

The Burning Bush

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 April 2024

Preacher: Trevor Skead

- [0 : 0 0] I have a question for you this morning. Not a serious question, or at least not to me. Maybe to some of you it's a very, very serious question.
- How did Cape Town become the coffee capital of South Africa? Or dare I say it, the world. Okay.
- Before there was a bootlegger on every corner. Who of you remember a time when there wasn't a bootlegger? Bootleggers on every corner. Some of you. The rest of you are pretty new in Cape Town then, right?
- Before there was a bootlegger in Cape Town, 2013 actually, quite a while ago, bootleggers started their mini empire, their quest to take over the Cape Town coffee scene.
- There was deluxe coffee. Who remembers deluxe? Still around. 2009, at one time they may have thought they were the kings of Cape Town coffee. 2009 or so, same year, truth coffee.
- [1 : 0 3] Truth coffee thought we were going to be the kings of coffee. But as far as I can understand the story, the real story of Cape Town coffee began with a very appropriately named coffee roasting company and shop called Origin Coffee.
- Who do you even know Origin Coffee? Does everyone know Origin Coffee? Even the new Cape Townians. This, as far as I'm told, and I'm not quoting this, or please don't quote me, I watched a movie recently that started with a line, based on a true story, only the facts have been changed.
- I've done my best. I've done my best not to change the facts. I think this is pretty accurate. But as far as Cape Town coffee goes, Origin is where it all began.
- Appropriately named, Origin's stories are stories of beginnings, stories of these defining moments that set new trajectories. And I think, I'm not sure if this is the reason they chose this name, but it says on their website, we decided that it was time for South Africans to drink high quality coffee poured by professionally trained baristas using the highest quality coffee beans roasted by a skilled artisan roaster.
- And obviously a lot of other people have thought this is a very good idea since then. Now I don't want to pop, actually I do want to pop the Capetonian coffee snubs bubble, because there's a godfather of coffee in South Africa that you may never even have heard of.
- [2 : 3 5] In fact, not in Cape Town. And established years and years and years before Origin thought, hey, we're going to do something new here.
- And this story takes place in a little town, my hometown actually, Cabeja, formerly known as Fort Elizabeth. In the year 1924, Jock Masterton opened the first specialist coffee roastery and shop in South Africa.
- And in fact, Daily Maverick thought it would be a good idea to write an article about this. And they say these words, this is not me, this is where the story of modern day coffee in South Africa was first told.

Why students coffee? Have you heard of them? Okay. These are the real coffee connoisseurs in our congregation. Go speak to them afterwards.

Origin stories are great. These defining stories, superheroes have them. The bad guys in movies have them. The heroes in movies have them. And in many ways, we as people have them.

[3 : 44] They speak to our human need to define ourselves. A story that tells us who we are, why we are, what we are, even to a degree what our futures may be.

They speak to our need to have significance. Our need to combat and push back against the idea that we may be lost or we might not have answers to that ultimate question, that human question, that deep-seated question that in many ways is at the core of a lot of what we do, that question, who am I?

Who am I? Now, in our passage today, we see Moses. And we see Moses at a point in his life where he had lost all that significance, meaning, purpose.

He'd been brought to a low place, a forgotten state, a dead end, you could probably say, in his life. There was actually no way you could take his story at that point and massage it into an inspiring origin story.

And not really unlike Moses, the nation of Israel, too, was in many ways in a forgotten state. Slaves in Egypt, 400 years after their great father, Joseph, had brought his family to settle there.

[5 : 03] A great nation, yes, but a nation enslaved. A nation who had inherited a great promise from God, but seeing very little of that reality, forgotten even maybe by God.

And then in a defining moment, a trajectory-changing moment, Exodus chapter 3, the burning bush, we see something radically different set in motion.

Moses' dead end has opened up into a new future. He will have a new mission, a new purpose, a new reason. As the story unfolds. But we see something radically different in this story compared to all the other origin stories that we tell.

And that is that this story is not rooted in the story of self-discovery that every other story tells. But a God discovery.

A Moses discovering a truth. A truth about his God. His resolution to the who am I question or crisis is only possible when he comes to terms with the answer to the primary question, who are you, God?

[6 : 15] The constant message of our world to us is that we need to find ourselves in order to know true happiness, true meaning, and true purpose in life. The Bible, however, Christianity and this story very definitely teaches us the opposite.

Not that we need a clearer understanding of ourselves first, but rather that we need a clearer vision or view of God first.

Last week, Graham took us through Isaiah chapter 6. We saw Isaiah's encounter with God in his grand vision. And we saw this exact same dynamic at play.

As Isaiah encountered the holy, holy, holy God. In our passage this morning, we see Moses' encounter with God. And the parallels between the two are hard to miss.

There's a reckoning with the truth of who God is. And a reckoning with the corresponding realization of who we are, who he is, who we are in the light of who God is.

[7 : 22] First by instinct and experience. And then by articulation, a telling of it, an explaining of it. And so as we work through this story this morning, I'd like us to latch onto the two questions, the two big questions that Moses actually asks in his encounter with God in that burning bush experience.

And so we're going to use these two questions to help us organize our thoughts and help us make sense of the content of the passage this morning. And so have a quick look at verse 13 with me. Exodus 3 verse 13.

We read these words. Moses said to God, Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, The God of your fathers has sent me to you. And they ask me, What is his name?

Then what shall I tell them? What should I tell them, God? Who should I tell them you are? Who are you, God? Okay. Second question. And you can go back two verses now.

To verse 11. We see Moses' other question to God in the passage. Verse 11. Moses said to God, Who am I? Who am I? That I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt.

[8 : 36] Who are you, God? Who am I that I should go? So that's the landscape we're going to cover this morning. Let's start with question one. Question one. Or at least since I'm putting it forward.

Question one. Who are you, God? Now even though Moses technically answers, asks this question second. You saw what is verse 13. Verse 13 comes after verse 11.

And God gives him an answer. And God gives him an answer, an explicit answer at the end of this interaction between Moses and himself. We see in the story that Moses has actually already experienced and is already experiencing the answer to the question from the moment his encounter with God begins.

Moses sees the strange sight of a bush burning, but not being consumed by fire. And so he comes over to take a look. And then his name is called out, Moses, Moses.

He says, here I am. And then we hear the words in verse 5. Do not come any closer, God said. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.

[9 : 46] And then he says, I'm the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. And at this we see Moses hides his face. And we are told because he was afraid to look at God.

And in this moment, before any explanation has been given, we see that Moses, as he approaches the bush and as he hears his God address him, Moses instinctively knows that there is a substantial difference between himself and the God who addresses him.

There is an instinct that says God is holy and I am not. And there is something substantial about the gap between the two.

God's holiness, his nature, transcends, goes beyond my own in a significant way unlike any other thing I encounter in life.

In Christian theology we talk about the transcendence of God. The idea we find throughout the pages of scripture already that God is above and beyond anything that exists, anywhere, at any time.

[11 : 01] And when I say that, I don't just mean like a scale, okay, like from zero to a hundred. And maybe you've got rocks at zero and bugs at one. And you have other animals and critters and things.

And eventually you get people, hopefully quite high up the scale, and eventually you get God at a hundred. That is not what the transcendence of God means in scripture.

When we're talking about the transcendence of God, what we're saying is, yes, there is a scale, maybe, for everything else. And you might grade it in terms of sort of levels of self-awareness and intellect or whatever it might be.

Moral ability, I don't know, whatever. However, we might be pretty high at the top end of that scale. When we talk about the transcendence of God, what we're saying is that God is not even on that scale.

There's a scale for everything else except God. Okay, we're not relative to God in any sense, a measure of God in any sense.

[12 : 00] When we speak about the transcendence of God, we say that God is above and beyond anything and everything that exists. You have God, and then you have everything else that is.

He is the only uncreated, self-existing, self-sufficient creator. And everything else is the created or creation.

He's off the scale. And when Moses finally does get around to asking his question in verse 13, well, you're sending me to the Israelites to tell them that things are going to change, that you're going to deliver them, that there are great things coming.

Who must I tell them sent me? Well, God's answer is, I am who I am. Or I will be who I will be.

Verse 14. And God in this moment reveals to Moses his divine name. Not a title, not a description of an aspect of his character, but this name that encapsulates his essential being.

[13 : 17] He is. He is. He is the one who was and who is and who always will be. Self-existent. Self-sufficient in himself.

Not depending on anyone or anything else or anything in any measure, this God simply is. Now, my children are getting older.

My daughter is 40. She started high school this year. My son is 11 years old. But as most parents can relate to, we spent many evenings throughout their childhood.

They're still children. Still my little girl. Hey, undergrace. She's giving me that look that she gives me with increasing measure these days, where she scrunches up her face a bit and her eyes go a bit narrower.

I know exactly what it means. But we spent many, many nights reading the Bible together, praying together, telling stories, engaging. And children somehow seem to know that at the end of the day, when parents' capacities for engagement are not as high as they are at other points in the day, some of them seem to think this is the best time to ask questions.

[14 : 35] The big questions about life. And so as a parent, as you're trying to navigate that space, giving your children all the attention they need, but really trying to make sure you can wrap this up and get on into a peaceful moment, the last thing I want to hear is the big questions, the dreaded questions.

There's probably two of them. The two whoppers. Number one, where do babies come from? Okay, we're not going to go there. Number two, especially after you've read a Bible story, where did God come from?

Okay. Now they're both actually easy answers, just not easy to explain. You agree with me? We're not going to talk about question one.

Question two, the answer is simple, but from our perspective as people in a finite world, there's a great deal of mystery to this. But the answer is simple, he just is.

He has no origin in something else. Everything else does. And so everything else in our world has this point of reference, and even if we're going to stretch our imaginations to the furthest point, and we're going to make the craziest sci-fi movie you could make, and we're going to create the most far-out creature, or alien, or whatever it is that we can imagine, we're always using bits and pieces of the ordinary stuff of our world to make up the elements of this new creature, this new creation of our imaginations.

[15 : 59] But we can always identify their prototypes, because we're always drawing from something that's familiar to us, however small it may be. That's the definition of a creature, of something created.

It has an origin. The great I am, no origin. He is the original source for everything else that is.

Everything else that is, is because He is. Do you understand that? And if nothing else was, or ever were to be, He still is, and always will be.

And God's is-ness, or His I am-ness, His divine being, is complete, and here's the important thing, lacks nothing.

And here's the part you have to hear from this. In other words, God didn't create anything because He needed it. Or in our case, God didn't even create us because He needed us.

[17 : 07] There was no sense of loneliness, or emptiness, or incompleteness in God that prompted Him to create something. He is the great I am.

Self-existent, self-sufficient, always. So we come this morning to worship God, not because God needs us, not because God even needs our worship, not because our worship completes Him or fulfills Him in any way.

Yes, He is worthy of our worship. Yes, we owe Him our worship. But we gather together to worship God and to sit under His Word together for the exact opposite reason.

God doesn't need us. We need Him. But here's the remarkable thing this morning. A mystery greater than the burning bush that wasn't being consumed.

The great I am, the transcendent one who doesn't need us, moves towards us and initiates relationship with us.

[18 : 19] Take a look at verses 5 to 7 again. The beginning of the story, God says, Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals. For the place where you are standing is holy ground.

Then verse 6, He said, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Go to the end of the passage now, verse 15.

We see God rounding off this encounter. It's part of the encounter with the same thought. God also said to Moses, Say to the Israelites, 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. Although this was a new encounter with God for Moses, it forms part of a much older story. A promise. A covenant that God had made with Abraham years and years before.

That he would be his God. That he would make Abraham into a great people. And that it would be through that people that God would work to be a blessing to all the world, ultimately, through a promised one, a redeemer.

[19 : 29] And in stark contrast to this very true, very necessary, pivotal idea of the transcendence of God, the holiness of God, we also see the beautiful other side of how God relates to people in what we call, in theology, and what we're seeing here, the imminence of God.

God, the God who is near, the God who is with us. He has the good news, the incredible news, the mysteriously magnificent news of Exodus chapter 3 and the entire Bible.

God is transcendent and he is imminent. He is God without us. He does not need us, but in a mysterious love and grace that we can never understand, he chooses to be God with us.

He wants us. He desires to lavish his love on us and bring us into a real and lifelong, into all eternity, relationship with himself.

That brings us to question two. Moses asks the great human question in some ways here, who am I? In this moment, Moses is all too aware of his existing origin story.

[20 : 48] He was an Israelite baby who survived Pharaoh's crazy decree that all the Israelite baby boys should be killed and ended up in the household of Pharaoh, growing up as a prince of Egypt.

But at about 40 years old, in a moment he lost it all when realizing his identity, his true identity as an Israelite, he defended an Israelite slave and he killed an Egyptian slave driver and had to flee into the desert where he's been now for the last 40 years, finding his way forward eventually as a lowly shepherd.

Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? Take a listen to God's answer in verse 12. Moses says, who am I?

You expect a range of responses, but this is the response we get from God. God says, I will be with you. One plus one equals two. This does not compute.

Who am I, God? What can I possibly bring to the table? You know my story. I'm the worst, the last person you should be sending on this mission. At this point, we'd expect God to boost his ego a little bit, bump up his confidence.

[22 : 02] Moses, you've had a rough time, but I've seen your perseverance. I've seen how strong you actually are. You never gave up. I see your potential, Moses. I see all these things in you, Moses.

That's not God's answer. Who am I that I should go? God's answer, I will be with you, Moses. God's answer to Moses is actually the answer we all need more than anything else to that central question of life.

If he is the great I am and the true source of all that is, then there's a corresponding converse point of truth and it is this, there is nothing I need more than him.

If he is the true source, there is nothing I need in all of life than to be connected to the true source of life. And when I reach that place, when I have that realization, there is no greater, more settling, more confidence inspiring, more rest for my heart giving, more identity defining answer that can ever be given to me, ever been given to my who am I question than the one God gives to Moses here.

I will be with you. Who am I? I, the source of life, will be with you. We can't define ourselves apart from God.

[23 : 37] We find our definition in God and in his defining of us. The truth of who God is tells us the truth of who we are.

I need the great I am as my God, as my center point, as my life. And God's response is, I will be with you.

Let my presence define you. Let my presence be what gives you your identity, your purpose, your meaning, your direction. Let my presence in your life make sense of whatever that back story might be that I am redeeming for my glory.

And so in Exodus chapter 3 what we see is the joining of stories, origin stories maybe. Moses' story to God's story.

And it anticipates the joining or the rejoining of Israel's story again to God's story. But it's not a new combined story that's beginning here.

[24 : 41] God's story redefines their stories, their identities. But, in order to experience this, it's not just enough for us to acknowledge the truth of who God is.

We have to surrender to the truth of who God is. It's not just enough to acknowledge it, to recognize it. We have to surrender to the truth of who God is, the great I am.

But here's the problem. Our hearts resist that with everything we are. In other words, we want the answer to the who am I question.

We want an answer that will satisfy us, but if we're being really honest, we prefer that answer to be unattached to the who are you God question.

We certainly don't want to ask the who am I question of God in a way that lets God be the one to define it. Because, in all honesty, and this is our human condition, deep down, we actually want to be and are deeply committed to being the definers of who we are.

[25 : 59] God A.W. Tozer, an older theologian and writer, wrote in a book called The Knowledge of the Holy, one of my favorites, he wrote these words, we are usurpers, we live on stolen thrones.

That is our primary origin story as people. What he meant was this, and I'm going to read you a slightly longer snippet from the book, because I can't do a better job of saying it.

So let me read it to you. He writes, the natural man is a sinner because, and only because, he challenges God's selfhood in relation to his own.

In all else, he may willingly accept the sovereignty of God, but in his own life, he rejects it. For him, God's dominion ends where his begins.

Yet so subtly is self that scarcely anyone is conscious of its presence. Because man is born a rebel, he is unaware that he is one.

[27 : 06] His constant assertion of self, as far as he thinks of it all, appears to him as a perfectly normal thing. He is willing to share himself, sometimes even to sacrifice himself for a desired end, but never to dethrone himself.

No matter how far down the scale of social acceptance he may slide, he is still in his own eyes a king on a throne, and no one, not even God, can take that throne from him.

Sin has many manifestations, but its essence is one. A moral being created to worship before the throne of God sits on the throne of his own selfhood, and from that elevated position declares, I am.

That is sin in its concentrated essence, yet because it is natural, it appears to be good. The story of the Israelites, if you read on from Exodus, would prove this exact point.

Although they want the Exodus, they wanted the exit from Egypt that God offered, over and over again, their story would show that they never truly wanted the God of the Exodus.

[28 : 17] How is this crippling disability of our hearts overcome? Well, like Moses, we need to see the truth of the burning bush.

We need to see the burning bush. Tozer finishes that section with these words, It is only when in the gospel the soul is brought before the face of the most holy one, without the protective shield of innocence, that the frightful moral incongruity is brought home to the conscience.

We see the truth of the situation. Now, it's unlikely that as you leave this building, you are going to find yourself wandering around the desert with your sheep and happening to stumble upon a burning bush.

Maybe one or two of you, most of you, probably not. But as you sit here this morning, the great I am of the burning bush of Exodus chapter 3 comes to offer himself as God I am with us.

In his greatest self-revelation or burning bush expression of himself the world has ever known. And it's the story we tell every single Sunday from this pulpit, the story of Jesus Christ.

[29 : 39] If you had to flick over to John chapter 8, you would see Jesus engaging with the Pharisees. And there's a bit of a back and forwards happening there and they get quite frustrated with him as they often do and they get to a point where they're discussing Abraham and Jesus says, well, Abraham knew me and they're like, how on earth could Abraham know you?

You're not even 50 years old. And then Jesus says these words in John chapter 8 verse 58, very truly I tell you before Abraham was born I am.

And there was no mistaking what he was implying. It wasn't subtle. In fact, if you go look at the Greek you're going to read these words I am ego, I me.

And if you were to take the Greek version of the Old Testament which would have been read by the Pharisees, ego, I, me are the exact Greek translation of the words that God uses in Exodus chapter 3.

In John chapter 8 Jesus says, Yahweh, I am the transcendent one of Exodus 3. As I stand before you today, I am.

[30 : 53] No confusion, no mistake. And their response tells us that it's exactly the case because their anger, their calls of him being a blasphemer are not in any way disguised or downplayed.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, you can call him Jesus essentially for that is his name, Yahweh with us. Why is it such good news for you today that God doesn't need you in his transcendence?

Because in the story of the great I am he is constantly over and over again moving towards these people in compassion and love and at that story's climax we see Jesus, the greatest revelation of God to people in the flesh, the greatest moment of self-revelation and clarity the world has ever seen.

We see this amazing coming of the God who is with us in a way that we have never seen before. Except as Jesus comes and as Jesus goes to that cross and as he dies for our rebellion, our sin, our self-assertion of ourselves as God of our lives.

The Son of God doesn't ask us to remove our shoes. He has his shoes removed. In fact, he has all his garments removed by those who would spit in the face of the great I am so that he could enter into that holy moment to once and for all open the doorway for all who would follow him and in that moment as our sins are carried before the holy throne of the great I am and judged there, we see the God of holy grace forgiving us without even the smallest question.

[32 : 41] As we consider this great God, the transcendent God who doesn't need us and we look at the cross and we see Jesus, we realize something magnificent.

Unconditional love is ours because God doesn't need us but because he wants us. He sacrifices himself for us and therein is our peace.

Therein is our security. Therein is our comfort. Therein is our identity and when we find that, we find an origin that isn't defined by our past or our futures, by our abilities or our inabilities, by our successes or our failures, but defined by the God who is and has called us to be his own.

This is the story of the gospel and this is our hope as a people each Sunday as we gather here today. Let's pray together. Our Father, we thank you this morning that as we bow our heads before you, we believe that you are at work to help us bow our hearts before you too.

Father, we realize that this is not something we do naturally. We know that you need to work in us, Lord, to help us to see the truth, to help us respond, to help us surrender, to help us rest in you.

[34 : 10] And so, Lord, my great prayer is that you would be our true origin story, the defining story of who we are, that you would be the one, in a sense, who tells us what our future is, because our future is wrapped up in what you have won for us on that cross, an eternity with you, in the fullness of all that you have redeemed.

And so, Lord, our prayer is that you would make us strong in that great truth, and where we battle to hold on to it, where we look to other things, for that sense of worth, that sense of assurance, that sense of meaning and purpose.

Lord, you would help us to see those things clearly too, that we might look again and see Jesus, might see the great I am who has come, who has made us his own. And so, Lord, we know this morning that unless you help us, we cannot.

And so, Lord, would you open our eyes, would you open our hearts, and would you help us to step into the life that you offer us in Christ. We ask this in his name. Amen.