

ECHOES OF GOD: JOURNEYING WITH GOD'S WORD



Week One: Exodus

Dear Friends,

Let's start on our journey together with the word of God as our companion. And, as on all significant journeys, we can hope to know our companion, and even ourselves, somewhat better at the end of the journey.

So shall we set off?

The Bible is full of journeys: to freedom, to slavery, to exile, of homecoming, and pilgrimage, all in search of a better future. If you read Mark's Gospel Jesus seems to arrive, teach, heal and move on with considerable speed. He often leaves the disciples breathless, but clearly reveals the urgency of his mission. However, there is a Great Journey that in some ways forms the identity and sense of purpose of God's whole people, then and now.

This is the Exodus of the twelve gangs of slave labourers from oppression in Egypt. It's a journey from not knowing who they were, or what they could hope for, to becoming *Is-ra-el* literally **the People of God**. It's an amazing story and it has a whole book dedicated to it in the Bible. This journey is retold and remembered in many ways and forms. We hear it in story, poetry, and song in all the other books of the Bible; especially Numbers, Deuteronomy, Wisdom 10-19, Psalms 78, 105, 106 and 135 and Isaiah 40-55. It is significant that all the other books, including the Gospels and Letters of the New Testament, have echoes of it.

You know the basic story. The person who God chose to lead the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt was a member of Pharaoh's court called Moses, a spoilt, adopted, Hebrew orphan. He was an unlikely leader of a new holy people and showed himself as such, murdering an Egyptian, and then escaping into the desert in fear of reprisal. A local farmer gave him work as a shepherd and married his daughter, Zipporah, to him. There could be little expectation that such a character would achieve very much.

So let's read together what happened in the desert. It's a story that takes us into the heart of the relationship God called Moses to, and still calls all those who follow his journey of faith, across the ages. On our journey, we will travel backward and forward from this story. It will invite us to encounter the living God, and lead us into liberated and free lives.

Main text: Exodus 3:1-17 - The Burning Bush

There are echoes of the unique importance and holiness of the divine name throughout the whole of the Scriptures, but especially in Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 19:12 and in Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:34 ff.

1. Moses was looking after the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led it to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2. The angel of God appeared to him in a flame blazing from the middle of a bush. Moses looked; there was the bush blazing, but the bush was not being burnt up. 3. Moses said, 'I must go across and see this strange sight, and why the bush is not being burnt up.' 4. When God saw him going across to look, God called to him from the middle of the bush. 'Moses, Moses!' he said. 'Here I am,' he answered. 5. 'Come no nearer,' he said. 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. 6. I am the God of your ancestors,' he said, 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.' At this Moses covered his face, for he was afraid to look at God. 7. God then said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying for help on account of their taskmasters. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. 8. And I have come down to rescue them from the clutches of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that country, to a country rich and broad, to a country flowing with milk and honey, to the home of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites. 9. Yes indeed, the Israelites' cry for help has reached me, and I have also seen the cruel way in which the Egyptians are oppressing them. 10. So now I am sending you to Pharaoh, for you to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.' 11. Moses said to God, 'Who am I to go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' 12. 'I shall be with you,' God said, 'and this is the sign by which you will know that I was the one who sent you. After you have led the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.' 13. Moses then said to God, 'Look, if I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you," and they say to me, "What is his name?" what am I to tell them?' 14. God said to Moses, 'I am he who is.' And he said, 'This is what you are to say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you." ' 15. God further said to Moses, 'You are to tell the Israelites, "God, 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 all time, and thus I am to be invoked for all generations to come. 16. 'Go, gather the elders of Israel together and tell them, "God, the God of your ancestors, has appeared to me -- the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob -- and has indeed visited you and seen what is being done to you in Egypt, 17. and has said: I shall bring you out of the misery of Egypt to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, to a country flowing with milk and honey.

(The Revised New Jerusalem Bible)

This remarkable story is the core revelation of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. In one sense the rest of the Scriptures are the unpacking of its meaning. The great Biblical stories reveal the times and ways that God's people open themselves to this revelation and discover their own identity, or else close themselves off and become lost.

A little background

Gods in the ancient world were local to a place or nation, race or class. Here Moses encounters "the God". He is told that this God is the God of his long forgotten ancestors: Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob. Wandering figures from a different world of faith. A world lost before the disaster of slavery. So this is a God whose influence stretches across time and space, a god not limited like the local gods.

When the terrified Moses tries to wriggle out of returning to Pharaoh's court, he asks who should he say sent him? An ancestral deity of slaves is unlikely to cut much mustard with Pharaoh, the Lord of the known World - who was regarded by the Egyptians as a god himself. So God answers with a fascinating definition which can include "***I am who I am***" or "***I will be where I will be***" or even "***I will be what I will be***".

Therefore, God's-self tells us that God is always beyond our naming, beyond our words, beyond any images that we might make of God. Yet "*the God*" who is totally beyond our imagining and our images chooses to be with us and calls us to an intimate relationship with God's-self. This God sees our misery and comes to liberate and free us. And this God promises to do this for all time. The people this God will call into being, literally "***the people of the God***" in Hebrew "***Is-ra-el***", will be a sign in history that this is what God is and this is what God offers.

Much later, reflecting backwards, the Hebrew People will come to understand that only this God could be the Creator. Indeed, that this was "*the one God*" who their father and mother in faith, Abram and Sara went out to seek, from the comfort of civilised Ur of the Chaldees, with its many temples and gods. The messengers of this same *God* will promise to the old couple a son, and an eternal inheritance. Later, the people, having abandoned the simple worship of the living God, are taken into exile. There in slavery, they will again rediscover the meaning and significance of *God*. They will realise that this God who chose them is also the Lord of all history, of all time and of the cosmos.

And when the time is right this "***I am who I am***" will choose to come among them as one of their own, ***Emanu-el*** – God with us, Jesus, born of a young Palestinian woman. Jesus' life will fulfil this revelation and show us all how the liberator God of Exodus, now in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, can make us all truly free.

Reflection

Each year at the feast of Passover, the youngest member of a Jewish household asks the oldest: "*Why do we remember this night above all other nights?*" The oldest person there will tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt, of all that happened as the people of God came into being, and of how they became a free people and a sign of how such freedom is possible. Then he or she has to ask, how is the free God *God* still calling the people today and leading them into new freedom?

Jesus did this for his people at the Last Supper and we are asked to do it week by week in the Eucharist. We remember where we come from - God's free choice and that we are the forgiven ones. We remember what we are called to be - the agents of God's freedom and creative love.



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