

## **Exodus 3:1-15**

### **Moses at the Burning Bush**

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

There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, '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.

Then the LORD said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.'

But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you."' God also said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you": This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations.

## **Romans 12:9-21**

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

In mid-August I was out before 7:00 driving to meet another early riser of the congregation for breakfast and conversation. I was listening to the CBC Saskatoon morning edition on radio. Mark Henick, CBC mental health columnist, was being interviewed about weather related Seasonal Affect Disorder (SAD). SAD actually can happen in each season based upon who we are.<sup>1</sup> Some get cranky and lethargic in the summer heat; I do as well but not to an extreme. Some don't mind the cold and dark of winter while others hibernate or migrate south for several months. I like the fall, but getting there is a challenge for me. August is when this segment aired, and I was feeling the August pinch. As do many of us.

August is packed with gearing up for the Autumn church year. For parents, students, educators and staff at all levels of schooling, this weekend is a final reprieve from the demands of the institution. For gardeners and farmers, the seeds of spring have ripened; what is there needs to be harvested, preserved, and the soil cleared for the future. The diminished morning and evening light is cause for dismay. Throw in a few unforeseen circumstances, and the sadness and anxiety deepens. The old life of summer is dying.

In such a mental framework I came across an article by Debie Thomas in *The Christian Century*. It is entitled "Each of My Dyings" and I will quote a bit from it. I will then personalize her model as an example of how we all might apply the spiritual wisdom she offers to our own circumstances.

The Anima Christi is said to have been a favorite prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola. In it, Jesus is asked to "call" and "bid me come" when the hour of death draws near. In a contemporary reworking of the prayer, David Fleming makes a more expansive supplication: "On each of my dyings shed your light and your love."

I prefer Fleming's version. Of course, I hope that I will know Christ's intimate presence on my deathbed. But in the life I live now, I hunger for so much more. I need God to attend and enliven each of my dyings—and there are many. So many endings before the Ending, so many farewells before the Farewell. On every dream, hope, wound, or wondering that needs to die within me, oh Lord, shed your light and your love.

I'm praying this prayer often these days. My father has dementia and is slowly becoming a person I don't recognize. My mother is a stroke survivor who has lost her hearing and much of her mental acuity. My parents are very much alive; I can sit next to them and hold their hands. I can listen to Dad's

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<sup>1</sup> CBC Mental Health Columnist Mark Henick Saskatoon radio's Morning Edition (August 16, 2023); Henrick is the author of *So Called Normal*. I have gotten a clip of the interview from the CBC Saskatoon office. Further description of SAD can be found at the Canadian Mental Health site: [Seasonal Affective Disorder \(SAD\) | CAMH](#)

preacherly voice and smell the rose-scented lotion on Mom's skin. I am not, at this moment, facing an hour of death. But I am dwelling in the land of many dyings. I've started keeping track of them, because I want to notice any glimmer of light or love God chooses to send to these gravesides.<sup>2</sup>

There's the dying of childhood. Not my literal childhood, but the comforting illusion that I am still the child in my relationship with my parents. For so long, they have been the grown-ups, the wise ones, the heroes I could depend on to come crashing in and save the world when push came to shove. Now our roles have reversed."

I (Patrick) visited with my parents the week I wrote this. Dad is searching for words in ways he never used to do. Mom has neuropathy and is struggling with her balance. I have two brothers near by, but I am not. Our parents have been our providers, and now we three brothers are their care givers with me struggling to do so from a distance. Oh Christ, on each my dyings shed your light and your love.

There is the dying of the future. Our Mennonite churches are dwindling in size and capacity, and there seems little I can do to stem the tide. The creatures named "pastor" are nearing extinction. I sometimes feel like a dinosaur watching the meteors crash all around me and an institution to which I have given much. And this dying of the future does not even touch the personal side. Oh Christ, on each my dyings shed your light and your love.

There is a dying of a particular vision of wholeness, restoration and healing. I am wracked every time I listen to the news and yet feel it is my professional duty to be aware of the concerns with which our city, Province, Nation and world live. There is a rise in homelessness, addictions, disparity of wealth, state sponsored violence, climate change disasters, as well as Christian nationalism. I am painfully aware that last Monday (August 28th) marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the civil rights March on Washington.<sup>3</sup>; the rhetoric and polling numbers of former President Trump along side another racially motivated shooting spree make me wonder if in 50 years we have gained ground or lost ground in racial tolerance let alone equality. Oh Christ, on each my dyings shed your light and your love.

In each of these deaths, and others, there is also a persistent sense of God's presence. Amidst each death, I actually believe God is ushering in new life and invites us to be part of the resurrection not knowing what the new life will look like or how it happens. On that note I will end this section with the words Thomas uses to conclude her essay.

"This business of death and resurrection is supposed to be squarely in our wheelhouse as Christians. This is what we do. We plant our seeds in the

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<sup>2</sup> Debie Thomas, "Each of My Dyings" in *The Christian Century* (August 23), pp 36-37.

<sup>3</sup> See Peter W. Marty's "The Dream and the Backlash" in *The Christian Century* (August 23), p. 1.

ground, knowing they will crack open and die before new life will spring forth. We walk through the shadowy realms of death, trusting our shepherd to protect us from evil. We stand in the valley of dry bones and say, *Yes, I believe these bones will live.*

I believe all of this. I am also felled each time another dying presents itself in my life. Hence the prayer, spoken again and again: “Shed your light and your love.” I cannot consent to die unless Christ calls and bids me come. I will live again only if each of these dying—every small and singular one—is soaked in the love and the light of God, the perpetual giver of life.”

### Moses’ Story of Commission and Rededication

People may wonder why I chose the scripture text of Exodus 3:1-15. I didn’t. It, along with Romans 12, are two options within the assigned readings for today from the Revised Common Lectionary. Given my laments of August, it felt to me a bit like God’s grace. The fuller story of Moses which surrounds the burning bush account is a narrative depicting the dying and rising which Thomas described.

Moses was born during a time of Hebrew slavery in Egypt. His mother, sister and mid-wives send the new born boy down the river to ensure the safety of young Moses. As a newborn Hebrew boy, you see, the Egyptians should have killed him at birth; but he didn’t die. It must have been terrifying for all those women to deliver the child, put him in basket and send him down the river. And a terrible loss for the parents and family. Your son is alive and yet he is gone. Oh God, on each of our dyings shed your light and your love.

Moses is adopted into the royal family and instantly becomes a prince. In a flash of compassion driven violence, he kills an Egyptian guard mis-treating a Hebrew slave. Fearing for his life he takes refuge across the border out of Pharaoh’s long arm of the law. Moses leaves all that he has known heading into an uncertain future. Oh God, on each our dyings shed your light and your love.

At a Midian well Moses shows kindness to Zipporah, daughter of Reuel / Jethro. Moses and Zipporah marry. They become parents of Gershom. With Zipporah on maternity leave, Moses becomes the sheep minder of the family. His Hebrew family is gone, but not forgotten—Gershom translates to one who sojourns. Oh God, on each my dyings shed your light and your love.

As a recap. In Midian Moses has found refuge and a new start. He has a new family. He has a new occupation. Compared with the drama of Egypt, life is going pretty well. And then God speaks out of a burning bush.

God tells Moses to go back into Egypt. God tells Moses to be part of bringing release to the slaves. Moses doesn’t want to go and makes up all manner of excuses. What if they ask about your name? What if they want to see some act of power? I don’t speak well, so I can’t be your spokesperson. Clearly, Moses

doesn't want to go. He likes his new occupation. He likes the calm of being on the land. He likes his new family tent. But God is insistent, so Moses packs up the family and heads west. As part of the story Moses must embrace the death of this season of his life and step into the future trusting God's promise of Divine presence. If this is true of Moses, will it be any less true for us? Oh God, on each of our dyings shed your light and your love.

It is not easy to step out in the unknown future. One must have a trust in God's presence beside us and before us even if we do not always perceive it. The tasks before us may not be easy and we may not get them finished. And we will not get things just right in the next phases of the journey even as we stumbled in the previous phase. Imperfection is very much a part of the Moses story.

Moses is a murderer, and God still chooses him. The faith of Moses is tenuous at best when encountering God in the enflamed bush, and still God chooses him. Moses often blames God for the misery he experiences, and still God chooses him. Moses blatantly disobeys God's directives, and still God abides with him. If this is the case for Moses, will it be any less the situation for us? God chooses us and abides with us in spite of us. Oh God, on each of our dyings shed your light and your love.

Knowing God chooses us and loves us and abides with us, how shall we go forward in the midst of our dyings into the unknown world of resurrection? How do we enter the new school and church year and stage of life? The words of Romans are a fitting answer to that question and a fine way to end a sermon. Beloved:

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Amen.

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