

I AM Hearing, Remembering, Observing, and Sending

Exodus 2:23-3:15

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“Deep in the Arabian desert is a small fortress. It stands silently on the vast expanse of the ageless desert. Thomas Edward Lawrence, known as ‘Lawrence of Arabia,’ often used it. Though unpretentious, it was very sufficient. Its primary prize was its security. When under attack, often by superior forces, Lawrence could retreat there.

Then the resources of the fortress became his. The food and water stored there were life supporting. The strength of the fortification became the strength of its occupants. When Lawrence defended it, it defended him. As one relying on the garrison, he was the object of its protection. Its strength was his. Old desert dwellers living around there tell that Sir Lawrence felt confident and secure within its walls. He learned to trust it; his experience proved its worth.” (James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited, Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988, p. 427.)

From Arabia to America, from desert sands to desperate souls, this story of Sir Lawrence stokes the fire of a question -- What are your experiences of letting God be your place of safe retreat, of strong defense, of absolute, unfailing provision? Do you turn to God as you would a fort? Is God truly your stronghold?

Inspired by countless witnesses in the Scriptures, tremendous amounts of testimony in classic devotional writings, and through my own diverse ministry experiences, I firmly believe that every human being needs and wants to feel secure in God’s care. There is a Spirit-breathed stirring for God in our souls that functions like a spiritual homing device that keeps ping, ping, pinging ... letting us know when our hearts and minds are truly aimed toward being aligned with God’s presence. It grows silent and settled in those moments when we just know, with a knowing that transcends words and actions, that we are secure in the fortress like protection and provision of God Almighty.

Yet despite the persistence of this innermost signal, it still gets too easily scrambled by the many happenings in this world that threaten our sense of spiritual security. Static fills our spiritual perception and tuning into God’s Word feels like trying to find a crisp sounding radio station in the middle of the Appalachian foothills. This is the static such as fearing the unknown, realizing our inability to really be in control, living with the disappointment of unreliable people in our lives, of having a

seeping sense that we are not truly worthy of real love, and of sicknesses and tragedies we can't reconcile with what we've learned in faith.

The end result of all this static? God's incredible, fully trustworthy presence in our lives gets tuned out. Intellectually rejected or apathetically taken for granted – equal offenses if you ask me -- the mighty fortress of our God known in prayer, in Scripture, and in song doesn't dissolve into the desert sand. But it does seem more of a mirage. And thus goes unglorified and ignored that it is the only true safe haven human beings have from spiritual and worldly oppressions.

For a couple weeks now from this pulpit we've been keeping pace with Moses. And here he is before us again today. Yes, here is Moses ... his life abruptly redirected to the dusty, quiet days of shepherding after a rip-roaring regal upbringing as a Prince of Egypt. Here is Moses ... safely situated in the refuge of Midian with his wife Zipporah, son Gershom, and father-in-law Jethro. The years of constant, painful, shameful watch he once kept of Hebrew brothers and sisters suffering slavery have come to pass. He has escaped the big social justice drama and settled for the laborious but simpler keeping of sheep. He's been doing this now for decades. God's been with him, an intimate part of all his daily routines. But it's been a silent, unremarkable companionship.

I wonder then, has Moses, yes, even Moses, grown complacent in his awareness of God's powerful provisional presence in his life and among the suffering souls of the world? The Scriptures don't really reveal anything about how much and how often Moses thought about his old, conflicted life back in Egypt while during his decades in Midian. We aren't told that he prayed to God, that he assisted his father-in-law in worship, that he helped Zipporah make baked goods for the Temple coffee hour.

We do know, from our own lives, though, how when a crisis settles down our very alert, very passionate God-consciousness can recede into a dim backdrop of our days. And so we sometimes get lulled into believing it is safe outside the fort, safe by ourselves in our little corners of the world. Maybe even Moses succumbed to such a lull?

One day, however, any lull of daily duties was remarkably interrupted by an angel of the Lord. I'm not exactly sure what any of the angels of the Lord who have ministered to me and to you looked like, but I do know what the one that attended to Moses looked like. He was a fiery fellow. Lept right out of a bush, as a matter of fact. But then that was it for the angel. This assignment was just to get Moses' attention, to ignite his awareness of God. The angel was like a flare directing Moses' innate homing device to the very intimate, very unavoidable presence of God. Directly tuned in Moses

heard God speaking and knew with absolute certainty he was on holy ground, in the mighty fortress of his God.

The ways we receive divine revelations are never really predictable and certainly not always the same. Once we discern God whispering to us, or tapping us abruptly on the shoulder, or interrupting what is otherwise a regular old day of routine with an emergency flare, the best we can do is respond by trying to further discern what we believe God wants and needs from us.

The reason for God's meeting Moses on that destiny-making day of his life was made very clearly. I can't say for sure what the voice Moses heard sounded like. Charlton Heston? James Earl Jones? Mother Teresa? But it surely was the voice of utmost authority in Moses' hearing and heart. Let's review what God had to say because it's a word we need to be reminded of every moment of every one of our days -- lest the static of spiritual threats keeps us from retreating to our one true fortress of protection and provision in this world.

God let it be known to Moses that the grief-stricken, groaning cries of tortured, enslaved Hebrews had not fallen on deaf ears. God had heard every plea for liberation, for protection. This means that while God may have seemed to be on stand-by while Moses was in Midian, God was not. It was then revealed to Moses that these cries inspired God to remember his covenant relationship with the likes of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And having heard the pleas and remembered the holy promises made, God observed all the more intently the misery of his children. All this, God told Moses, led to the divine decision – decades in the making according to the way we humans keep track of time – to finally deliver them from their soul crushing existence in Egypt. The end result of all this direct revelation there at the angel-touched, angel torched bush was God's summoning Moses back to Egypt as the ambassador of liberation on behalf of the Hebrews.

I'm sure *that's* the news Moses wanted to hear. Leave the pastoral life to do battle with Pharaoh, the son of the man who'd ordered a "hit" on his life. That didn't sound very safe. But Moses was assured that he was not being sent on a solo mission; that even when in the palace of the Pharaoh, he'd been safeguarded in the fortress of God's power and provision. Moses was not going back as an exiled Prince of Egypt. He was going back to be God's own mouthpiece and muscle.

And if ever asked for proof by any of the Hebrews as to the reality and authority of the powerful, protective, and provisional presence that was sending and sheltering him, Moses was instructed to simply state he was acting in the name of I AM. In other

words, in the name of God their Creator, the One who had been steadfastly faithful to the people and promises of the past. It was a name synonymous with I HAVE DONE and I WILL AGAIN ... with TRUST ME, TRUST MY SERVENT MOSES ... with I AM YOUR PROTECTION AND PROVISION.

Friends, one of the great lessons we learn from this episode of Moses' life is that our Mighty God is a mobile fortress. And if ever we are lulled away from feeling we and this world need to retreat into the provisions offered there, God is going to get our attention one way or another in order to remind us that the holy work of liberation and restoration in Jesus Christ never ceases. And when we really and deeply realize we too are on holy ground at all times, we, like Moses, need to act boldly in the name of I AM, who hears, who remembers, who observes, who sends us for the sake of salvation. Amen.

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes.
Elizabeth Barrett Browning*