though he made peace with being a totally unknown and insignificant shepherd in an anonymous nearly unlivable wilderness, he had that curious sense that maybe somehow he had missed a calling. He remembered feeling like he was made for some important destiny, but figured perhaps that had just been his own ego at work, because it was never going to happen.

God was letting the wilderness do its work. But God also did his work when he appeared to Moses. His startling meeting with Moses would go a long way to clearing up any misconceptions Moses might have had about who God is.

Moses Learned That God Exists

Moses was minding his own business, taking care of the sheep when he saw a highly unusual sight. He saw a bush that was "on fire," according to verse 3. A bush on fire isn't really all that remarkable. Recently Laurie and I were out on a walk and she remarked on how green and thick the brush is on the hill just west of our house. We can remember when that hill was blackened and bare after a huge destructive wildfire roared through and seriously threatened our neighborhood. We saw lots of bushes burning back then with flames leaping high into the air, so why is a bush burning so worthy of note?

The passage tells us that the bush was on fire but was not burning up. At the least we know that would be unusual, so we could just leave it at that. However, I have some speculation about this event. This is just a guess on my part, not infallible truth. Other than the sun Moses had never seen any light brighter than a flame. At night, the only light he had ever seen would have been the moon, stars, a candle or a fire. There was no other form of light. I suspect that what Moses saw that day was not actually flames, but a brilliant light shining from a bush. He had no category for this light except fire, so that's what he called it. But since this brilliant light wasn't fire the bush did not burn up.

Psalm 104:2 says, "The Lord wraps himself in light as a garment." When God led Israel in the wilderness he appeared as a pillar of fire at night. When Jesus was

transfigured according to Matthew 17:2, “his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.” In Acts 26:13 Paul explained the change in his life to King Agrippa by recounting how Jesus had confronted him while he was traveling to Damascus. He said, “About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions.” The light surrounding Jesus was so powerful it even was more brilliant than the sun in the middle of the day. In Revelation 1:16 when John was given a vision of Jesus Christ he saw that “His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.”

You and I are used to bright artificial lights. Go to Petco Park to watch the glorified minor league baseball team we have in San Diego and you will see lights that make it bright enough at night that you can easily see a baseball from far away. Sometimes when you are driving a car coming in the opposite direction will have those headlights that are so bright they are blinding. Moses had never seen anything like that. So I suspect he saw some bush glowing with a brilliant light brighter than anything he’d ever seen. What in the world was that? He had to go find out.

When he arrived he had an encounter with God. He had believed in God prior to that moment. He probably believed in some other supposed gods at some level as well. But he would never be the same after this incident. God revealed himself to him in an undeniable way. He knew for a fact that the God of Israel not only exists but is active in this world. And he learned who that God really is.

It is so easy to live with an intellectual faith that has a big element of unreality to it. Yes, we believe in God, but it is so easy to not expect him to be real and present in the world. Have you ever had an experience where God gave a little real world reminder that he is both very real and present? I’ve never encountered any neon bushes, but there have been a few small incidents where our family got a small reminder that our God is real and present. One humorous one involved our daughter Carissa. Years ago I read a book in which the author told an amazing story. He was backpacking with his family in the mountains. One day while hiking a contact lens popped out of his eye. He looked everywhere for it but couldn’t find it. This was disconcerting because he didn’t have a replacement, meaning he’d have to be half blind until he got home. That night he prayed about it as he went to bed. He asked God to help him somehow, to give him some way of dealing with the situation. During the night he had a vivid dream and in the dream saw himself at the place he’d lost the contact, bending down to a rock beside the trail and finding the contact on the side of that rock. When he woke up he thought that was

unusual, but figured it was a function of his frustration over losing the lens bubbling up while he slept. But he couldn't get it out of his mind. Finally he went back to that spot on the trail and to his surprise he saw the rock he'd seen in his dream. He looked on the side of the rock and there was his lens, right where he'd seen it in that dream!

From the more Pentecostal types you hear supposed miraculous stories similar to this one that smack of made up and downright silly. But the guy who experienced that story is a down to earth solid guy not given to flights of fancy. It was a pretty amazing little incident. Though hardly earth shaking, it certainly makes you wonder. Seems like God allowed a tiny peek that he's actually there. Carissa happened to be home from college the Sunday I related that story in a sermon. A few days later she needed some money urgently for a particular purpose and couldn't find the money she had set aside. She looked everywhere for it, to no avail. She was extremely frustrated and felt helpless. That night as she was going to bed she remembered the story I had told. So she prayed that God would enable her to find the money the way that guy had found his contact lens. That night she dreamed that she found the money under the couch cushions in her apartment. She woke up thinking, "Nah, that can't be." But she looked under the cushions, and found the money!

That's pretty trivial, but it is one of those moments when you get a little tingle down your spine because you realize God really is there! A more significant thing happened around the same time to Laurie. She had gone as a chaperone on a high school mission trip with Toby to Fiji and Tonga. This was during a wilderness time for Laurie and me. We were dealing with some very difficult things in our ministry and it was really grinding us down. Laurie met a young woman in Fiji who loved the Lord exuberantly. They didn't get to spend much time together, but Laurie felt she really connected with this woman. As the group Laurie and Toby were with were about to leave this woman pulled Laurie aside. She said God had told her that Laurie was dealing with some very difficult things and proceeded to describe some of what we were dealing with. She said God told her to pray for Laurie and to let her know he knew all about it, and that he would work it all out. There was no way for that woman to know what she knew! No one except Laurie and I knew about it and we weren't telling anyone. Except that she was right, God had somehow communicated it to her. The incident was spooky...and comforting. God is really there!

I could give you a list of other incidents in varying degrees of amazing in which God gave us reminders that he is real. I can tell you that every time it's a bit

spooky, but it is exciting. It is thrilling to know that God is as real as this building we are in today, and to know that he is active in our world. One of the things that I wish were not true is that those kinds of things often occur in the wilderness. Carissa was in a little brief wilderness in college. Laurie and I were in a wilderness when she had her encounter in Fiji. It turns out that the wilderness is a great place to have an encounter with God. That's because when we are in the wilderness we often are desperate and have nowhere to turn. Our spiritual senses are sharpened because we see our need for God like at no other time. He most often shows up when he is our only hope.

Moses Got A Glimpse of The Glory of God

First in the brilliant light of that demonstration Moses saw something no human and no other supposed God could do. That brilliant glowing light was beyond human ability to produce. As he approached God told him to remove his sandals because it was holy ground. He was in the presence of a holy God.

But why take off your sandals? Often people remove their shoes when they enter our house. This is because they know they are entering holy ground. They are in the presence of His Holiness Rick. Uh, no. It's because we have a very light, almost white carpet and they don't want to be the ones to get it dirty. It has nothing to do with holiness. If we had wood floors they wouldn't bother.

It's kind of funny, but in our previous ministry my son participated in the worship team a few times and upset some people when he removed his flip flops while doing so. I got some blowback from it. God told Moses that in God's presence he should remove his sandals, but some of those people would have insisted he put them back on. My reaction was that Toby was just doing what God told Moses to do, so, um, I leave it to you, should he obey God or you? Just saying.

However, that's beside the point. What's this removing sandals about? It actually was an ancient custom that was widely observed. It was a sign of reverence. It still exists in some cultures in the east where one is expected to remove shoes before entering a home. In many cases that is a statement that one is unworthy to enter the home thus thankful for the kindness of the homeowner. But at the least it is a sign of respect. Maybe the closest thing in our culture would be removing a hat. When the national anthem is sung at a sporting event one is expected to remove a hat. That is a sign of reverence. This is the same kind of thing. Moses was in the presence of the Holy One.

But he really gets the picture when the name of the Lord comes up. God instructed Moses to go back to Egypt to lead Israel out. Moses didn't like that idea much. The humiliation of being chased out of Egypt as a criminal and then spending 40 years in Barstow tending sheep has removed any cockiness or arrogance. In fact, Moses' confidence is shot. He figures he's doing all he'll ever be able to do. That would seem reasonable to me. I've been a pastor for almost 38 years. I can assure you I am not thinking, "Gee, maybe I ought to go into politics for my next career. Or maybe I should become an engineer." That's not happening. After 4 decades I'm not thinking about anything else as some kind of sequel career. Moses can't imagine taking on the task of leading anyone. He tried that once before a long time ago and it was a train wreck. Have you ever launched out to attempt something and have it turn into a complete hot mess, and everyone knows it? How anxious are you to try that again?

So color Moses reluctant. He doesn't want any part of this. He's thinking, "It's cool that you came to see me Lord, but if it's all the same to you I'd prefer to stay here doing what I know I can do, take care of sheep." God says, "Sorry, Dude, this is a done deal. You gotta go." So Moses says, "Look, I don't think this is a very good idea and when I try to become President of Israel no one else will either. So when I go I need to explain where this is coming from. I need to tell people it's your idea, not mine. But, um, see, I don't know exactly who you are. I don't even know your name. So, uh, what's your name?"

I can understand the problem. Moses is sure that in the unlikely event that he went along with this nutty scheme when he shows up and tells the people of Israel, "I'm here to lead you," he knows their response is going to be, "Well who are you? We don't know you from Adam, so we wouldn't even follow you to the chow line." He figures he would need to say, "See, it's not my idea. God sent me." Oh, of course. We get that a lot. When you talked to him did you happen to get God's name and contact info so we could sort of check your references?

You get a peek there at how little Moses knew of God. He knew he was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He was the national God of his people, but they didn't even know what to call him. The Egyptians had Ra, the Canaanites had Baal and Molech, and Israel had...somebody. They weren't on a first name basis yet.

God's response is enigmatic. I think of it as the Popeye response. I am what I am. I'm Popeye the Sailorman. God's answer kind of sounds like that. He says, "I am who I am." Oh, well thanks. I'm to go tell Israel that Popeye sent me? That clears up everything. Then God goes on to say, "Tell them 'I am' sent you."

Oddly that seemed to satisfy Moses. That's because he understood what God meant. The Hebrew word *hayah* meant "to be" or "to exist." In verse 15 God said, "Say to the Israelites, 'the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.'" The Hebrew word translated "Lord" is Yahweh, the Hebrew name that is formed from *hayah*. It means the one who exists. The one who just is.

God was saying he is the one who just is, who exists in and of himself. That is not true of anyone or anything else in all of creation. Everything else comes from something or someone. Everything else is caused by something or someone. God was saying that he is the one who just is and always has been. He is the one who caused everything to exist. He is not some supposed deity over a particular part of the world, or over the sun, or the moon, or thunder or the ocean. He is the one who is the source of and ruler of all of it. It all exists because he caused it to exist, and its continued existence depends solely upon him.

Colossians 1:16-17 says, "For in him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." There is only one Being who existed before everything, it is the one just is, who always has been, the great I Am, Yahweh.

There once was a theory that all that we see is eternal. It has always been here, thus there is no need for a Creator. But science has come to the rescue. It has now been proven that the universe had a starting point. It came into being at some point in time. What existed before that time? What caused the universe to come into being? Yahweh was claiming to be the cause. He was claiming to be the one that as Paul said, "holds all things together."

At that point Moses was thinking, "Oh, you're *that* God!" Moses could not comprehend the brilliant light he was seeing in that bush. And that was an analogy for the One who caused that light to shine so brilliantly. Now Moses understood this was a being beyond his ability to comprehend. This was the Creator who has power over all things, who eternally exists without cause and without end or beginning. That's a concept we cannot grasp, for it is beyond finite intelligence. In that dramatic moment Moses, after seeing a visual aid, understands that this is who his God is. The obvious implication of this is that if that God was sending Moses he'd better go, and Israel had better follow him.

Moses Discovered God Had Something For Him To Do

Moses felt insignificant. At this point in his life he thinks all he's really equipped to do is take care of a few sheep in an empty quarter of the world. He feels inadequate to do anything else. But in this incident he learns that his feelings are irrelevant.

Yes, he is inadequate. It was important for him to learn that. So important that he had to spend a third of his life out in the desert being convinced of it. He needed to know that because he was about to take on tasks that no human is adequate for. He couldn't do miracles to force Pharaoh to let his people go. He couldn't save Israel when they were pinned against the Red Sea with no avenue of escape. He couldn't create a covenant with Yahweh and a law for his people. He couldn't provide water and food for them in the desert where none previously existed. Only God could do all of that. Moses' inadequacy was irrelevant. But now he also knows that for this God all of that is child's play. If this God had the unfathomable power to speak and make a universe so awesome and vast it is beyond human comprehension explode into being, then parting seas or making water and manna show up in a barren desert was no big deal at all.

Moses had come to understand that in his own ability and power he was insignificant. Though he didn't know it at the time even as an Egyptian noble he didn't matter. Here's how true that is: how many Egyptian nobles can you name today? Had Moses not been given his role by God his name would have quickly disappeared and no one would have any idea who he was. But God gave this insignificant, inadequate man a role to play that had eternal significance, and still does today. God had something for Moses to do, and in comparison nothing else he could ever do would have any importance whatsoever.

APPLICATION

BE PATIENT WITH THE WILDERNESS

This is a difficult instruction, because though people may flock to the desert to see the wildflowers this year, no one wants their life to be a barren wilderness. But one message I see in Moses' life is the wilderness had some work to do. It required 40 years before the work was done.

One time recently we were transporting Ella to her home when she was tired. She didn't want to be strapped into a car seat. She began getting fussy and saying "Done, done." Laurie distracted her by showing her a video of herself playing with her toy piano that's on Laurie's phone. But then the video stopped and Laurie hit a wrong button and she briefly lost the video. Ella started wailing. Laurie said, "Just

a moment, Ella. I'll get it back." Do you know what Ella did? She kept on wailing. She doesn't understand "wait." She doesn't get, "Just a moment, I'll get it back." Furthermore she doesn't want to get it. She wants it NOW!

Sadly we are often much like her. When we are in the wilderness we start saying, "Done, done." When God doesn't make it stop we commence the wailing. It is important for us to remember that just because we are tired of it doesn't mean the task of the wilderness is complete in us. We may not want "wait," but that is likely exactly what God is saying to us.

SEEK TO SEE GOD'S GLORY

Moses wasn't seeking an encounter with God when he was in the wilderness. He was just surviving. Neither can we force God to reveal his glory to us in some way like he did with Moses. I mentioned that we have had a few minor incidents where God let us know he was present in some tangible ways, though no neon bushes. But we controlled none of that. God works in his own ways when he chooses to do so. However, in Jeremiah 29:13 God said to his people, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." God wants us to see his glory, so if we seek it he will make sure we can see it. Jesus said in Matthew 7:7, "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you." God wants us to be blinded by the light of his glory, to stand in awe of him. This is his desire for all of us. If we pursue it with all our hearts he will fill our hearts and minds with awe at his goodness, his grace, his love, his awesome power, his righteousness and his wisdom.

Our tendency is to mostly want the wilderness experience to stop. That's what we focus on. Make it go away. However, when we make that our focus it causes us to be impatient, frustrated, unhappy and even resentful when we don't get what we want. When we focus on seeing God's glory it makes us strong, able to endure and even be joyful.

Pastor and author Mark Buchanan says that our greatest need in times of need is to see the Lord. The more desolate the wilderness you are in the greater your need to see the glory of the Lord. Seeing God for who he is, understanding that he is "I am" with all of the power and majesty that means, is what transform you and make you able to endure the wilderness and overcome. Ask God to enable you to see him for who he is and to be in awe of him in his glory.

We all know that if you go out to the desert at night you can usually see a spectacular display of stars on a clear night. But the next day you won't see any of

them. What happens? Does someone turn the stars off during the daytime? Is this an environmentally conscious person seeking to save energy in the universe? No, we don't see the stars because the glaring brilliance of the sun totally obscures the lesser lights of the stars. Ask God to enable you to see his blinding glory, because it is a glory so brilliant and piercing that it can obscure our vision of the distressing wilderness that so tends to occupy our thoughts. Focus on God's glory. Seek to see it, to be overwhelmed by it, and to make it known in all the world in every circumstance of your life. Seek it with all your heart.

GO WHERE GOD SENDS YOU

Moses wasn't anxious to go back to Egypt and do what God told him to do. In fact, he came up with every excuse for ducking that responsibility he could think of on the spur of the moment. But he did finally go. And the result was God used him like few other people in history.

I suspect none of us are going to ever be Moses class leaders. But God has something eternally significant for us to do. We need to remember what Moses had to learn in the wilderness. He wasn't capable of doing the thing God dropped in his lap. What he was capable of doing was just going where God told him to go. He had to learn that the ability was God's not his.

We need to learn the same thing. Maybe you are reluctant, maybe you feel unworthy and incapable, but just do today what God gives you to do today. Do tomorrow what God gives you to do tomorrow. And God will make your life meaning something for eternity.