

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Dr. Stephen Haynes
Sunday, June 21, 2026

Thank you, David and Mary for the invitation to preach this morning and of course to the session. As I stand in the pulpit, it's hard not to think of the great preachers that have come through this church over the years. And actually, as I was walking down the hallway outside your office, I felt a lot of those preachers gazing at me from their portraits. It was a little unnerving. But today I'm thinking particularly of a couple of people who have stood here whose voices were cut short far too early. Steve Montgomery and Margaret Burnett. Those of us who knew them and had the privilege of hearing them preach know their words continue to fill this sanctuary.

Let's pray for God's illumination.

Lord, send your promised spirit to enlighten our minds as your word is read. And as your word is proclaimed, quiet in us any voice but your own. Amen.

So this is the third sermon in a series called Tell Me a Story. This particular story is about Moses. Moses' story takes up most of the book of Exodus. We're only going to be reading a few verses, so we're starting sort of in the middle. Whitney was kind enough to sort of fill in some of the backstory for us, and I'll do more of that. Listen for the word of God as it's proclaimed in Exodus, chapter 3.

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian. He led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush. He looked and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called out to him from the bush, "Moses, Moses." And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer. Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. And the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me. I have also seen how the Egyptians oppressed them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you. when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God

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on this mountain." But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'the God of your ancestors has sent me to you' and they ask me, 'what is his name?' What shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'the Lord, 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 forever, and this my title for all generations."

Here ends the reading of the word.

So, as I mentioned, this is the third in a series of sermons called Tell Me a Story. And there's probably no Bible story that's better known than Moses' story. Moses is one of those Bible characters that everybody meets at some point. If you were ever sent to Sunday school as a kid, if you ever heard the story of the plagues and wondered what is a locust, if you ever saw the Ten Commandments or the Prince of Egypt or Exodus, Gods and Kings, which I don't recommend, if you ever heard MLK saying, "I've been to the mountaintop," you've encountered Moses and his story.

In fact, Moses, as Whitney suggested already this morning, is among the so-called heroes of the Bible. These Bible heroes are the subjects of children's books, children's sermons, video series, TV documentaries, and of course, vacation Bible school curricula. And because my mother used to own a Christian bookstore, I can tell you with confidence that Bible heroes are a big seller. But the phrase heroes of the Bible is misleading because as Mary reminded us just last week, the Bible's only hero is God. Instead of heroes, what we find are a lot of—in the pages of the Bible—are a lot of complicated, flawed men and women who behave in ways we would not want our children to emulate. They lie, cheat, kill, betray one another. And I'm just talking about David.

And, yet, God chooses and uses these less than heroic men and women. And in that sense, these heroes are a lot like you and me. Of all the non-heroic heroes chosen by God, Moses has the best backstory. He's been born in a time and place in which Hebrew males are under a death sentence. So to protect the infant Moses, his mother hides him along the riverbank. Miraculously, instead of being thrown into the Nile as Pharaoh had commanded, he's drawn up out of the Nile and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. Moses' sister, who is standing nearby, arranges for his own mother to nurse him. And because he's secretly raised by his own mother, it's likely Moses grows up knowing he's actually a Hebrew passing as an Egyptian. But curiosity about his people doesn't take him far from the comfort of the palace because he doesn't witness the Hebrews forced labor, we're told, until he's grown up. And when he does, when he sees one of his enslaved kinfolk being mistreated by an Egyptian overlord, he decides to intervene. He kills the man, hides his

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body in the sand, and goes on away. I'm not a lawyer, but it seems to me Moses' behavior qualifies as what we would call first degree murder. Perhaps a good defense attorney could get his charge reduced to involuntary manslaughter. But shouldn't we expect a bit more from our Bible heroes? And what Moses does next isn't exactly heroic either. When he learns that his secret is out, he flees Egypt, travels about 400 miles into the desert, and assumes a new identity. Posing as an anonymous Egyptian, he marries into a local family and becomes his new father-in-law's shepherd. Moses appears to have escaped danger. His private exodus has taken him beyond the reach of the Egyptian king.

But he soon learns he has not escaped the notice of the Hebrew God. While shepherding beyond the wilderness, we might say out in the sticks, Moses catches sight of a burning bush. "Moses, Moses, a voice from the bush says, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry on account of their task masters. I know their sufferings and I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt." Moses may not have been all that familiar with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob given his background, but the voice...but the voice from the bush tells him everything he needs to know. This is a God who observes, who hears, who knows, and who sends.

They say that God comes to us disguised as our lives. In Moses' case, God comes disguised as a talking bush. And he has a few questions. The first is, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" But the bush has answers. "I will be with you," it says. Then Moses wants to know, "If the Israelites ask me what is God's name, what shall I say?" "Just say, "I am has sent you to me," the voice responds. But before Moses can process this cryptic answer, the voice issues further instructions. "Assemble the leaders of Israel and say, "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has appeared to me." And then Moses's questions turn to objections. "I've never been eloquent." He says, "As you know, I am slow of speech and of tongue." But the voice has an answer for that, too. "I will be with your mouth and teach you what to speak." Outmaneuvered by a talking bush, our hero resorts to a frightened plea. "Please," he says, "send somebody else." I've said so-called Bible heroes are a lot like you and me, and we can certainly see ourselves in Moses' response to the voice from the bush. The narrator of this, the narrator of the story is very confident that it is God speaking to Moses. But Moses is not so sure. He wants to ask a few clarifying questions, run through some what if scenarios, perhaps take a rain check. And who can blame him? The whole experience is so ambiguous. Does God really speak from burning bushes? Or is this what happens to people who wander beyond the wilderness? Did Moses get the details of the story right? And what sort of name is I am who I am, anyway. We know Moses remains uncertain about his desert encounter because when he decides to leave for Egypt, he doesn't even mention

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why he's going to his Midionite family. But he does obey the voice. And if there is heroism in Moses' story, it is in his obedience to a call that's uncertain, dangerous, and very private.

It's not hard to imagine Moses' inner monologue on his trek back to Egypt. "I'm hardly an ideal Hebrew." We can hear him saying, "Heck, I'm not even circumcised. I'm not the best choice for lawgiver. After all, I've killed another human being with impunity. And how am I going to assemble the elders of Israel? The elders haven't laid eyes on me for years, and they probably aren't sure I'm one of them anyway. I'm far from a master communicator. Did I remember to mention to the bush that I'm slow of speech? And what if they ask how I know I've been sent to them? A burning bush in the wilderness, please." But if God comes to us disguised as our lives, God had come to Moses long before he encountered the voice from the bush. Moses' life may have looked like a story of self-liberation, but he knew it was one long tale of divine protection. Moses knew he was only alive because some crafty Hebrew midwives had outsmarted Pharaoh. Because his mother had set him afloat on the Nile. Because Pharaoh's daughter just happened to be walking by. Because he was spared from the depredations of slavery. Because he could flee Egypt while passing as a member of the royal family. In other words, God had been speaking to Moses since the moment of his birth. He may have had doubts about the bush, but he recognized the voice.

If God comes to us disguised as our lives, then we should be always listening for that still small voice that speaks our name. Unlike Moses, we're not likely to get all our questions asked. Lots of examples of this from our history. Paul heard Jesus calling his name on the road to Damascus, but his only instructions were, "Go into the city and you'll be told what to do." Anthony heard Jesus calling him to sell his possessions and give them to the poor. But there was nothing about how he was supposed to live afterward. Augustine heard a voice telling him to pick up the Bible and start reading, but he had to trust that the rest would be revealed in time. And closer to our own time, Frederick Buechner heard God speak in a sermon of all places, but the preacher didn't mention how he was supposed to live the rest of his life. When God's voice finds us, whether it's in church, on the road, or beyond the wilderness, there is unlikely to be a blueprint, an action plan, an executive summary, or even talking points. The message may be ambiguous, easy to ignore, and even easier to explain away. We will only know it's God's voice because it calls us by name. because it reminds us that we're alive due to God's grace and because it hints at how our story can bring grace to others.

Why me? We might ask. I'm hardly the ideal Christian. Just ask my family. I haven't buried any bodies in the sand, but there are a lot of things I'd prefer remain hidden, including my failures, my character defects, my selfishness, my unbelief.

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Why you? Because you have what the world needs, a unique story that reveals God's gracious care. In that sense, you are just like Moses.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, to whom be all glory and honor forever and ever. Amen.