



THE SPLENDOR OF INCARNATION

Catalog No. 1453

Exodus 2:23-3:10

Fifth Message

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December 7th, 2003

My daughter gave birth to a son on Friday. Giving birth is probably the most holy moment in a couple's life. I remember feeling overwhelmed by the holy love between Emily and myself following the birth of our first-born son. It was much deeper than romantic love, and that sacred sensation is as fresh today as it was almost thirty years ago.

Why does the birth process never lose its mystery and awe? Why does a newborn make even the hardest heart and the most seasoned veteran melt with joy? Why are we seized with emotion as the helpless infant makes that short journey down the birth canal, gasping for its first breath? Perhaps it is because at its core, birth is a mirror not only of what God gives, but who he is. Parents have a sense of inexpressible joy as they hold their newborn son or daughter. God has given them the ultimate gift – life itself – a possession to be handled with more care than all other riches. But the gift of birth is more than that. It is an expression of God himself, for the child bears the divine image. For parents, knowing and loving the child encompasses something of what it means to know and love God.

No one felt this more than Mary, the mother of Jesus. Imagine her emotion when the angel announced to her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and she would bear a son who would be called the Son of the Most High, the Son of God. It's puzzling that the incarnation is such a stumbling block for so many Jews, when in fact incarnation is the climactic moment to so much of what God had been doing in the Hebrew Scriptures. This morning we will examine what I have termed the splendor of incarnation in the life of Moses, the founder of the Hebrew nation. I pray that in doing so we will come to a greater appreciation for the God we worship at Bethlehem.

I. The Heart of the Holy Exodus (2:23-25)

Now it came about in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died. And the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God. So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them. (Exod 2:23-25 NASB)

Last week, we examined Moses' debut as liberator of his people. Finding that his first two attempts ended in dismal failure, he was forced to flee to Midian. There God provided him with a wife, a father, a son, and a home. God then took this "wannabe" judge and turned him into a shepherd – an occupation loathed by Egyptian high society. In Acts, Stephen records that Moses remained in Midian for forty years (7:30). He probably felt forgotten and abandoned by God. But the narrator declares that God had not forgotten his people; rather, he was waiting for a new situ-

ation to arise in Egypt.

There is great mystery in the implementation of God's sovereign rule on earth. While the Almighty Creator is free to direct history as he chooses, he seems to delight in working through historical events and human instruments. God gives us marvelous dignity as human beings. He zealously upholds that dignity and will not violate it, even at great cost to his own person. But the fact that he patiently waits for opportune situations to unfold on earth does not mean that he is detached and unsympathetic to our suffering.

Here we are given a glimpse into the heart of the Holy. Apart from the mention of God's activity in blessing the midwives (Exod 1:20-21), this is the first time in Exodus that God becomes active. He is the subject of four verbs. In our last study we saw how Moses was deeply provoked by the injustice he observed occurring among his people. Impetuously, he carried out justice based merely on what he "saw." Here we find that God not only sees Israel's plight, he also hears their cries and intense groaning. Houtman observes, "In 2:23,24, four terms are used for the wailing of the Israelites; in 2:24,25 four terms are used for the reaction of God."¹ God does not remain aloof to their cries; he is deeply moved by them.

The phrase "God took notice" (from the verb *yada'* "to know") indicates an intimate knowing that goes to the core of one's being. All these things spur God to remember his covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The notion of remembering does not mean that God had forgotten his promises and they were brought back into his memory. No, it means that now is the opportune time for his promises of long ago to be implemented on earth. Now is the time for justice. Timing is everything in the kingdom of God. It is never enough to do the right thing; we must do it at the right time. As it was in Israel's Exodus, so it was at Israel's second Exodus, with the coming of the Messiah. Paul writes, "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law..." (Gal 4:4).

II. The Appearance of the Holy Exodus (3:1-3)

Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. So Moses said, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up." (3:1-3)

Now that our expectations are raised, we wonder how God will make his appearance on earth. As is typical of

God in the patriarchal stories, he appears when we least expect it, and in the most ordinary of ways. The day began like any other for Moses. His alarm clock went off early and he headed off to work. But this time his commute was longer than usual. The text seems to suggest that in searching of new grasslands for his flock, he was forced to travel further than before, ending up at the western edge of the wilderness.

The narrator reveals that this uninhabited place, with very little vegetation, just happens to be the famous "mountain of God." But to Moses it was just an ordinary place. We are reminded of the story of Jacob. In flight as a fugitive, he arrived at another place to spend the night, and God transformed the "no place" into a "holy place" (Gen 28:10-22). Here in this no man's land, Moses will have his encounter with the Holy. At the foot of the mountain he receives what scholars call a theophany, a visible manifestation of God within the world he created. Frethem explains the nature of such an appearance:

Here God is manifested within the life of the world in a way that is highly specific, articulate, tangible, formful, and revealing of a divine vulnerability...God's Word is thereby embodied, made visible; enabling a knowing, a becoming, a convincing, and a living that would not otherwise be possible...The analogy of the laser beam might be used with profit to help explain the theophanic presence: sharply focused, highly intense moments of divine appearance.²

At this point the narrator slows the pace almost to a standstill so that we might fully enter into this holy encounter and not miss a detail. Out of the corner of his eye, Moses glimpses the incredible sight of flaming fire in the midst of a thorn bush. There may even be a word play between the term bush (*s'neh*) and Sinai (*sinay*), for what occurs at the bush with Moses will foreshadow the greater event at Sinai before the whole nation. As Moses would later write, "You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the very heart of the heavens: darkness, cloud and thick gloom. Then the LORD spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form—only a voice" (Deut 4:11-12).

While pasturing his sheep, Moses has stumbled onto the Holy in the form of a blazing fire. Houtman writes, "Fire is a sign of the presence of YHWH. Because of its awesome devastating power and capriciousness, fire can make one shudder with fear and is a singularly suitable metaphor for denoting the irresistibility, sovereign power and holiness of God before which nothing impure can stand (Is 6:5)."³

The flame is in the form of a man, whom the narrator explains is the "angel of the LORD" (*malak* can also mean "messenger"). "The OT regularly refers to messengers whose task is to bridge the spatial distance between the sender and the person or group one wishes to reach. A very close relationship exists between them and their sender: They speak/act in his name, as if they were the sender himself."⁴ In the Old Testament, there is such a fluidity between the "messenger of the LORD" and the Lord himself that it is hard to distinguish between the two. The net effect is that through the service of the messenger, God's holiness is brought near to the person, while still maintaining a safe distance between the two.

Moses is struck by the fact that although the bush is burning it is not consumed. The image is an apt description of God's desire to dwell within man, while at the same time not consuming him. Later, God would be characterized with the humble title, "the one who dwells in the thornbush" (Deut 33:16). We find the fulfillment of this imagery on the day of Pentecost, when the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit and there were "tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them" (Acts 2:3).

Moses turns aside to get a closer look at this amazing sight. At this stage we are allowed to view the scene from the Lord's vantage point.

III. Keeping Distance from the Holy Exodus (3:4-6)

When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (3:4-5)

Observing that he had Moses' attention, the Lord calls out, "Moses, Moses!" with the intensity of a mother crying out to her young child who is about to touch a hot stove. When Moses responds, God stops him right in his tracks. Moses, like Jacob, has stumbled unaware into holy territory. He is in extreme danger of getting too close. Perhaps if he had taken one more step he would be struck dead. God orders him to remove his sandals (or "shake off," so that he does not even touch them).

Entering into God's holy presence is dangerous. We can't casually barge in without concern for our uncleanness. Though God desires to become known and to reveal himself, there must be some distance maintained to preserve his holiness. Later, when Moses is instructed in preparation to meet with God on Mount Sinai, he is commanded to set up similar boundaries for the people: "You shall set bounds for the people all around, saying, 'Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death'" (Exod 19:12). The author of Hebrews warns through this same imagery that when we come to worship, our gatherings are even more holy, therefore we ought to give even greater care to fear God in all the dimensions of his holiness and obey his word (Heb 12:18-29).

He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (3:6)

After exhorting Moses to keep a safe distance, God identifies himself as the "God of your father." The mention of Moses' father is an attempt to establish a point of contact between the two in order to alleviate Moses' fear. Then God reaches further back, identifying himself as the one in whom Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had placed their trust. This is the Creator God who keeps his word; he is not unknown in history. Yet, despite God's personal identification, Moses is still so overcome with fear and unworthiness that he keeps his face hidden. Who can stand before a holy God, or who can endure his penetrating gaze?

Now we come to God's first speech in the book of Exo-

dus. Rather than keeping Moses at a distance, God draws him intimately to himself. The holy fire does not consume him, but overflows with kindness. This is the glory of incarnation.

IV. Being Drawn in by the Holy Exodus (3:7-10)

A. God reveals his heart and plan to Moses (3:7-8)

The LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings. (3:7)

Now the Lord speaks directly to Moses, inviting him like an intimate friend into the privileged place of his secret counsel (Ps 25:14). First he shares his heart with Moses, and what had motivated him; then he reveals his intentions. Again we discover a God who is intimately acquainted with the sufferings of his people. The language could hardly be more emphatic, not just of his concern, but also of his agony (lit. "I know his pain"). God's words are like those of a parent tormented by the condition of his children; for these he says are "My people," and they are being subject to cruel and dehumanizing oppression. The parent can endure no more; now is the time for action. Once God has revealed his heart to Moses, he then reveals his plans for Israel.

"So I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. (3:8)

Just as God had revealed his future plans with Abraham (Gen 18:17), now he does so with Moses. He is going to enter their world and deliver them from that oppressive environment to take them to a "good and spacious land." "Good" is most likely a reference to its fertility, which God later describes in detail; while "spacious" speaks of wide-open spaces with freedom to breathe. A "broad" or "spacious" place will later become a common metaphor to describe the sense of openness and spacious freedom that salvation brings, in contrast to a "narrow, oppressive" place that constricts the soul and causes grief such as Israel endured during her slavery (Gen 26:22; 2 Sam 22:20; Ps 118:5).

God's salvation is characterized by more than mere deliverance. Just as Moses not only delivered Reuel's daughters from the wicked shepherds, but also watered their flocks, so God will do more than rescue his people. After he delivers them he will bring them into a land so fertile that it "flows with milk and honey." Aharoni explains that this expression refers "to the produce of the two most important agricultural activities: milk—dairy farming, flocks and herds; honey—the cultivation of trees."⁵ The honey is probably not from bees but the syrup from dates, grapes and other fruits abundant in the Jordan Valley. An ancient Egyptian document from the mid-twentieth century tells the story of Sinuhe, who fled Egypt, and gave a similar description of the land: "It was a good land, named [Araru?]. Figs were in it, and grapes. It had more wine than water. Plentiful was its honey, abundant its olives. Every (kind of) fruit was on its trees. Barley was there, and emmer. There was no limit to any (kind of) cattle."⁶

God's hyperbolic description of the land was intended to capture the imagination of the Israelites and feed them with the hope that they were headed for a new Eden. Some scholars suggest that these were foods of the gods. So vital was this expression that God never allowed Israel to forget it. Sixteen times it is repeated and placed before them, each time in the context of God's sacred oath to give them a land that was paradise indeed. We can only imagine Moses, who had shepherding sheep in a parched wasteland, salivating as God described what awaited him.

In like manner, we are to feed our imagination on the prophetic metaphors that describe the New Heaven and New Earth. Because we live in an affluent area, where everything is state of the art, including the weather, we are often content with our present abundance and lose sight of our heavenly hope. In Third World countries there is a much greater emphasis on our heavenly hope. Whenever my soul is parched, I like to reflect on Amos' wonderful description of the land to come:

"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD,
"When the plowman will overtake the reaper
And the treader of grapes him who sows seed;
When the mountains will drip sweet wine
And all the hills will be dissolved." (Amos 9:13)

Who is this God that allows humans to enter into his secret counsel? Jesus extended the same privilege to the apostles. I wonder if he was thinking back to the Exodus when he said to them, "No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15).

God tells Moses that there is even more to come.

B. God invites Moses' participation (3:9-10)

"Now, behold, the cry of the sons of Israel has come to Me; furthermore, I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians are oppressing them. Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." (3:9-10)

Once again, God expresses his heart to Moses. How deeply God feels the crushing physical and psychological oppression of the sons of Israel. But this time, after having fully drawn Moses in to know the pains of his heart, he invites him to be the one to bring his people out of Egypt. What dignity God gives man! He does not ask Moses to play some minor role in the drama. This is what we might expect when God sets the stage to parade his glorious redemption before the world. We imagine that he would take the primary role, and that we might fill the role of lighting technician, or perhaps an extra with no lines, or at best a supporting actor. But the Creator God asks a human being to play his role, the leading role!

And it is not as if Moses had no experience for this role. God had been grooming him for this part his whole life. He is asked to do for the nation exactly what Pharaoh's daughter did for him. She heard his cries in the waters of the Nile when his life was hanging in the balance. They moved her heart with such compassion that she disobeyed her father's edict and rescued him from a certain death, and adopted him as her son. Do you mothers ever reflect on the importance of your role in shaping your children

for the future? (see Ps 22:9) Now, through forty years of exile, Moses has become a humble shepherd, the very instrument needed to lead God's people out of Egypt to the Promised Land.

There is no greater fulfillment on earth than this. Joy in life is not creating your own stage, but being invited to play a role on God's stage. What a God we serve: so holy, yet so intimate; so mighty, he created the heavens and the earth; yet so humble, he chooses to accomplish redemption through human instruments of clay.

Centuries later, the holy God would appear in the ultimate theophany. Again his appearance was announced by messengers to a group of shepherds who were doing what they did every night, keeping watch over their flocks. Luke tells the story of their being overcome by the holy, yet at the same time drawn near into the midst of it:

And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased." (Luke 2:9-14)

The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

This Christmas, may we fall down and worship. Amen.

The Incarnation⁷

Not in cloud and not in thunder,
Filling all the world with wonder,
Came to earth the Lord of earth;
But with helpless cries and tears,
Mid a mother's pains and fears,
Entered by the gate of birth.

By the way of flesh he came—
How else could he kindred claim?
How else, save life's path he trod,
Coming in the way of breath,
Going out the way of death,
Be himself the way to God?

Living words by prophets spoken,
Hearts with longing well nigh broken,
Expectation in the air;
Blind desire of every nation,
Eyes that waited for salvation,
Coming of the Son declare.

Thus he came, our new beginning,
For the death doom of our sinning,
Giving us God's life again:
Then a bright new star shone o'er us,
Then began that heavenly chorus,
"Peace on earth, good will to men."

— Isa Craig Knox (1831-1903)

1. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus Vol. 1, A Historical Commentary on the OT* (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 330.
2. Terence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God, An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 79.
3. Houtman, *Exodus*, 338.
4. Houtman, *Exodus*, 335.
5. Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 15.
6. Aharoni, *Land*, 15.
7. Isa Craig Knox, *Songs of Consolation* (London: Macmillan, 1874), 3-4, available online at Representative Poetry Online, <http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/poem2526.html>, © 2003 Ian Lancashire for the Department of English, University of Toronto.

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