

Exodus 3:1–15

Over the next month or so we shall be looking at the story of Moses and the Exodus. I know that the Prince of Egypt is going to be performed at the Ilkley Playhouse later this autumn so this is the biblical preparation for it!

Today we consider how Moses was called and nominated by God to do God's liberating work and fulfil Moses' destiny and how we too may search for God's call on our lives. As I start here as your new minister how are we going to discern God's call to us at this time of new beginnings.

In my twenties, (a long time ago now) I was wondering if God was calling me into ministry. I was a social work assistant at the time and stuff was happening in my life – which I will tell you about at another time. But one thing that did happen, as sometimes happens when you are reading scripture, God speaks to you through a verse or word. I was reading John chapter 15 where Jesus talks about being the Vine and we are the branches. And I came to verse 16 and I felt the Lord saying this to me, that I was being personally addressed.

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.

This was my burning bush moment.

So, I went off to train as a minister.

Training then was very hard and deconstructing. You were made to doubt everything that you believed. It was a very sceptical academic environment. I was wondering if I had made a mistake.

I went on a summer placement to a Mission College in Ghana. During a prayer meeting one German missionary said he felt the Lord had given him a verse for me.

John 15.16

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last

Oh I remember that verse I thought. What a coincidence!

A year later all the ordinands had to go on a retreat before we were ordained. We went up to a retreat centre in Keld -north Yorkshire. Even then I was unsure whether this is what I wanted to do with my life. On the retreat the director gave each one of us a passage of scripture to go away and reflect and pray over.

Guess which scripture the director of the retreat chose for me?

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last

I thought mmm, maybe God is trying to tell me something.

I don't know if you have heard the call of God on your life? I don't know if you have a special scripture that God has spoken to you that is precious for your faith. Lean into it. Be open to a fresh call of God to take up something new or go in a certain direction.

Jesus calls us his friends. Remain in him, be open to the Spirit's help and empowering, love one another.

He also calls us to be fruitful. There is a call and there is a call with a purpose – to do something. Moses would be called – to set God's people free.

In John 15 Jesus uses the analogy of a vine and pruning the vine so that it continues to bear fruit.

I am no gardener. My daughter has been doing the Royal Horticultural gardening course whilst she has had some time off before she started training as a GP last month in Bath. She had been busy pruning our bushes in our garden and bringing forth new growth.

If you don't keep an eye on things those bushes can get unwieldy, become straggled and tired and it all inhibits growth.

Applying this image to our lives and the life of the church Jesus was challenging us to ask honest questions about ourselves and our churches. Are we still bearing fruit. Vague term – it could apply to your own life – think of the fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5.22

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control.

If your life isn't growing those fruits then perhaps you need to look at your lifestyle and habits and openness to God and God's spirit – a kind of spiritual inventory.

Bearing fruit in a congregational sense is different and you need to ask some searching questions.

I have been on some Leading your Church into Growth courses. They have a prayer they use that goes as follows:

God of Mission,

Who alone brings growth to your Church,

Send us your Holy Spirit to give

Vision to our planning,

Wisdom to our actions,

Joy to our worship,

And power to our witness.

Help our church to grow in numbers, in spiritual commitment to you,

And in service to the local community and world.

Amen

The fruit of good works, service to the community, and growth in numbers – the fruit of evangelism – are people hearing and responding to the gospel of Jesus.

Are we bearing fruit in all those aspects? Don't carry on doing stuff that doesn't bear fruit. Many churches die because traditions and habits that no longer bear fruit are still adhered to because that is what we always did and always do.

Are they bearing fruit?

I want this church to grow. I will do what I can to help you grow. Growth maybe painful. Growing pains! There is no guarantee. Britain today is stony ground for the gospel but we need to pray for breakthroughs.

My last church in Dursley I was there 25 years. It had 95 members when I arrived, mostly elderly. The first thing I did was to start a prayer meeting on Tuesday morning.

I said we need to pray for growth and revival. Only God can bring growth. We need to ask God for purpose and provision – who will join me in prayer for that? Four older ladies turned up. I have never underestimated the power of old ladies. They said to me we don't have the energy to run stuff but we can pray. I said that is vital. Pray for God to be at work. Bang on the door of heaven and remind the almighty we are still here and want things to happen.

The life of that church has been covered in prayer since then. We have brought requests after request and can testify to God's faithfulness and mystery. Because not all those prayers have been answered as we would have liked. Like any request you can answer by saying yes, no, not yet. But I do know that if you don't ask you don't get. If you don't seek you may not find a way forward. If you don't knock the door isn't opened.

I left that church with 130 members, having done the funerals of virtually all but a dozen or so of the original members. God hadn't finished with that church. God hasn't finished with this place either I do hope and believe and it was good to be at the prayer meeting on Thursday that you have and I look forward to regularly praying for you all, for our church, for our town and for our world.

May God put fire in our hearts and empower us to do the work of Christ in this place.

There was fire on the day Moses was called - a burning bush, yet not consumed.

My first church in Warrington back in 1995, was a former Presbyterian church and the Presbyterian church has had the symbol of the burning bush as their emblem.

Paired often with the Latin motto "*Ardens sed virens*" (Burning but flourishing), it signifies that the church—though tested by trials and persecution—survives and grows because God is in the midst of it.

In the biblical account four centuries had passed since Jacob's family entered Egypt, due to a famine (Genesis 46). The Hebrews had become a significant ethnic group, living free, settled, and prosperously in the fertile delta region of Egypt. Then a new dynasty of pharaohs – kings – came to power in Egypt.

Pharaoh was ignorant of Joseph's leadership during severe drought, which had enabled Egypt to emerge a wealthy regional power (Genesis 47:13–26). Rather, Pharaoh noted the Hebrews' prosperity and power, and feared these resident aliens threatened the dynasty's security. It's a common knee jerk reaction – when something goes wrong find a scapegoat to blame. In the depression of the Thirties, the Nazis blamed the Jews. Today our scapegoats maybe asylum seekers on small boats?

The Hebrews were forced to serve Pharaoh, who tried three control tactics. First, there was enforced and severe hard labour, but such oppression did not retard the growth of the Hebrew community. Second, Pharaoh tried enforced infanticide, but Hebrew midwives – including Shiphrah and Puah – resisted and preserved life. They were told to kill a male Hebrew at birth but the text says in chapter 1 verse 17 that they were god fearing women and told the King that hebrew women were not like Egyptian women: when they go into labour they give birth so quickly that the midwife can't get there quick enough. Pharaoh, being your typical male of the time, doesn't have a clue what they are on about it and how ridiculous this excuse is. Eventually, Pharaoh ordered the Egyptians to kill Hebrew children. God knew of the Hebrews' misery, and responded. A brave Hebrew mother and her daughter Miriam (Exodus 15:20), together with Pharaoh's daughter, saved and raised Moses. Pharaoh's word killed. His daughter's word granted life.

Hebrew women and Pharaoh's daughter were crucial in fulfilling God's promise to Abraham. They secured a future for Israel, and modelled virtues of courage, resistance, loyalty, and faithfulness. These courageous women chose to serve God, subverting

Pharaoh's plans. Pharaoh used political power, social policy, and prejudice. God used the awesome powers of nature and courageous, resourceful women. God still uses resourceful women today.

A while ago I came across the Women in Black feminist movement. Every Friday at noon, a group of women gather in silent protest at one of Jerusalem's busiest intersections. Their organization has done this since 1988. The distinguishing feature of this group is that they all dress in black. Together, they come to mourn all victims of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Their collective statement is against all forms of violence, particularly violence perpetrated in war. They are mothers, sisters, aunts, and concerned friends; they are "Women in Black."

Palestinian women have united with their Israeli sisters and opened mutual dialogue groups. From these initial beginnings in Israel, Women in Black have been joined by similar groups in many other countries. As they stand in protest, the women have been subjected to political and sexual taunts from opponents, who view them as either naïve or disloyal to their own countries.

In 2007 I took my church to visit the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland. We heard about the Peace People who began in 1976 as a protest movement against the on-going violence in Northern Ireland. Its three founders were women who had suffered in the troubles. There are plenty of contemporary examples of women taking the lead in courageous faith filled actions against injustice and violence. When the men can be competing for power and control sometimes it takes the women to subvert and resist and stand up for what is right.

God knew the oppression and misery of the Hebrews and Exodus notes how God heard them crying and decided to act.

The cries of our prayers can move the hand of the almighty.

In the Exodus story God acted after years of oppression and infanticide, securing Moses' survival, safety, and education. As an adult, Moses killed an Egyptian while defending the life of a Hebrew slave, then fled to Midian. It is here that God calls Moses. Moses met God at Mt. Horeb, or Mt. Sinai, a place that features repeatedly in the Exodus story. Mt. Sinai was uniquely associated with God's presence. God's presence at the site made the ground holy, giving land a spiritual significance. Perhaps we have places which we associate with God's presence more than others.

The Hebrews were not able to initiate liberation by themselves, as Pharaoh's oppression had taken its toll. A greater power was needed. God called Moses, warned him, made him a partner in the liberation of the Hebrews, and offered him a relationship with God.

A reluctant Moses responded. Moses accepts his task when God's identity is convincingly established. Moses discerns that the God of his ancestors has called him to liberate the people.

All our callings, our dreams and visions need discernment and critical reflection. Moses asks for verification: who is sending me? Who is going with me? What help will you give me? How will you overcome my shyness and inability to be articulate before powerful men? These are all the questions Moses asks as part of the discernment of his call.

God gives God's name. This passage is the only place in the Hebrew Scriptures where God is identified by the holy name "I am who I am," which can also be read as "I will cause to be." This understanding fits very well with God being involved and active in the Hebrews' liberation. God is the source of salvation.

God's call changed Moses' life completely. God's name 'I am who I am' challenges us to reach inside ourselves – 'who are we?' 'Who am I?' 'What is my deepest desire? Am I loved – what is my worth; what is my purpose?

These questions reach to the heart of our existence. To answer them is to discover our true calling.

Moses killed a man because he was moved by righteous anger at the mistreatment of a Hebrew slave. His deepest longing was for compassion, justice, and freedom. When God met Moses at the burning bush and commissioned him as his agent of liberation, God was calling Moses to face who he truly was and what he most deeply desired. That desire was aligned with God's desire for freedom and justice. We are free and fulfilled only when our desires align with God's; then we work with the grain of our souls, not against it.

Ray Davey the founder of the Corrymeela Community told the story of Peter Hartley who was a prisoner of war in one of the awful Japanese camps. He told of the incredible ordeal of suffering he and his fellow prisoners passed through, building a railway in the jungle. Then one day he found that he simply couldn't go on, his body was powerless with fever and a few days later he suffered a crippling attack of dysentery. The doctors did all they could, but as the days passed he grew weaker and weaker. By the tenth day his spirit began to sink. He had no fight left and he was sure that he was dying. Then he began to pray that the end would come quickly.

Next morning he described how the orderly brought in the mail. He watched the letters being distributed without interest or curiosity. What use were letters now to a man about to die? What use were they, months or even years out of date.

Then suddenly the orderly threw a small packet of letters on his bed and said: 'somebody must love you, sergeant, to send all that lot'. Hartley made no reply. He was debating whether he would look at them. This went on for several minutes and then suddenly he sat up and grabbed them. The first letter was from his mother. It described the tremendous relief they all had when it was reported that he was alive and a prisoner of war. This brought home to him how much those at home had suffered and how much they looked forward to his return.

That did it. Now he knew that he must survive and go back to them. So he fought for his life and slowly recovered. And eventually got home.

The power in the words of those letters saved his life. This sense of the power of words was very real to the people of the Bible. They believed in the potency of the spoken word. To them it was really alive: charged with energy and life.

When you look through the Bible you can consider the ways and situations in which God's word came and spoke to different characters. Moses is at the Burning Bush and gets God's call to do something that he didn't want to do. But he obeys and goes out to lead his people from slavery into a new life.

Does God's word come to us today? In every age there has been a vast procession of those who have heard God's word and answered it. But for the most of us God doesn't come in dreams or visions, or burning bushes but in ordinary events. Albert Schweitzer describes how the call to missionary work in West Africa to those suffering with leprosy came to him in a newspaper article. God comes through our listening and thinking, through beauty and goodness, through our inner longings and hopes, through our friends and through strangers, through our needs and fears and so many other unexpected ways.

At this time of year when organisations start up again after the summer break, autumn programmes get into full swing, schools are back, firms plan up to Christmas, people get busy and feel busy and feel burdened once more. There is always stuff you have to do; Stuff you'd like to do; stuff you don't want to do. Can we discern through all that

demanding maze, what we are **called to do**? Can we discern the still small voice of the call of God?

God still stands with and on behalf of the most vulnerable people. When people call out for justice, God hears and responds, often through the hearts and hands of God's people. There are still "pharaohs" who oppress and enslave. Who might they be? Who today is living in situations that threaten to destroy? How might we join them in overcoming such oppression? Who is going to bring good news? Who is going to liberate and set free those caught in despair, those with no hope. Who is going to step forward and say 'here am I, use me to make some difference in the world, in the church, in my community, no matter how small or in what way.

'Who am I,' said Moses.

'Who are we?'

God answered Moses, as God answered most people who God called to do stuff in scripture: 'I am with you'

'I am with you'