

GOD IS

SERIES: EXODUS - JOURNEY TO FREEDOM



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Exodus 3:1-22

Third Message

Paul Taylor

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I want to start this morning by asking you a question that you always get asked. It is a simple question. “Who are you?” Think about the first answer to this question that comes to your mind. Maybe it is your name. Or a position you hold. Or something unique about your identity. Let’s go ahead and share our answers to that question.

Our identity matters to us. Throughout our lives, we spend a lot of time trying to figure out what should be a simple question. Who are we? That question goes through different seasons: children, adolescents, young adults, adulthood, empty nest, and retirement. It is like a fly buzzing around our heads all the time. It won’t go away. We are always asking the simple question, who are we?

Some of us have an identity crisis. Our nation is driven by identity politics. We worry about identity theft. People talk about their gender identity, ethnic identity, or racial identity. We try to find our true identity. And we carefully craft our online identity.

It might be fair to say that we are obsessed with the idea of identity.

Today is our third week in our series in the book of Exodus. We have subtitled this series “Journey to Freedom” because we will watch God’s people transformed from a people oppressed and enslaved into a people who worship in freedom and abundance.

Fortunately for us, our passage this morning tackles the issue of identity head-on. Last week we met Moses, the eventual savior of God’s people in Egypt. This week we will see what many people refer to as the call of Moses. He will encounter God in a powerful way and be given the responsibility for leading God’s people. But at the center of this calling lies the issue of identity. Moses questions his own identity. That leads to one of the most powerful statements in the entire Bible on the identity of God. We will discover that, quite simply, God is.

Let’s go back and see how we characterize ourselves. Who are we in this room? [Survey results]

We are a diverse group of people, from names and titles to descriptions of our relationship with God. We think about ourselves not only in different ways but in different kinds of imagining our identity.

This morning we will see a man who has struggled with his identity. He had a unique childhood, leaving him with serious questions about who he was. As he encounters God, he learns something, not so much about himself but about God. We will find out that maybe we have been asking the wrong question all along.

Here I am

Last week, we met Moses through three different vignettes. As an infant, he was miraculously saved from being killed. As an adult, we saw him intervene on behalf of his people. Then we saw him rejected by the Israelites and the Egyptians alike, so he ran away. We talked about the seeds of hope that we found in these stories. But at the beginning of our chapter for today, we are wondering whether someone forgot to water those seeds.

When we next meet Moses, he doesn’t seem like much of a deliverer.

Exodus 3:1:

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Meeting Moses this way does not fill us with hope. Here is a man who has run away from his identity. Egyptians despised the job of watching flocks. They considered watching flocks the worst possible job anyone could do. But Moses had become a shepherd. He was no longer an Egyptian.

Moses had also married the daughter of a Midianite priest, and now he was watching his father-in-law's flocks. For a Bedouin family in the desert, their flock was their wealth. It was a bank account, investments, and property equity all in one. His Midianite father-in-law trusted him enough to lead all of his wealth far from home. Moses was no longer an Israelite.

By the time he settled in Midian, Moses had renounced all of his former identity. He had grown up a prince in Pharaoh's court, but he was no longer an Egyptian. Ethnically Moses was Hebrew, but he had been rejected by his people. Moses didn't fit anywhere, so he ran away to Midian and became a new person.

Moses married a foreign woman and had a son. He named that son Gershom, which he says means "sojourner there." He may have settled in Midian, but he did not belong there.

Moses did not know who he was. He didn't belong anywhere. He was a man without an identity.

Some of us can relate to that feeling. We feel like we don't belong. Some of us were adopted or have adopted kids. Some of us are mixed families of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds. Some of us are the second generation: your parents emigrated, and you have always felt caught between their past and your present culture. Some of us have wrestled with our sexual identity, struggling to fit into "standard" categories. Some of us have always felt out of place for a reason we cannot explain.

Moses did not belong anywhere, so he left and started a new life. But then God showed up and changed everything. On that mountain, Moses saw a burning bush that did not burn up. Let's hear what happened when he turned to look.

Exodus 3:4-6:

When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

After he got Moses' attention, God called out to him, repeating his name twice: "Moses, Moses." The double repetition is a sign of affection in the ancient Near East. Moses' reply echoes throughout the pages of Scripture, "Here I am."

Abraham said this when God called him (Genesis 22:1). Esau said this to Isaac (Genesis 27:1). Isaac said this to Jacob (Genesis 27:18). Jacob said this to an angel (Genesis 31:11). Joseph said this to his father Jacob (Genesis 37:13). Later on in the story, Samuel will say this to the Lord (1 Samuel 3:4).

Let me give you a suggestion. If you think you hear God calling you, say what Moses said. You do not necessarily need to be looking for God's purpose in your life. Moses was just doing his job, trying to be a faithful shepherd. But sometimes, little things happen, which might just be God trying to get your attention. If that happens, take a closer look. If you hear God calling your name, Moses' answer is the right one to give. You should say, "Here I am." In short, if God calls you, then show up.

That can sound simple. How hard is it to show up? We come from a long line of people who have refused to show up. The first time in the Bible we read of God looking for someone doesn't go so well.

Genesis 3:8 recounts that "they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God".

You and I don't often hear God walking in the garden, but we know of him. Instead of showing up, we often choose to hide. Jonah got on a boat. Gideon hid in a pit. Elijah ran like the wind. We like to hide. We like to protect ourselves. Instead of fearing God, we end up being afraid of him.

It is not always easy and may lead to a challenging assignment. But when God calls your name, please say, "Here I am."

That is what Moses did, and it did lead to a difficult assignment. Listen to what God.

Exodus 3:10:

Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

Think about this. Moses had fled Egypt. He had left that life behind, the life where he was kind of Egyptian and kind of Hebrew, rejected by everyone, and wanted for murder. He had started fresh.

But God sends him back. God sends him back into the trauma of his past and says that he has a role. Moses has to confront the power of the family in which he grew up. Moses has to lead the people who rejected him and rescue an entire group of people from slavery and oppression. Moses does not realize what he has shown up for, so his attitude is about to change.

Who am I

Moses' bold statement, "Here am I," is quickly followed by a far more tentative question.

Exodus 3:11:

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?"

At first, Moses shows up, but then he crashes into the reality of his fragile identity. "Here I am" has turned into "Who am I?"

David will ask this same question when God tells him to be king. Solomon, his son, will ask the same thing when God asks him to build the temple. Moses asks this question of God because the assignment God has given him shakes him to the core. You want me to go back where? To face whom? To do what? Who am I to do anything of those things? I've moved on. None of that is part of my identity anymore.

What are we asking when we ask, "who am I?" What kind of an answer are we looking for? What kind of an answer would make us feel better about ourselves? This question can easily turn into an insatiable quest. We can dig deeper and deeper to find out who we are. Maybe that question is hiding something.

A *Psychology Today* article makes an astute observation.

People who ask this question are typically struggling with their identity and are searching for a core sense of themselves. The irony is that the more you seek to identity who you are, the more fragile you are likely to feel about yourself.¹

If questioning our identity makes us feel even more fragile, what are we to do? How do we arrive at some idea of who we are? How do we figure out who we are?

When Moses asked God this question, here is how he responded.

Exodus 3:12:

He said, "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

God's answer is really odd. Moses asks, "Who am I?" and God doesn't really answer the question at all. Instead of talking about Moses, God talks about himself. God says simply, "I will be with you." Instead of giving Moses something to latch onto for his identity, he promises Moses that he will be present with him.

In answer to the question, "Who am I?" God says, "You are the one whom I will be with."

The phrase "I will be you" occurs almost a hundred times in the Old Testament. Over and over again, in crisis, celebration, challenge and victory, God wants his people to know He is with them. One of the names of Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us."

Could it be this simple? Sometimes we don't get the answer that we want. But sometimes, God gives us the answer that we need. Moses is the one whom God is with. Could that be enough? Can that be enough to give Moses the courage to face the task God has given him? Can that be enough for us? You are with God. You are the-one-God-is-with.

God seemed to think that when Moses was questioning his identity, what he needed was not an answer to his question but an answer to something far deeper in his heart. He needed to know that God was with him. Is the same true for us?

Maybe you need to know that God is with you when you wonder if you belong at your job. Perhaps you need to know that God is with you when you wonder if you are cut out to be a mother. When you receive rejection letters from college and wonder who you will become, maybe you need to know that God is with you.

We need to know the most that God is with us when he sends us on whatever mission he gives us. Moses wonders whether he can do what God asks him to do.

Is he the kind of person who can do this? God answers by telling him, “You are the one whom I will be with.”

Every Sunday, we gather here in worship. In this place, we have a sense that God is with us. Here, it is easy to see that we are the ones God is with. God is with us here in order to send us out from here. We are sent from here into schools, companies, hospitals, restaurants, homes, and neighborhoods. We are sent from here to be God’s scattered church in the world.

We need to know that as we go into our jobs, raise our kids, or attend school, we are the ones God is with. He is with us in those places where he sends us. He may send us into dangerous territory, but he never sends us alone. Wherever you go, you are the-one-God-is-with.

God gives Moses a unique sign as a way of sealing his promise. God often gives people signs when he asks them to do hard things. They usually come before the hard thing. The sign gives them the courage to do the difficult task. In this case, the sign comes afterwards. Moses has to do the hard thing, and then he will receive the sign which confirms the promise. This sign pushes Moses forward. He obeys so that he can see what God has promised.

But it also leads to another question. And this question is an even bigger one than the first.

Who is God?

If the answer to Moses’ question of identity is that God is with him, then the follow-up question is entirely natural. Listen to what Moses asks.

Exodus 3:13:

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

Moses begins with, “Here I am.” Then he asks, “Who am I? Finally, he turns to God and asks, “Who are you?” When Moses asks God for a name to give the Israelites, he isn’t just asking for a word. In the Bible, names convey the essence of the person. Moses is asking about the very nature of this God.

A.W. Tozer says, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”²

Maybe this is what we’ve been getting at all along. Is this the question which lies underneath all of our anxiety about identity? Who is God in the world? Does he exist? Is he good? And the one that really drives us: If he exists, how does he feel about me?

Let’s see how God answers this question.

Exodus 3:14-15:

God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I am has sent me to you.’” 15 God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

These are some of the most theologically rich words in the entire Scriptures. “I am who I am.” These three words in Hebrew have inspired more writing, reflection, and contemplation than any other. Nowhere else in the Bible does God claim this exact title for himself. The Hebrew name for God, Yahweh, is related to this verb but is a different form. There is so much here. We will barely scratch the surface of what these words mean.

God simply is. The most fundamental thing about God is that he is. God simply is.

Martin Heidegger was a philosopher in the 1950s. He claimed that the fundamental question of metaphysics is ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’³ Why does the world, the universe, and humans exist first? Why is there not simply a void?

God’s response to Moses moves toward an answer to that question. The nature of God—his very essence—is simple. He exists. In claiming that, God suggests that he is the basis for all existence. He is the reason that there is something rather than nothing. Our existence—our very being—is only real because it is founded upon his existence. The reason that anything is is because God is.

We all have questions about God. We doubt and wonder, and our faith wavers. There is a great irony when people choose to disbelieve in God. They deny the existence of the being who forms the basis for their own reality in the world. God is. And because God is, we are.

What that means for us is simple. If God is, then we can be. And we can be with him. Be with God.

I mean this word “be” in a very technical sense. Have your being with God. Exist with God. Find your identity in the fact that you exist because God exists, and he is with you.

The verb God uses here is an active one. It denotes action that begins in the past, continues in the present, and lasts into the future. Let’s say you saw me running and asked what I was doing. I would say, “I am running.” I started running some time ago. I’m running now. I’m planning on running until some future date.

God means that he says, “I am who I am.” God is not just is. God is is-ing. He is being right now and will continue to be in the future.

Here is how Jewish scholar Leon Kass describes the implication of this.

[I am who I am] therefore suggests something not only incomplete and unlimited, but also ongoing, progressing, free and unpredictable; not static but acting in time; and ‘knowable’ therefore only through watching ‘its’ deeds and words; ask not my name, just see what I do.⁴

When Moses asks God, “Who am I” God answers, “I will be with you.” When Moses asks God, “Who are you?” God answers, “I am who I am.” Moses is the one who God is with. God is the one who is is-ing. Together, these become an invitation for us.

We are not just saved for eternity when we place our faith in Jesus. God invites us to come with him on the mission he has for us in the world. God says, “If you want to get to know me, come along and let’s do the things of life together.” You can read about me. You can learn about me. You can study me. But those won’t really tell you who I am. If you want to get to know me, let’s be together.

Ask not his name, just see what he does. Better yet, join him in what he does. Be sent from here and be the ones whom God is is-ing with.

Conclusion

We started this morning by asking a simple question. The simplest of questions, “who are you”? But as we walked through the text of Exodus 3, we realized that

this question isn’t simple at all. It strikes at the heart of our deepest understanding of ourselves and ultimately points us in the direction of God.

As chapter 3 wraps up, God tells Moses that the way will not be easy.

Exodus 3:19:

But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand.

The king of Egypt is not going to submit easily. It is going to require a “mighty hand.” In response, God promises Moses that he will stretch out his hand.

As we are sent into this world, we will face situations that clearly require a mighty hand. If we are to represent God, we will be sent into those places we are terrified to go. We will have to face our fears and respond with faith. All of this will make us wonder about our identity. Are we enough? Can we do it? Who really am I?

When we have questions about our identity, all the answers begin with God. Our God is the one who stretches out his mighty hand. And we are the ones whom that God is with. Let that be enough. Let that be all the answers you need.

As we continue in worship, we will proclaim our confidence in the identity God has given us. Know that you are chosen by God. Know that you are made free by his love. Know that you are who God says you are. You are the one he is with.

Endnotes

1. Mel Schwartz, Who Am I?, *Psychology Today*, June 2, 2010, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/shift-mind/201006/who-am-i>.
2. A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Fig, 2012)
3. Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 7–8.
4. Leon R Kass, *Founding God’s Nation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 73.