

## *Encounter, Listen, Discern*

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### **Exodus 3:1-14 (NRSV)**

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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' <sup>4</sup>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.' <sup>5</sup>Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' <sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup> 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, <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup>So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' <sup>11</sup>But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' <sup>12</sup>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.'

<sup>13</sup> 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?' <sup>14</sup>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."'

### **Context**

The opening chapters of the Book of Exodus are dramatic indeed. By the end of chapter 1 Pharaoh, intent on subduing the Israelite people, has ordered, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile" (Exodus 1:22). In chapter 2 the infant Moses is rescued by Pharaoh's daughter from the river and is raised as her son. Years later, the adult Moses, after killing an Egyptian, flees to the land of Midian and marries a daughter of the priest of Midian. Meanwhile back in Egypt the Israelites are in a sorry state: "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. ... God heard their groaning ... and God took notice of them" (Exodus 2:23-24). Moses – and his people – are vulnerable, ensnared in a world which is uncertain and threatening, with powerful forces lined up against them.

By contrast in the first verse of chapter 3 Moses is occupied with the prosaic, timeless task of tending his father-in-law's flock. Into this everyday world comes the startling sight of a bush, which is burning but not consumed. Already we have been prompted to realise this is no ordinary landscape by the reference to Horeb, "the mountain of God" (v.1). There is furthermore a mysterious mention

of “the angel of the LORD” (v.2) but it seems rather that it is Moses’ natural curiosity that draws him to investigate this strange phenomenon: “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up” (v.3). A great sight, but one that also attracts Moses’ other senses as he not only sees the “flame of fire” (v.2) but must have heard its crackling, smelt the burning stems, and felt the heat of the blazing bush.

Once God realises Moses’ attention has been caught, God speaks to him, calling him twice by name: “Moses, Moses!”. This follows the pattern evident elsewhere in the Bible of the person’s name being mentioned twice, whenever God speaks to a human being, e.g., Abraham (Genesis 22:11), Jacob (Genesis 46:2) and Samuel (1 Samuel 3:4).

After Moses responds, “Here I am,” God issues the deeply moving instruction: “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” We are not told explicitly that Moses complies but, as the illustration below suggests, for centuries readers and artists have assumed that he did so immediately.



Removing footwear as a sign of respect in a holy place is a long established Near Eastern custom, still evident today in the custom of Muslims taking off their shoes as they enter a mosque. Exodus 39:1-31 describes the vestments worn by the priests in the Tabernacle, but there is no reference to the priests’ footwear; it is assumed they are barefoot in the sacred precincts. Similarly during the Good Friday liturgy the Roman Missal indicates that the priest celebrant should approach to venerate the Cross with “his shoes removed, if appropriate.”

Once Moses has acknowledged God’s presence by this simple yet profound act, the encounter develops rapidly. God reveals his identity: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” and goes on to indicate how attentive he is to his people: “I have observed the misery of my people ... I have heard their cry ... I know their sufferings.” If sight has been the primary sense used in the appearance of the burning bush, now listening also comes to the fore. “I have *heard* their cry on account of their taskmasters. ... The *cry* of the Israelites *has now come* to me” (vv.7, 9).

In the ensuing dialogue Moses reveals how intently he is now listening, a listening that leads to the revelation of God’s name. Moses is amazed when God announces, “I will send you to Pharaoh to

bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt' (v.10) and instantly queries, "'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'" (v.11). God reassures him, "'I will be with you'" (v.12), but that leads to Moses' next question: "'If ... they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?'" (v.13). God replies to Moses, "'I am who I am'" (v.14). The revelation of the divine name marks a new stage in Moses' relationship with God. It is a special moment that is both intimate and sacred. To this day the sacredness of the divine name YHWH (Yahweh) is preserved by the Jewish custom of substituting the words *Adonai* (my Lord) or *Hashem* (the name) whenever the word is read aloud in Hebrew.

Scholars note that Moses' encounter with God bears all the hallmarks of a prophetic call narrative, when the mission of prophetic figures, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, is initiated. The American scholar Carol Meyers outlines the typical pattern of a prophetic call narrative as follows: "the appearance of God to the prophet (3:1-4a), an introductory statement by the deity (3:4b-9), a statement of commission (3:10), an objection (3:11), and reassurance along with an empowering sign (3:12)."<sup>1</sup>

The meeting at the burning bush has changed Moses' life for ever.

### **The Burning Bush and Synodality**

The enduring importance and relevance of the encounter at the burning bush can speak to us of the essence of synodality, which is not just a short-term preparation for the Universal Synod in Rome in 2023 and the Irish Synodal Assembly in 2026, but rather an enduring way of being and functioning, "expressed in the Church's ordinary way of living and working"<sup>2</sup>.

At the Mass for the Opening of the Synodal Path on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2021, Pope Francis suggested in his homily that three verbs characterized the Synodal path: encounter, listen, and discern.

#### *Encounter*

Some hallmarks of God's encounter with Moses:

- It happens in the midst of Moses' mundane, everyday life.
- God waits to speak until Moses is attentive.
- God takes the initiative by
  - o revealing the unusual presence of the angel of the LORD
  - o attracting Moses' attention by means of the burning bush
  - o calling Moses by name
  - o alerting him to the sacredness of the place
  - o being the first to speak.
- The encounter takes place in a sacred space; we stand on holy ground whenever God speaks to us (or whenever we speak to each other).

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.56.

<sup>2</sup> *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*, 1.2.

Pope Francis at the Opening Mass: “As we initiate this process, we too are called to become experts in the art of *encounter*. Not so much by organizing events or theorizing about problems, as in taking time to encounter the Lord and one another.”

### *Listen*

Some hallmarks of God’s listening

- God is a God who listens: before ever God meets Moses, he has already been listening to the cries of his people.
- God’s listening leads to action: he has resolved to “come down to deliver them from the Egyptians”, and to bring them to “a land flowing with milk and honey.”
- God calls Moses to listen to him. It is an invitation, not a command.
- In the intimacy of listening God uses Moses’ name and reveals his own; God knows him as a beloved individual.
- God does not dismiss Moses’ fears but offers Moses reassurance and a sign of hope.
- God speaks; Moses listens; Moses responds; God listens.<sup>3</sup>

Pope Francis: “True encounter only arises from *listening* ... . Let us ask ourselves frankly during this synodal process: Are we good at listening? How good is the ‘hearing’ of our heart?”

### *Discern*

Some hallmarks of discerning with God’s help:

- God meets Moses where he is, near his home ground, in his ordinary task of keeping the flock.
- God opens the prospect of a new life and a new mission: “I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”
- God persuades and reassures Moses; he does not coerce.
- Moses’ new role is for the good of others. He will rescue the people from their slavery.
- Moses is changed: from being a timid tender of his father-in-law’s flock, he will become a resolute leader of his people.

Pope Francis: “Finally, *discern*. Encounter and listening are not ends in themselves, leaving everything just as it was before. On the contrary, whenever we enter into dialogue, we allow ourselves to be challenged, to advance on a journey. And in the end, we are no longer the same; we are changed. ... Ask ourselves what it is that God wants to say to us in this time. And the direction in which he wants to lead us.”

### **Questions**

- What message has the Burning Bush for you?
- How are you being called to encounter, listen, and discern?

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<sup>3</sup> Read Exodus 3:15-22 and 4:1-17 for further examples of God listening to Moses.