

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Online Bible Study Starter

Exodus 3:1-6

God is holy, and the holy cannot be grasped, possessed, or exploited by human beings. The heart of the commandment against idols (Exodus 20) lies in God's refusal to be reduced to the manageable, the predictable, the regulated. We cannot hold God in our hands or subject God to our wills. These first six verses of Exodus 3 establish the distance between God and the human being, Moses. "Come no closer!" That command gives the watchword for these first six verses.

Then verse 6 offers a hint of what is to come. Moses is to come no closer, take no liberties, make no claim upon God, not even with his natural curiosity (about the bush). Yet, as soon as the distance is established and Moses is warned to respect it, God takes a step closer to him. *I knew your father. I may be new to you, but you are not new to me. We have a history of which I am aware, even if you are not.* "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

By this self-identification with Israel's ancestors, God not only moves a step closer to Moses (and through him to the Israelites back in Egypt), but also re-enters the history of promise. The stories of God's dealings with the ancestors – Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and his family – are driven by God's promises to these people and their descendants. To Abraham and Sarah, God promises the heir they lack and a land for their vast multitude of descendants, the land of Canaan. So, the mention of these ancestors suggests the renewal of the promise. We, of course, know already that Moses will be the one through whom God leads the Israelites to the land promised their ancestors, but as yet Moses knows nothing of that.

Moses must keep his distance, but God is coming closer. That tension will be repeated throughout the chapter.

In form, this narrative is like the call of a prophet, and Moses is seen by later Israel as the first and greatest of the prophets. "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel." (Deuteronomy 34:10-12, the last lines of the book). So it is that the Gospel of Matthew in particular goes to some lengths in presenting Jesus as like Moses but greater than Moses.

Since both religion and life itself always tend toward idolatry, as people seek to glorify their own achievements and take control of life into their own hands, it is crucial to our understanding of biblical faith that we acknowledge the freedom and holiness of God. We can never, in any way, take charge of God. No ritual, sacrament, doctrine, or confession of faith gives us any power or authority

over God. We cannot obligate God in any way. Taking the idea further, we need to know that faith is trust, not certitude, ever. Faith does not take God's love or mercy for granted. As Christians, we need to be aware always of the difference between trust and certitude. Paul the apostle spoke of his own salvation as something for which he hoped but never as something he possessed and could take for granted. Paul would never have accepted the current notion of "being saved" as a status in which one could consider the question of God settled and done.

God can never be for us a question answered, a matter solved, a situation we have well in hand. God is God, before whom we must be silent and keep our distance. "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." The place is holy, of course, not because the plot itself is sacred, but because God is there.

What's with the "angel of the LORD" in verse 2? It soon becomes apparent here, as elsewhere in the Old Testament, that the one speaking to Moses is the LORD God and not just a messenger (the meaning of "angel"). This biblical use of "the angel of the LORD" is called by biblical scholars a hypostasis – a sort of stand-in for God's presence or projection of God's presence used to keep the distance between the human and the holy God. The angel is not a separate being but a projection used to avoid showing Moses as speaking too directly to God. In this way, the Bible maintains reverence for God's holiness. The Bible also employs other ways of avoiding any too-direct reference to God that would be seen as irreverent, such as speaking of God's "glory" which appears (when it means God is present) or using the word "heaven" to mean God. In his parable of the two sons (the Prodigal Son), Jesus has the younger son say, "I have sinned against heaven and against you (his father)." Here "against heaven" means against God, and "heaven" is to be understood as a substitute-word for God. Likewise, in Matthew, Jesus speaks of the "kingdom of heaven" following Jewish piety. Luke renders the same phrase with the same meaning as the "kingdom of God," since Luke's gospel is for Gentile readers to whom "kingdom of heaven" might wrongly suggest some location other than earth. To this day, Jewish piety often avoids direct references to God, especially in print. In our bulletin for the interfaith Thanksgiving service, one recent rabbi here in Bridgeton asked us to print the word "God" in the Jewish readings as "G-d" to avoid spelling it out. He read it aloud as "God," but left the printed name incomplete out of reverence, so that not even the printed word would appear as a "graven" image of God. So, the angel or messenger of the LORD serves as a slightly less direct presence of God, but Yahweh God very quickly moves closer to Moses, and the exchange between them becomes more personal.

Discussion Suggestions:

1. Does this reading add a dimension to my discussion of the "fear of the LORD" in my sermon, "Trust and Fear"? <http://home.earthlink.net/~rsind/sermon060521.htm>
2. We may think of idolatry as something remote from us and our faith, something primitive and pagan. Is it?
3. How might this reading's insistence upon God's holiness enhance the message of God's compassion that is coming in this chapter?