

Holy Mercy

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Occasionally we have an encounter that changes everything. In 1997 I walked into a coffeeshop in Denton, Texas where I was studying cultural anthropology to move to the Middle East as a single missionary. But then an effervescent blonde asked me if I would like a cup. Three years later we got married, 21 years later, here we are three wonderful kids, missionaries in Austin. Moses had an encounter that changed, not just his life, but *history*. An encounter with God's presence, God's plan, God's patience.

God's Presence

Our passage picks up 40 years after Moses marries a Midianite. He was 40 when he left Egypt, 80 when encounters YHWH. He's lived two lives: one as an Egyptian elite, another as a Midianite shepherd. His third is on the way. Guiding his flock west into the Sinai wilderness, presumably looking for fresh pasture, he finds himself at the foot of Mt. Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai. He notices a bush on fire, the flame won't go out. He hears a voice, Moses, Moses! He responds, Here I am: [And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush](#) (2). What are we to make of this? Let's peel away the layers. First, **fire**. Something we need but don't want to get too close to; it illuminates and burns. The next time we see the flame in Exodus a *pillar of fire* leads Israel out of Egypt, burning up the darkness, lighting the way (13:21-22). The flame is a theophany, a manifestation of God. What's it telling us? God is essential but dangerous, illuminating but scalding. Moses is on holy ground: [Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground](#) (5). Why the **sandals**? When I lived in Thailand, I had to remove my shoes before entering a home and sit positioning the soles of my feet away from my hosts. Why? Because the bottom of the feet were considered unclean. When Levite priests ministered in the temple, they had to remove their shoes and wash themselves entirely. Why? [To be in God's presence you have to be clean](#). So God says, *Don't come near*, the same thing he says to Israel when he descends on Sinai *in fire*: Don't come near, don't touch the mountain you'll die. It's temple behavior: *remove the shoes, don't touch, pass through the pillars and fire, into the sacred presence*. What's it telling us? [God is holy; we are not](#). Is it possible to get close and not be burned? He says: [I am the God of your](#)

father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (6). God tweaks his usual wording: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and *your father*. I’m not just the God of fire; I’m the God of your father, and their fathers. I’ve been pursuing you before you were born! Moses has a flashback. His true place is not among the Midianites but among the covenant people of God. He’s veered away. Have you wandered from God and his people? Come back, it might burn at first; false gods are scorched by the heat, but you’ll also enjoy the light. Moses hides his face, and pulls away in fear, *but within minutes* he’s comfortably close to the flame. I knew someone who hid a sin for years. Until one day he came to me and said I’ve got to tell you something. You could see the pain of his admission on his face, but even as he confessed the light broke in. His confession led to tremendous joy and victory. He burns but illuminates. Repels yet attracts, warns woos. How? *The angel of the Lord*. Angel means messenger. Jesus is the Word, the messenger of YHWH, and the Word comes out of the midst of the Flame *and draws us in*. Jesus draws us in. That’s how we get close, absorb the warmth of his love, the clarity of his light. *God in Christ is more merciful than we can imagine and more holy than we may admit.* In God’s presence we experience life-changing holiness and unimaginable mercy because *of Jesus Christ*. Implications? He is the God, and we *are* the priests, called to live close the flame and attend to the temple. Exodus 20: His people are a kingdom of priests. Where’s the temple now? It’s you, Peter says, the church, [a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood...](#)(1 Pe 2:5). App: [Have you noticed the difference between watching the church on Sundays and gathering with the church.](#) It’s not the same. Why? Because you’re a priest not a spectator, a minister not a viewer. You belong in the temple, every one of you, a priest in Christ. If you knew the real me. *He’s more merciful than you can imagine.*

God’s Plan

Next, God outlines his plan, a plan he’s been unfolding for centuries: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, *Moses*. He has seen the afflictions of his people, heard their cries, knows their sufferings, so he comes down to deliver them. The word deliver means *save*. His plan is **redemptive**. He will save them from oppression, but not just liberate them into individual freedom, to live however they wish. No, he delivers them, v. 12, into his service, [when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain](#) (12). *He saves for service*. As Leon

Kass says, *It takes a lot more time getting Egypt out of them than it took getting them out of Egypt.* It's true isn't it? Saved to *serve*? That can make you bristle. Why? Deep down, even though we know we're bad enough to need redemption, we still want control. There are nine first person pronouns here, I, God initiates. He's in control not us. He's the God we're the priests. I know some parents who tell their kids to follow Jesus you have to hand him all the keys of your life, not just one or two. Why? Yes, he's God, but because he knows how every room works. He has *the plans*. He's the architect and the builder. Upon faith we hire *him* to redo the place. So don't be surprised when redemption hurts a little. There are walls to be knocked out, rooms renovated, but it's redemptive. We would have settled for a shack by the sea, but he's building a palace, *a temple*—where God dwells with the church, every tribe, nation, tongue. His plan is redemptive *and regenerative*. When YHWH lays out his exodus plan, rehearsing it in various ways, he adds little bits of information. And here he adds this, *I will take them out and up into a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey* (8). It's a land of milk and honey, not because there are latte fountains and honey pots everywhere, but because the land is pastorally rich for raising herds that produce milk and date trees that produce syrup. It's an image of *plenty*, rich with resources for close to a million people. It's a new creation. So we're saved for service (*redemption*) but we're headed to new creation (*regeneration*). A sweeping, redemptive, regenerative plan for all the cosmos. A plan that requires patience.

God's Patience

After laying out his plan, God tells Moses he'll accomplish it *through him*. Moses is not quite ready for that, so he launches a series of objections. Which tells us something about God. While holy, he is also *patient*. In fact, he is patient because he's holy. So if you find yourself objecting to God or questioning his plans, you're in good company. Let's take a look at a few of Moses' objections. First, he objects to God saying, ***Who am I?*** An appropriate response. After all, God is asking him to take on the Egyptian superpower and wreck the whole slave economy. But, then again, who better than Moses? He's the son of a pharaoh and been trained in Egyptian culture. *But* God doesn't roll out his Egyptian resume. Instead, He says, But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain" (12). Not *Who am I*

but *I will be with you*. We're often encouraged to ask *Who am I*, and set out defining ourselves through our hobbies, friendships, politics. But the most defining thing about us shouldn't be us—it's who's with us. *I will be with you*. *The I am*. You'd think that would be a done deal, but Moses objects again saying his people **won't believe God appeared to him**. God doesn't rebuke him but accommodates him. He gives Moses three signs to back up his claims: turning a rod into a snake and back, making his hand leprous then healed, and turning water into blood. Three signs that point forward to the plagues. Linger on one. God says throw your rod onto the ground, **so he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it** 4:3. He ran from it. Interesting detail. Of course he did! It's a snake. But wait a minute. Moses was fearless when objecting to YHWH, but when he sees a snake he runs for his life?! Moses has it backwards. He fears the snake but not the Lord. Are there things to fear, sure, snakes bite. But God is bigger. One of our elders often says, Make things the appropriate size. Reduce your fears to their proper size, how, by placing them next to an infinite God. After all, *he is with you*. He knows every room. Moses eventually throws his cards on the table and says, **Please send someone else** (13). God's anger is kindled, and rightly so. It's a calling Moses, church, not a question. Remember who you're turning down. The flame. But then God follows his anger with mercy: I'll be with your mouth. I'll give you Aaron to speak to the people, and when you leave the Egyptians will give you the shirts off their back, gold and silver out of their pockets. In his righteous anger, God conveys *mercy*. Too often I correct my kids in anger, sinful anger, and sometimes I drag that anger into a mood or snide remark. I continue the punishment when I should convey a heart of mercy. But not God. He is holy and merciful, righteously angry and staggeringly patient, which comes into focus at the cross. Where Jesus is judged (holy) in our place (mercy). At the cross we discover *God is more merciful than we can imagine and more holy than we admit*.