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If you have your Bible with you, I encourage you to open to Exodus 3. Today we're going to be looking at a fairly familiar story from Exodus chapter 3. Because of the length of the passage, instead of reading the scripture straight through, I'm going to re-tell the story and point some various things out along the way, so you may find it helpful to follow along.

I want to speak today to those of us who sometimes wonder where God is, and why we don't feel his presence more clearly and more regularly. I want to speak today to those of us who see injustice and evil in the world and cry out to God, "why aren't you doing anything about this?" I want to speak today to those of us whose lives are wracked with pain, sorrow, bitterness, and anger. I want to speak today to those of us whose lives feel like they are going too fast and are out of control.

In Exodus 3, I think there are several things for us that are instructional about how we experience the richness and fullness of God's presence.

First some background about how Moses gets where we find him in Exodus 3. You probably remember how Exodus begins in Egypt, and the Hebrews, Moses' people, are slaves laboring for the Pharaoh. Because the Hebrew population is growing rapidly, the Pharaoh orders all Hebrew boys killed at birth, but Moses' family saves him by placing him in a basket in an area of the Nile River where Pharaoh's daughter bathes. Moses is discovered by the princess, who adopts him into the royal household, with his mother serving as his caregiver.

After Moses reaches adulthood, he grows angry with the way that his people are treated by the Egyptians and one day in anger kills an Egyptian who is beating a Hebrew slave. This act draws Pharaoh's attention and Moses is forced to flee Egypt to Midian where he marries and settles down. While we are told that the Israelites are groaning under their slavery, and that God takes notice. So when we find Moses in Exodus 3 tending his father-in-law's sheep, he is a fugitive, separated from his family, longing for home.

And one day, while Moses is tending the sheep out in the wilderness, Moses notices a burning bush that is burning and is not consumed. It is easy to read this story and blow right through this part of the story, but think about it. How does Moses know that the bush isn't being consumed? Moses is paying attention. Think of a bush, a shrub, a small tree . . . how long would it take it to burn? 5 minutes? 10 minutes? An hour? However long it takes, Moses watches this bush burn for longer than just an instant, long enough to realize this isn't the average-everyday bush on fire that I've seen before. Something is different about this one. I'm going to go check it out. And when Moses goes to examine the bush, he hears the LORD speak to him, "Moses! Moses!"

I find it interesting that God only appears to Moses when Moses has been paying attention for a while. It makes me wonder how the story of the Exodus might have been different if Moses had a short attention span like many of us do, or if he had been going about life at 100 mph, thinking about what he needed to get done, where he needed to go, and what he was afraid he wasn't going to have time for. Is it possible that Moses might not have noticed and missed out on an experience with God and a call to an incredible adventure?

How often do we live life wondering where God is, feeling like we're grasping at straws trying to hold things together, when maybe there are God is trying to communicate with us by placing burning bushes all around us that we are moving too fast or too busy to notice?

This isn't simply a modern problem. In Genesis, Jacob is on the run, when God

appears to Jacob in a dream. When Jacob wakes up he exclaims, "The Lord is in this place and I didn't even know it."

When we stop, still ourselves, and pay attention we can find God in some surprising places. We might find God in the grocery store, on the highway, in our living room, on TV, anywhere. Like Jacob we need to wake up to God's presence around us and see what He is doing. Like Moses we need to slow down enough that we take notice of the seemingly insignificant things around us that God may be seeking to use to speak to us. What an exciting thing it is to discover God in a place you didn't expect to find him!

So Moses notices the bush, and goes up to check out what this strange thing is, and God tells him to stop and take off his sandals because he's on holy ground. (Note: it's holy because it is where God is, so if God is everywhere, maybe we are always in a holy place. It's just a matter of whether or not we notice it.)

Then God speaks: *6 Then he said, "I am the God of your ancestors-the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." When Moses heard this, he hid his face in his hands because he was afraid to look at God.*

*7 Then the Lord told him, "You can be sure I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries for deliverance from their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. 8 So I have come to rescue them from the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own good and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey-the land where the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites live. 9 The cries of the people of Israel have reached me, and I have seen how the Egyptians have oppressed them with heavy tasks.*

As I've reflected on these verses recently, I've tried to imagine what these words must have sounded like to Moses. Remember this is a guy who is a fugitive from Egypt, because he got so angry the brutality in which the Israelites were living, that he killed an Egyptian. Moses has got to be thinking inside. Alright! God's finally going to do something. The promise he made to our father Abraham about having our own land is going to be fulfilled. God's been listening after all! Yes! This is great! Can't wait to drink some of that milk and eat some of that honey!

Then God continues, *10 Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You will lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.*" And suddenly Moses' reaction changes . . . "Umm . . . say what? Can you repeat that? Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring my people out of Egypt?"

Now let's think a minute: Could God have liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt without Moses or anyone else leading them? If so, isn't it interesting that God doesn't choose to do it that way but chooses a human partner, who is passionate about the goal (remember he killed the Egyptian) to help him accomplish the liberation? But isn't this what God always does? In Genesis, God partners with Adam to care for the garden, the story of the scriptures is a history of God seeking to partner with people. And what does Jesus do with the disciples and us the church, he partners with us, telling us to go build the kingdom.

If this is the case, what does this say to us when we wonder "God, why aren't you doing anything about this?" Maybe if we listen closely enough, we hear God saying, "Alright, let's go do something about this. I'm going to use you."

And maybe sometimes we find that response from God a bit intimidating or that our enthusiasm wanes a bit because its not exactly the response that we were hoping for from God, and we start mustering excuses like Moses. Excuses like, "I'm too old, I'm

too young. I'm don't have time. I don't have enough money. I have too many other responsibilities. I'm not trained, I'm not qualified. I don't have the skills. I don't know enough about the Bible. I don't have the personality. I'm not a good enough Christian. I'm too much of a sinner. I'm not a leader." And we tell God that he would be better served asking somebody else.

God spends the next chapter and a half answering Moses objections. He tells him who he is, what to say, what to tell the Israelites, what to tell Pharaoh, what to do if they don't believe him, and convincing Moses that he is capable to do it, because God is calling him to do it and is going with him. That was then. People are different today.

Maybe that thing that is burning in your chest – that fire in your bones - The injustice that really gets you fired up. The issue that you can't stop talking about - The group of people that you are really concerned about - Maybe God is speaking to you from the burning bushes around you, saying "Hey, I'm picking you, I'm going with you, you don't need to worry about anything, let's go get this thing done."

Maybe the reason that God doesn't seem to be present for some of us is because aren't really sure we want to hear what he has to say, or because we're trying to ignore God's call to us from the burning bushes around us, because God's call is going to mean a change in our lives, a change in the way we do things, a change in what we do, maybe how or where we live, who we hang out with, or even put at risk our financial, social, emotional, or even physical security and any one of these things might appear to be frightening.

For Moses, following God's call means all of these things and putting himself at risk of being killed by Pharaoh. But he accepts the call, goes to Egypt and is God's instrument in leading the Israelites out of Egypt. Because Moses trusts God and responds to his call, he is able to experience God's goodness and continuing presence throughout his life, even to the point of being able to see God.

If we want to experience the fullness of God's presence in our lives, we have to first be willing to hear what God might be calling us to do or who he might be calling us to become.

There's one last part of this story that I want to point out. When Moses goes through his list of objections, after he objects to God picking him. He asks God, "who are you?" God responds, "I AM WHO I AM," which really sorts things out. In verse 15, God continues answering the question saying, *"Tell them, '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 will be my name forever; it has always been my name, and it will be used throughout all generations.*

If you look in your Bible, "Lord" is probably written in all caps. When we read this in English, it's easy to blow right through this passage and miss the significance of what God is saying here. God is giving Moses his name. Not a title or a description, but his name. In Hebrew, this name looks like this: יהוה which if we translate it into English looks like YHWH. Ancient Hebrew did not contain written vowels, so we don't know exactly how this would be pronounced, but most scholars believe it would sound something like Yahweh. This word appears more than 6,800 times in the Hebrew Bible. Most scholars believe YHWH is related to a root word meaning "to be present" or "to exist" (which is interesting because it suggests that part of God's nature is to be present) and probably meant either "He creates or causes" or simply "I am (that I am)," meaning that God did not depend on anyone or anything for his existence.<sup>1</sup>

Now there is a second thing about God's name that is worthy of note here. When we attempt to pronounce the letters YHWH, what we get is remarkably similar to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.followtherabbi.com/Brix?pageID=3116> See article titled, "My God is Yahweh"

the sound of breathing<sup>2</sup>. According to Rob Bell, this was the belief of many ancient rabbis, and if you do a quick perusal of the internet today, you can find contemporary rabbis who believe the same thing.

If then the name of God is like the sound of breathing, what is the first thing a baby does – take a breath or say the name of God? Do we die when we can no longer breathe, or when we can no longer say the name of God? Doesn't it create a fascinating paradox that a person can deny the existence of God with their words at the very time that their breathing is speaking the name of God and testifying to His existence?

Along these same lines it is interesting to note that the Hebrew word for breath, "ruah" is also used to mean wind and spirit. So in Genesis 2, when God goes about creating Adam, he takes the dirt and forms it, and then breathes into it "and the man became a living being."

Maybe breathing is more than just a physiological response that provides us with oxygen our body needs to survive – maybe God has given us breathing to be a tangible reminder of his constant presence and provision.

Maybe when we are discouraged or frustrated or fearful or angry or filled with grief, and our spirits cry out "God where are you?" – Maybe God's response is I'm as close as your breath.

It's interesting to note from a biological standpoint the average adult should breath somewhere in the neighborhood of 6-8 times a minute when asleep and 10-18 times a minute in a normal wakened state. Many different things affect our breathing from exercise to air quality to stress and cause us to accelerate our breathing and make it shallower. The point of breathing is to exhale waste carbon dioxide and inhale oxygen, and accelerated and shallow breathing does not allow the body to take in as much oxygen a slower deeper breaths. (Ninety-Nine Percent of our energy should come from breathing, yet most of us access only 10-20% of our full breathing capacity, leaving us short of energy and compromising optimum health and well being.<sup>3</sup>)

Many of us deal with breathing problems from asthma to allergies to illnesses and even stress that prevent us from getting a full breath of air causing us to breathe shallowly and more frequently. Some people even develop such a habit of shallow breathing from their chest that their body loses the natural ability to breath from their belly, denying them extra oxygen and trapping carbon dioxide and germs deep in their lungs.

There is a spiritual parallel to this. Our busyness and attention spans can prevent us from breathing deeply in a spiritual sense. We get going so fast that we feel spiritually stressed and may even lose a sense of God's presence because we aren't taking the time to breathe spiritually. Or maybe seeds of bitterness or anger or depression or grief or hatred have become trapped in our lungs and prevent us from experiencing God's presence and the joy, love, peace, and hope that comes with it. Maybe we need to spend time each day asking ourselves the question – what do I need to breathe out? Maybe something that someone did to you. Maybe something that someone said to you or about you. Maybe something happened to you and its left a scar that you have clung to and has affected relationship and the way you approach life. Maybe you need to forgive someone. Maybe you need to let go of your anger and

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews*, pp 109-110. Cahill isn't the only one who notes this, Rob Bell, teaching pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church states that this idea can also be found in ancient rabbinical tradition (See a message by Bell at Willow Creek Community Church, titled "We're Over Here.").

<sup>3</sup> [www.breathing.com](http://www.breathing.com)

breathe it out.

In as much as we breathe out, we can breathe in the spiritual oxygen we need from God. What do you need to breathe in from God? Maybe just a sense of his presence – that God really is there. Maybe things are crazy in your world right now and you need to breathe in a renewed sense of peace. Maybe you need to breathe in a fresh sense of God's love and grace. Maybe you just need hope.

In a room this size, there are people who are grieving losses. There are people who are angry. There are people who are confused and don't know what to do. There are people who are struggling through the pain of strained and broken relationships. There are people who are afraid and anxious of things that are going on in their lives.

We began this service with Psalm 46, where the psalmist reminds us of who God is, and invites us to be still and know God. So let's close our eyes take a few moments in silent prayer. Think about what you need to breathe out . . . to let go of . . . to give to God. What do you need to breathe in from God? Take a few moments and share those thoughts with God and experience his presence.

(Susan sings "Breathe")

It may be difficult to do, but we have to constantly train ourselves to breathe deeply in a spiritual sense. Over time as our "spiritual lung capacity" grows, things will become easier to exhale, and more of God's goodness can be breathed in.