

ADVENT VESPERS I-2006

Exodus 3:1-14

I AM

Let's review the reasons God chose Moses, this broken-down and busted shepherd: ... All right, now we're cooking; time for a flashback back to Egypt. The Egyptians were murdering male Israelite babies. Baby Moses, whose name means "*drawn from the water*," was placed in a basket and sent up the river to spare his life. He was found and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. An Israelite living as an Egyptian, he could look out from the man-made paradise of the Pharaoh's palace and see the hell on earth that his brothers and sisters called home.

One day things came to a head, when Moses went down to where his people were to watch them work. Dressed as an Egyptian, he wore the outward fashion of the oppressor even as his whole inner being went out the oppressed. He saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite, as if the man were a dog, or less than a dog. He looked around, saw no one, and resorted to vigilante justice. He killed the Egyptian—a bold and brazen move by the now broken-down and busted shepherd we see in our text. Moses took it upon himself to deliver his people, or at least this one.

The next day, Moses, increasingly obsessed with the plight of his birth people, went back again. Dressed as an Egyptian, he wore the outward fashion of the oppressor even as his whole inner being went out the oppressed. He saw two Israelites fighting. Why in the world, united in their misery and bondage, fight with each other, especially when they ought to fight for each other? He tried to intercede, but the Israelites didn't want his suburban cowboy justice. "*Are you going to kill us as you killed the Egyptian?*" Moses was a man without a country.

Pharaoh caught wind of all this. He wouldn't have sedition, especially not in his own house, especially not from his own adopted grandson. So Moses, the self-appointed deliverer, fled without his people, without his dignity, without a plan or hope. Moses became a shepherd. No one liked shepherds in the ancient world; no one, that is, except the Lord.

And now we fast forward to a burning bush, a broken-down, busted, now barefoot shepherd, and a God named "*I AM*." "*Moses!*" And, then a second time, "*Moses!*" And, probably after looking around and pinching himself, Moses gave the answer God's people give when the Lord calls, "*Here I am*."

"*Go and deliver*." Moses had tried that already; it didn't work. The LORD must be looking for some other Moses. "*Who am I?*" Moses asks. And isn't that a familiar question for the Christian. "*Who am I*, that you should be mindful of me? *Who am I*, that you should seek me when I am lost? *Who am I*, that you should forgive me when you find me? *Who am I*, that you should call me your own? *Who am I*, that you should enlist me in your service? *Who am I*, that you might demonstrate your love for my neighbor through my hands, my feet, my mouth, my ears? *Who am I, LORD?*"

And who are you? There are lots of things you are, but there are a lot more things you are not, that you ought to have been. Who are you, that the LORD should *speak your name*, that the LORD should *place you in His service*, whether in the home, in the office, in the school, on the field, or in the church? You are broken-down and busted, though hopefully not barefoot. But the LORD doesn't make mistakes; He knows to whom He speaks.

There comes a time when we must *stop trying to do God's work and let Him do it, yes, perhaps through us, but Him doing it nonetheless*. God's timetable is His timetable. Moses learned that. God's plan is God's plan. Moses learned that. God's will is God's will. Moses learned that. It took forty years with livestock, but he learned it. Let us learn it as well. Let us receive His humbling with patience that we might serve with joy. Let us serve *where* God has placed us *how* God has placed us *in the way* that God has placed us. The LORD hears your cries, and He calls you through His Word, which sets your hearts aflame even as its promises preserve you in the refining fires of this life. Our ascending Savior, the new and better Moses, promises *"I AM, and surely I AM with you always."*

The LORD sends His shepherds. Why Moses? Lord knows. Really, the LORD knows. But St. Paul gives us a glimpse into God's head worthy taking:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Why did God call St. Paul, the least of the apostles, one untimely born? Why doesn't matter. By the grace of God St. Paul was what he was. And by the grace of God Moses was what he was. They were called shepherds, pastors of God's people, to declare to those in bondage the I AM's gracious answer to their penitent cry, *"Who am I?" "By the grace of God you are what you are, and I AM, and you are mine, and I AM with you."* And that is the gospel, made flesh in Christ, stamped with the Father's approval on the cross, delivered from the tomb and into your hearts by the Spirit and through faith.

"Who am I?" That can be a troubling question, especially when we know who we are. But perhaps there is a reason God speaks from the burning-yet-not-consumed thorn bush, a bush that is by definition and by nature unfruitful and good only for causing harm. Who are we to quarrel if the LORD wills thorn bushes to blossom? *"I AM who I AM, and by my grace you are who you are: my own dear child,"* the LORD tells us, and He can call whomever He wishes to call, and can use whatever He wishes to use, and can preserve even the most seemingly worthless things in the most seemingly consuming fires. So strap on your sandals, set aside your second guesses, and be who God has declared you to be. The LORD doesn't make mistakes; He knows to whom He speaks. Amen.