

God in the Present Tense
Exodus 3
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How would you describe a moose to someone who has never, ever seen a moose before?

This month I was reading a 2013 edition of Mosaic, the magazine put out by Canadian Baptist Ministries. It detailed the first CBM short term mission trip from Canada to Cuba. Youth and leaders from Welland, Ontario, travelled to Cuba to meet and serve with our FIBAC churches.

People's enthusiasm burst through the communication barrier, as youth from both countries carried on conversations as best they could through English and Spanish. But the real comedic barrier came when the youth from Ontario tried to explain to Cubans what a moose is – without using any pictures!

Where would you even begin? Depend on who you ask, moose can be majestic or homely. Some would say they look super dopey while others know they are exceptionally dangerous.

Cuba has no large animals to speak of. You couldn't say that a moose is like a large deer – there are no deer. There is absolutely no frame of reference to describe a moose to a Cuban based on the animals they already know. There are cows in Cuba, but a domesticated cow is in so many ways nowhere similar to a moose. The idea of moose walking freely among the coniferous trees of Canada would be an unimaginable concept!

A moose sounds like a fantastical, imaginary animal. To people outside of our borders you may as well be describing a Canadian unicorn. It seems that outlandish and that made-up.

You certainly can't sing songs to people about moose to describe them to others. The campfire song "There was a Great Big Moose" is completely useless in this regard.

So through a barrier of language, with no visual aids, and with no point of reference, how do you describe a moose to someone who has never, ever seen a moose? And how do you do this without sounding like you have lost your mind?!

Take this puzzle a giant step forward. How would you describe God to someone through barriers of culture, lack of common experience, no visual aids, and no previous point of reference? Where would you even begin?

How do you explain this Divine Being to someone when they have no point of reference?

This is the challenge facing Moses when God asks Moses to lead the Israelites. Moses barely knows God. How is he supposed to describe God to the people he is supposed to lead? In Exodus 3, God shares who God is with Moses, and then shares how Moses is to describe God to the Israelite people.

A key word explaining God in Exodus 3 is the word “I”. The use of the personal pronoun “I” by Moses and by God in their conversation is very over the top. It may even seem overused here, but the tiny word “I” will show us who God truly is. There may be no “I” in team; but there an “I” in Exodus 3 – and lots of it!

Many of us are very used to the idea of a personal God that is near to us and available to us. This idea would not have been a prominent thought in Moses’ day. In the minds of many God was distant and to be feared. The idea of a God that was near and available was preposterous, making the tiny word “I” very immense.

This mysterious God gets Moses’ attention in an unmistakable way.

Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³ So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.” (Exodus 3:1-2)

Here’s our first “I” sighting. ***“I will go over and see this strange sight.”*** (Also, between Moses’ experience of the event and the recording of the event, there has GOT to be something lost in translation here! This seems to be a very subdued reaction!)

⁴ When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

Again, Moses responds with an “I” statement: ***“Here I am.”*** Although this bush that burns but is not consumed is otherworldly, this is a very personal engagement with God. God sees Moses. God calls Moses over by name. And Moses responds: ***“Here I am.”***

God is near and personal, but God is also completely “other”. Moses is told to remove his shoes – he’s on Holy ground! But God also shares the deep connection that Moses has to God, even if Moses did not know this connection existed. God says:

- ***“I am the God of your Father.”***
- ***“I am the God of Abraham.”***
- ***“I am the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.”***

These are THE vital people in Moses' personal history, and in the history of all Israelite people. This God speaking to Moses out of the bush is a historically significant being. This God has roots through the generations.

As is communicated throughout the book of Exodus, God is also the personal God who sees!

- ***"I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt."***
- ***"I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers."***
- ***"I am concerned about their suffering."***

The Israelites have been in slavery in Egypt for a very long time now. Their misery has endured for a long time. Anytime we have a faith that we hold on to, and we go through long periods of suffering, what do we ask? "Doesn't God care?" "Doesn't God see me?" "Why doesn't God do something?" All of these seem like very reasonable questions for the enslaved Israelites to ask. God lets Moses know: I have seen their misery, I have heard their pain, and I am concerned." This is genuine concern. This is not concern in any sort of dismissive way. This is a God who truly sees and is truly engaged.

God's personal interaction with the people does not stop at concern or empathy – God has a plan of action. ***"I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land . . ."*** God is moving them from this place of misery and captivity, and moving them to their own place. This God that is often mistaken as distant and uninvolved will "come down to rescue them" and "bring them up" to a new land. Again, God sees: ***". . . I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them."*** But God doesn't just see. God will act. God will rescue.

God is personal, attentive and active. God will do all of this saving in spectacular fashion. And though God does not seem to need help in making this rescue happen, God will not be doing this alone. He gets Moses involved: ***"I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."***

Moses does NOT agree with this plan.

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

Moses has serious doubts. What qualifications does Moses have? He's been away from his people and Egypt for decades. He's just meeting God. He's a shepherd – he's no leader or speaker. "Who am I?" God responds to Moses' protest.

I will be with you.

When Moses tells God his lack of qualifications, God responds with his promised presence. God responds that God will make this happen or help this happy. God will fully equip Moses for the task at hand. God even gives a sign that he will be with Moses:

And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.

Reading this “sign” made me laugh out loud. *Here is the sign that I have sent you: when this impossible job is complete, this is the sign that I have sent you.* The sign that God is with you is when the job is done. As far as signs go, maybe not the best assurance. However, it’s a clear call to follow and obey.

This will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.

Moses has even more concerns. (Wouldn’t you?) He has no credibility with these people!

Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’

Then what shall I tell them?”

Moses is having to describe a moose to a Cuban. He is having to credibly say to them that God has sent him, and then describe to them who exactly this God is. What can he possibly offer them that says, “I have a credible mission from a credible God?”

This seems to be where the entire chapter has been heading. How can you describe the God who speaks but who also shows up in burning bushes with holy ground? God says:

“I am who I am.

This is what you are to say to the Israelites:

‘I am has sent me to you.’”

This name – I Am who I Am – seems to say nothing and everything all at once. It seems vague. But it’s the name that this entire passage has been building towards. And the “I Am that I Am” covers everything that Moses has encountered with God so far!

I Am Who I Am covers everything about God’s past history with the Israelites. ***“Say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.’ “Go, assemble the elders of Israel and say to them . . .***

I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt.

Though I Am Who I Am has a history with the Israelite people, God is very much present RIGHT NOW! God has watched, God has seen, and God cares. God has this immeasurable history that extends before Abraham, yet is exceptionally present with the Israelites right now.

I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into . . . a land flowing with milk and honey.'

I Am Who I AM is working toward their future. God will rescue and lead them from a temporary land of misery to a permanent land of promise.

I Am Who I Am is entirely active in that process. God lays out the things that God will actively do.

- ***I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless a mighty hand compels him.***
- ***I will stretch out my hand and strike the Egyptians with all the wonders that I will perform among them.***
- ***I will make the Egyptians favorably disposed toward this people, so that when you leave you will not go empty-handed.***

I Am Who I Am will do this with might and power and in spectacular fashion. I Am Who I Am will manipulate things in such a way that is unmistakable that he has done it.

God's name – I Am Who I Am – covers all of these essential things about a transcendent and personal God. "The name is important. God is in the present tense. He has no beginning and no end; he simply is. He is such an all-encompassing God that his name cannot fully describe all that he represents." (Nick Page) Who is I Am Who I Am?

- I Am the God of previous generations.
- I Am the God that sees your misery, crying and suffering.
- I Am the God that is concerned.
- I Am the God that rescues you.
- I Am the God that sends you.
- I Am the God that will be with you
- I Am the God that will make these things happen.

Mike Yaconelli tells a story of I Am Who I Am at work. A friend had experienced severe disappointment and tragedy. This friend had been faithful to God. He had sacrificed much for God. And now he was going through more pain and disappointment than he could handle. He was done with God. Like the Israelites he angrily called out, "God, don't you see?!" Bitter and angry, his friends recommended he go on a spiritual retreat.

Part of the spiritual retreat was to spend hours looking at nature and reflecting on God. See the things that God has made and reflect on God's goodness in making these things. The friend refused to do this. In fact he was going to look everywhere that nature wasn't! Concrete, brick, metal – those were the places the man was going to look.

The friend returned from the exercise refreshed. As he intently focused on the concrete before him, grass and weed were continually poking up through the concrete. All this time the man assumed God had been absent in his tragedy. In the exercise he recognized that God was persistently present right here and right now in the midst of tragedy, just like the weeds and blades of grass.

God declares his name to us: "I Am Who I Am". God is present. God is faithful. God is rescuing.

Hold on to that name. And follow and obey knowing you are sent by this God that is with you and equips you.

I Am who I Am:

- the faithful God of history . . .
- seeing us in our present reality . . .
- working towards our future rescue . . .
- by sending us and equipping us!