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'Out of Egypt I Have Called My Son' (Exodus 3: 1-15)

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We're embarking on the season of Lent, our six week period of preparation for the celebration of Easter. During this time, I'm planning to base my reflections on readings from the book of Exodus. I'm finding this an exciting, if slightly daunting plan! There are passages and books in the Hebrew Scriptures that feel enormous – so saturated with symbolic meaning, so formative for Western consciousness and imagination, and yet so foreign, that the reader (let alone the preacher) feels dwarfed in relation to them. Exodus is that kind of book.

And why now? Conventionally, during Lent, we tend to focus on readings from the gospels – we tell the story of Jesus' life and teaching up until he enters Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week. But it's the Exodus story – the story of God acting to liberate the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt – that implicitly shapes much of the gospel's understanding of what Jesus is up to. It's Exodus that provides much of the symbolic wherewithal to communicate Jesus' meaning. So by returning to this foundational narrative, I hope our sense of the Jesus story will also be deepened and we may experience in a new way the drama of salvation.

Some context to begin. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Exodus is the second of the first five books of the Bible, the five books the Hebrew tradition calls the Torah, the 'teaching' or 'law'.¹ Traditionally, the authorship of all five books was attributed to Moses, but for over two centuries of biblical scholarship it's

¹ Robert Alter (trans. and commentary), *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2004), p.x.

been recognized that they're drawn together from different literary sources.² The sources themselves date, in all likelihood, from the 9th to the 6th century BCE, with the final editing of the five books into a single collection happening sometime in the 6th century BCE during the Babylonian exile.³ Unsurprisingly, this process of composition gave rise to 'a good many duplications, contradictions, and inconsistencies, which (says Robert Alter) have been abundantly analyzed by modern scholarship'.⁴ Yet at the same time, there's clearly a cohesive story being told – the five books provide an account of 'the origins and definition of the nation [of Israel] from its first forebears who accepted a covenant with God to the moment when the people stands on the brink of entering the Promised Land'.⁵

Tonight, we pick up this story at a critical moment. You might remember that towards the end of the book of Genesis, Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, has ended up in Egypt. This is because Jacob's younger son Joseph – he of the coat of many colours – has risen to become a powerful administrator in Egypt and has been able to offer sanctuary to his ageing father and his brothers and all their households, as they escape famine in the land of Canaan. It's an immigrant success story, a program of family reunification. But fast forward some generations, to when there is a new king in Egypt who did not know Joseph. The Israelite families have multiplied and grown strong. The new king feels threatened by these resident foreigners, and begins to oppress them with forced labour (Exodus 1: 10-11). Sound familiar?

Moses is born under this regime and eventually reacts violently to it. Early in the book of Exodus, we hear: 'One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labour. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his

² These strands are designated as follows: 'J' the Yahwist; 'E' the Elohist; 'P' the Priestly; and 'D' the Deuteronomist. Alter, *The Five Books*, p.xi.

³ Alter, *The Five Books*, pp.xi-xii.

⁴ Alter, *The Five Books*, p.xii.

⁵ Alter, *The Five Books*, p.xiv.

kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand' (Exodus 2: 11-12). Unfortunately for Moses, and despite his precautions, his actions became known and, fearing the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt's retaliation, he fled to the land of Midian, where he married Zipporah, daughter of Jethro.

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, the king has died, and (the text says) 'the Israelites groaned from their bondage and cried out, and their plea from the bondage went up to God. And God heard their moaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God saw the Israelites, and God knew' (Exodus 2: 23-25).⁶ This is Robert Alter's translation of the end of Exodus, Chapter 2. He suggests that when the Hebrew says simply that 'God knew', God's knowing seems to encompass everything at once – the suffering of the people, the promises of the covenant, and everything that must come to pass if their freedom is to be realized.⁷ This objectless verb 'God knew', Alter says, 'prepares us for the divine address from the burning bush and the beginning of Moses' mission'.

At last, then, we come to our passage and to me it feels so numinous, so like a burning bush in itself, that I fear anything I say risks trampling on holy ground. But with our sandals off, let us pause and wonder awhile.

We might notice, first, the liminal and unpromising site of this encounter. Moses is living as an alien in a foreign land, with seemingly no prospect of return to his origins. He's led his father-in-law's flock into the wilderness. The Hebrew preposition 'into', in this phrase, usually means 'behind'. The King James Version accordingly translates where Moses has gone as 'to the back side of the desert',⁸ while the New Revised Standard Version says he led his flock 'beyond the wilderness'. We're truly in no-man's

⁶ Trans. Alter, *The Five Books*, pp.316-317.

⁷ Alter, *The Five Books*, p.317.

⁸ Alter, *The Five Books*, p.318.

land. What's more, the mountain where Moses encounters the Lord is called Horeb, a name derived from the root meaning 'dryness'. It means something like 'Parched Mountain', and one of the Rabbinic commentators points out that while Moses started out life associated with water – hidden as an infant in the rushes of the River Nile – he now meets God in the barren, least fertile seeming place of all, 'in dry desert and in flame'.

We might notice also the extraordinary emphasis in this passage on looking, seeing, taking time to attend more deeply. Listen again: 'The Lord's messenger *appeared* to him in a flame of fire ... and he *saw*, and *look*, the bush was burning with fire and the bush was not consumed. And Moses thought, "Let me, pray, turn aside that I may *see* this great *sight* ..." And the Lord *saw* that he had turned aside to *see*, and God called to him from the midst of the bush'. Irish poet, priest and spiritual director, Michael McCarthy, has drawn out the profoundly contemplative dimension of this encounter. In his poem, 'Burning Bush', he imagines Moses telling the story:

I was looking at the shape of Horeb, its slopes and shelves
the bushes with their hidden liturgies of bird-life
the grazing on the foothills
I watched without watching: ...

I was enraptured in the smallness of things.
Otherwise I might have missed it:

the beginnings of a shimmer
against the blue black of the mountain,
an almost flame.⁹

It's a glimpse of God, a flash of awareness, the intimation of a call as he gives attention.

And finally, we might notice the power of naming and being known. In this encounter, God calls Moses emphatically by name, 'Moses, Moses'. And in turn, Moses

⁹ Michael McCarthy, 'Burning Bush' in *Birds' Nests & Other Poems* (Cork: Bradshaw Books, 2003), p.21.

insists on knowing the name of God. Except that God's name turns out to be almost a non-name, so elusive and indefinable, so almost nonexistent, that in the end God can be known only in relation to God's history with us: 'Thus shall you say to the Israelites: "The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, sent me to you"'.

I'm a systematic thinker – I find it tempting to tie all this up in a bow, to draw some general spiritual moral from the story. These, then, we could say are the conditions of divine human encounter: liminality, contemplation, and letting yourself be known. And, for what it's worth, I think that's all true. But as big as these thoughts are, the story remains even bigger and more mysterious; it exceeds system and the distillation of abstract spiritual wisdom. It asks of us what the bush asked of Moses – to take off our sandals, and to let ourselves be drawn by the Un-nameable One into a journey for freedom and for life.