

Exodus 3-4

Slogans and graffiti

Heather and I come from families that have always moved around a bit.

In our own married life we have done our own share of relocating.

We both enjoy new situations and discovering new locations.

And last year we enjoyed discovering the suburb of Brunswick in Melbourne.

Heather discovered a whole new world of second-hand stores to browse.

I found spice shops unlike anything that existed in Perth.

Together we gradually tested out some of the variety of restaurants filled with all sorts of culinary delights.

And soon after we moved into Brunswick, I also found the local neighbourhood graffitist.

Just around the corner from our house he or she had left his mark in black paint daubed across a paling fence.

This graffitist is obviously a cut above others.

He or she is a self proclaimed free thinking.

I know this because the first bit of graffiti pronounces it.

In bold letters we are told, 'Free thinkers make up their own slogans'.

And then, across the road on another paling fence, we are given the free thinker's own slogan.

In tell-tale black paint the slogan proclaims 'You are not what you own'.

Now, I personally like this slogan.

But I can't just use it as my own.

To steal this slogan would be to refuse to take up the challenge to be a free thinker.

So at the end of today's talk I'm going to come up with my own slogan.

Like the free thinker's slogan it will have to do with self-identity.

And my hope is that it will arise out of the passage that we are looking at today in Exodus 3.

So, come with me into the world of ancient Egypt.

Let's see what God can teach us from his word in Exodus 3.

Now before we get underway, let me just warn you that today's passage is complex and detailed and brimming with theological and textual issues.

There is no way that we are going to be able to deal with all of them.

So what I've chosen to do is to give you a big picture of the text and concentrate on one or two issues.

Moses at the bush

A curious sight

Perhaps you'll remember the last words of Chapter 2 of Exodus.

Verses 23-25 told us that God had heard the crying and groaning of the Israelites.

He remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

And we know that when God remembers, he acts.

And so today we wait in anticipation.

We know God is going to rescue his people.

And we know this will happen through Moses.

But Moses hasn't risen to the occasion yet.

He has been bobbing down rivers in bulrush baskets.

Killing Egyptians.

Fighting off shepherds.

Rescuing maidens and marrying them.

Raising a family.

My own feeling is that the Moses who we meet in this chapter is a man in search of an identity.

He has been rejected by his own people.

He has been rejected by the Egyptians who adopted him.

Forty years have passed and this prospective hero is an alien in a foreign land.

He is simply a nomadic shepherd in the household and service of a certain Midianite.

And this is how we find him in the first verse of Exodus 3.

He appears to be in search of fresh pasture and in the providence of God he comes to Horeb, the mountain of God.

In other words, this is no religious journey.

This is the aimless wanderings of a man caught up in the necessities of his normal life.

And in the midst of his daily pursuits he comes across a bush that is burning.

Something is strange about it.

And so he decides to take a closer look.

And he discovers that the bush is burning but not being burnt up.

And so it all starts.

What began as just another day doing the same old thing that he always did turns out differently.

A new and extraordinary chapter opens in his life.

The old disappears and is replaced by the new.

The ordinary turns out to be extraordinary.

And a new man emerges.

For on this day Moses meets God.

Not just any God, but the living God.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The God of his fathers.

Nothing can ever be the same again.

The God who cares and acts

So, let's take a look at the dynamics of this encounter.

Look at verse 7.

The first thing God does is to state the occasion for his intrusion into the life of Moses.

He has intruded because he has 'seen' their misery.

He has 'heard' their cry.

And he 'knows' about their suffering.

With three verbs God acknowledges the trouble of his people.

Their present location is Egypt.

And this location is a cause of great grief and trial to them.

They are in an extreme situation.

And then comes the fourth verb.

Not only does God see.

Not only does he hear.

Not only does he know.

Verse 8 tells us that he 'comes down'.

You see, the seeing, hearing, and knowing of the living God is never static.

When the living God sees, and hears, and knows, he springs into action.

He is mobilised and enters into the trouble of his people.

He is the caring and acting God.

He comes down.

This is his nature.

We can see this in the next two verbs.

For they tell us that this living God will 'rescue' or 'deliver'.

And he will 'bring up'.

In the language of the Exodus he will deliver them from Egypt.

And he will bring them up into a new land.

And where Egypt had been full of oppression and evil, the new land will be full of space and goodness.

And then, in verse 9, the crunch comes.

For God tells Moses how he intends to deliver and bring up.

He intends to do it through a human agent.

He intends to do it through this shepherd going and confronting one of the most powerful kings of one of the most powerful nations of the ancient world.

Look at verse 10:

'So now, go, I am sending YOU to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.'

This is the first time in the history of Israel that God specifically selects his agent and speaks of sending them.

But Moses is not to know this.

All that he is concerned with is that God has chosen him as his agent.

Objection 1 (3:11)

And so Moses puts forward the first of five objections to God.

Each of the objections looks back to a past reality.

Each of them represents Moses thinking about who he has been and realising that his past cripples him for the task.

The first objection has to do with his identity.

We see it in verse 11.

Who am I?

Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?

God's response is clear.

In the original language this verse begins a wordplay that dominates these verses.

Given this, I think that the translation here could read 'I-will-be will be with you.'

In other words, Moses has asked God 'Who am I?'

And God has responded by telling Moses who he is and that he will be with Moses.

The point is clear.

The issue is not who Moses is but who God is.

And this God will be with Moses.

Now the next half of God's reply is quite enigmatic and its meaning is debated.

Given that it is not essential for the things that I want to concentrate on today, we are not going to spend time on it.

What we can say is that God promises a sign to Moses and that this is his answer to the first objection of Moses.

Objection 2 (3:13)

But Moses is not so easily persuaded.

And so he comes back at God again.

Look at verse 13.

Moses said to God, 'Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' And they ask me, "What is his name?" Then what shall I tell them.'

You see, in his last attempt at helping the people of God a Hebrew man carefully said to him: 'Who made you ruler and judge over us?'

In other words, 'Who gave you authority to deliver us?'

Again, Moses has been here before.

And he failed before.

This time must be different.

And so it is that God takes on the objection again.

He says to Moses:

'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.'

Now as you know, this is a very complex verse.

My own preferred rendering of the Hebrew would be:

I will be who I will be. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I will be has sent me to you.

At the core of this verse what is happening is that God is revealing both his name and its meaning to Moses.

God revealed himself to Moses as the God of the patriarchs.

Moses has said to God, 'Who am I?'

God has told Moses that the issue is not who Moses is but he is.

And now Moses has come back with what amounts to a 'And who exactly are you?'

He seeks clarification regarding God's identity.

And now God has responds by saying 'I-will-be-who-I-will-be'.

This is the only time in Scripture where God explains his name.

And he explains it by saying that his name displays his nature.

And his nature will be shown by how he acts on behalf of his people.

Who he is will be made clear by what he does.

However, Moses needs to know that although this is the case, this is no new God.

There is continuity between Israel's past and Israel's future.

The God who is revealing himself now and who will reveal himself in his future acts is the same God as revealed himself to the fathers in the past.

He, Yahweh, is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

In verses 16-22, God gives explicit instructions to Moses.

He is to convey clear news to the elders of Israel.

They WILL listen.

The king of Egypt WILL be hardened.

The Egyptians WILL be plagued.

Deliverance WILL occur.

And the Egyptians WILL be plundered.

Any obstacle, no matter how big, is taken into account.

God will overcome them all.

Objection 3 (4:1)

But Moses objects for the third time in 4:1.

Again, he hints at his past where he was not trusted or listened to by his own people.

The objection raised by Moses is a direct refutation of what God has said.

It is clear that God's verbal assurances are not enough.

And so God urges Moses to throw his staff down on the ground.

The staff turns into a snake and Moses turns tail and runs.

Then God urges him to take his fear in his hand and pick up the writhing snake.

It promptly turns back into a staff.

But God knows the heart of humans.

He knows that even the miraculous is sometimes not compelling.

And so he touches the fear of Moses again.

He tells him to shove his hand inside his clothes.

It comes out white and leprous.

Then he restores it to health.

Then he tells Moses that these two signs are for him.

But they are also for the people.

They are weapons in Moses's armoury so that he can assure the people.

So that his words can have some backing.

Objection 4 (4:10)

But Moses is not deterred.

In verse 10 he objects for the four time.

This time he maintains that he is not eloquent.

God's response suggests irritation.

Moses is speaking to the creator.

The one who made the mouth.

The one who can make people deaf or mute.

The one who gives sight or blindness.

God is God.

He gives to or takes from people as he deems fit.

The objection is pitiful from a man who is staring at a bush burning but not being burnt up.

Objection 5 (4:13)

The tempo has quickened.

But time has run out for Moses.

There are no more decent objections or excuses.

He must go or he must refuse.

And he chooses the latter.

It is a desperate plea in verse 13: 'Oh my Lord, please send someone else.'

It is a plaintive cry, but God's irritation turns to anger.

But even so, it is characteristically tinged with mercy.

Aaron is appointed spokesman, a sort of prophet for Moses.

But Moses cannot shrink from the responsibility.

Someone else may do the talking.

But the front man is Moses.

And this time there will be no discussion or objection.

Moses has been given a job.

And as he goes he picks up his rod – that gentle reminder of his background.

That gentle reminder of this incident.

That gentle reminder that as staffs can be snakes, so ordinary men can be deliverers.

Thinking about the passage

Friends, the centre of this passage is clearly that wonderful but enigmatic revelation of God in verses 14 and 15.

Moses comes into this incident seeking self identity.

And God comes to him and tells him that his own identity is not what is important but the identity of the one who confronts him.

And then Yahweh grasps him.

He commands him.

He overwhelms him.

And Moses finds his identity and his task.

He is not Moses the exile anymore.

He is Moses, the man of Yahweh.

It is Yahweh who shapes him.

From now on his whole existence will be shaped by this named God, Yahweh.

Things will never be the same for him.

He will sometimes find himself in places he doesn't want to be.

But having met this God there is nowhere else to go and nowhere else to be.

For he has met the true and living God.

Friends, this man Moses is the only man in history to whom God has revealed the meaning of his name.

The Scriptures of the Old Testament tell us that he spoke to God face to face.

But no matter how grand this encounter was...

No matter what the enormity of this revelation was...

It pales into insignificance beside the revelation that is in Jesus Christ.

For in Jesus Christ we have seen who God will be.

We have seen who he is.

We have stared God in the face.

For in Jesus, God, the one and only son, who is at the heart of God has come down and made him known.

As we have listened to the preaching of the gospel...

As we have listened to the scriptures tell us about Jesus...

As we have received him and believed in him we have become new people.

We have become children of the living God.

No matter who we were before things have now changed.

We are no longer simply shepherds.

No longer simply fishermen.

No longer simply accountants or doctors or plumbers or schoolteachers or students or pastors or scientists or labourers or...

No.

We are Christians.

We are slaves of Christ.

We are not what we do.

And the graffitiist is right—we are not what we own.

No, my own slogan is this... 'We are who owns us'.

This is who we are now.

We are who owns us.

For we have been ransomed from a futile existence and bought with the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

And our faith and hope and destiny are set on the God we have met in Christ.

Friends, let me assure you that this God will undoubtedly take us to some places we do not wish to go.

He has grasped us.

He commands us.

At times he will overwhelm us.

But in him we have found who we are.

And we know that there is nowhere else to be but where he is.

Where else can we go?

For he alone has the words of eternal life.

He alone brings us home to where we belong.

He alone gives us meaning and purpose and identity.

Friends, we are who owns us.