

“Hosanna! The Goal of Salvation”

Reading: Psalm 98; Exodus 3:1-15

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Rocks that had never before witnessed anything but baking sun and hissing desert wind became an altar that day. Dust that had never been anything but dust, a place for the occasional bird to scratch at pebbles, became holy, the floor space of that altar. The side of a lonely barren mountain, nothing but a place for a few scrawny sheep to tear up what little grass they could find, then leave their messy mark behind them, became the site of a temple. Moses, the son of Hebrew slaves, pulled from the river as a baby in his parents' desperate attempt to save his life, raised in the house of the king who had tried to kill him, fugitive in the wilderness after he had committed murder, now an old, forgotten shepherd in the far corners of the desert, found himself unexpectedly in the presence of God Almighty among the rocks and dust of the mountainside. Something that is holy makes you realize how small and ugly and dirty you must be when it stands there before you, looking you in the eye, looking right through your soul; Moses was commanded to take off his shoes as a sign of humility, as though he had been tracking muddy boots on new carpet, or new carpet made of gold and diamonds, or — as though he had stumbled into the presence of God Himself and was now finding himself inexplicably caught up in God's great masterwork.

His attention had been caught by an inexplicable thing, a bush that was on fire but was not burning up. And then someone started speaking to him from the bush, someone divine. And then the divine voice gave him a mission, a call, a task to complete. Moses didn't know it, but even though he had seen something nobody else had ever seen before — a burning, talking bush — he hadn't seen anything yet; this little miracle before him was just a taste of what was about to happen. God was preparing for war against the false gods of Egypt, He was preparing to set His people free from Pharaoh's slavery, He was getting ready for dazzling things that still dazzle us today. He was going to make walking sticks turn to slithering snakes, rivers turn to blood, locusts and frogs and gnats cover the land, burning hail fall from the sky, the sun turn to darkness, whatever it took to convince Pharaoh to set His people free. And then to give His people a path for their escape, God was going to part the sea and let them walk across dry ground on the bottom.

Not the sort of thing you see every day; those are miracles, and the bush was only an appetizer. Surely God knew what sort of battle He was going to have to fight to help Moses in his mission; God knew Pharaoh wasn't going to let the Hebrews go quietly. This Exodus was going to have to be an act of salvation for the ages. Moses, as he stood baffled in front of the burning bush, didn't know what was coming, nor did he really know who this God was that was speaking to him. He was uncertain and he tried to convince God that He'd picked the wrong messenger. “Who am I to do such a thing?” Moses asked. “Who am I to go before one of the greatest kings on the earth and make demands?”

God knew about all the miraculous things that were about to happen, and He could have told Moses as much. God could have said, “This will be a sign to you, proof that I'm telling the truth and I will protect you: when you go to Pharaoh's court, throw down your staff and it will turn into a snake.” God could have explained to Moses all the great things that were going to happen, the plagues and the parting of the sea and everything, and told Moses that you will know that I'm working because you're going to see miracles unlike anything that has ever happened before, but He didn't. Later on, God did give Moses a bit of a preview of what was to come, but the real proof, the real sign, is this

instead: "I will go with you, and the sign by which you will know that I am with you is that after all the miracles have taken place, you will bring my people back here to this mountain and worship me."

That's an odd sort of thing for God to say at this point; a little anticlimactic. What sort of sign is that? A *sign* in this context is more or less the same thing as a miracle; *sign* was one of the terms the biblical writers used to refer to a miracle. But the goal of a sign is to point you on to something other than the sign itself. You don't stop your car and admire a yield sign for its artistic value, you do what the sign says so that you don't get someone killed because it's telling you something about the traffic ahead. The sign is there to point you to something more important than the sign itself. And it's the same thing in the Bible: a sign in that context was something that was confirmation of God working, or it was a reminder of what He had done in the past, or it was a guarantee of something yet to come. A sign could be anything from a miracle to a stone monument; it was something out of the ordinary to remind you and reassure you of something that God had done. So as Moses stood before the burning bush, trying to understand why God would send him of all people on this mission, God gave him a guarantee, a sign to look for, that Moses would know that God had acted and saved His people when Moses returned to this mountain.

God didn't choose any of the historically dramatic miracles that He was about to perform as His sign to Moses, instead He chose the people worshiping at the mountain as His sign. That sounds less dramatic, less of a confirmation of God's work, than watching God part the sea. But as far as God was concerned, the miracle was not any one of the dramatic events that defy explanation or shatter the laws of nature, the miracle was that those people He had freed would gather in worship.

The Exodus event is one of the definitive acts of salvation in history, second only to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. If you want people to know what salvation is and how God is able to save, the Exodus is one of the places you point them to. In these weeks before Lent, we are taking time to tell stories of salvation. We're centered on the ancient cry of God's people, "Hosanna!" a word meaning, "Save us!" We need to remember how God has saved people in the past so that we can remember what He's capable of doing, and then kindle a burning desire in our hearts to cry out for God to save us and save those in need around us. We tell stories of salvation because God can and does still save.

But the surprising thing about this great act of salvation is that the Exodus itself, the setting-free of God's people from slavery with all of the plagues and conflicts with Pharaoh and his gods, is that God does not consider the salvation accomplished until Moses and the Israelites gather at the foot of the mountain in worship. Getting them out of slavery is not saving them enough as far as God is concerned. Setting them free from bondage is not completing the act of salvation. They must be set free for something new, a new identity, a new life. What is the point of wasted freedom? They are saved for a purpose.

It's interesting that whenever anyone makes a movie out of the Exodus story they pretty much roll the credits after the Hebrews get safely across the sea that has been parted by the best special effects Hollywood can muster. After the exciting miracles are done most people lose interest in the story, even though the sea is parted in chapter 14 and the book of Exodus doesn't end until chapter 40. Most of the story takes place gathered at the foot of the mountain. *That* was God's sign, God's promise, the part of the story that God thought was the greatest miracle, that His people would gather

in worship around Him. Most of the salvation takes place when they get to the mountain. We want the flashy stuff, the impressive miracles, the things that make for great special effects and leave our jaws on the floor, but God knows that those things are only a way to get our attention in the hope that we will then see what is truly important. God knows that we are easily distracted by a flash and a bang; if He gave us a sign like that He'd only have to do it again later to regain our attention when we got distracted by something else, but the important thing is that constant, persistent investment in the relationship over time – God's faithfulness, and our worship in response.

There is the momentary act of salvation, the setting free from bondage, the showdown between Christ and the devil, and that is the moment of salvation that we tend to focus on the most. But really, the salvation continues every day thereafter as we live and move and have our being in Christ, as we commit all our ways to Him and respond daily to God's grace. It is not unlike the difference between going out on a first date and getting married: there is the initial moment of salvation with all its excitement, but then, just as marriage is the greater adventure of a lifetime devoted to faithful love, there is a lifetime of living out our salvation in worship of God. What is the point of wasted freedom? We are set free so that we can worship God as new people given a new identity in Christ.

We get hung up on the miracles sometimes, thinking that we'll worship God if we see some really spectacular, undeniable proof of His existence. In reality, though, we're masters of denial. That's not a burning bush, that's swamp gas igniting, we would say. Weather balloons. *Martians*, even. The problem for many people is not a lack of proof, the problem is the presence of pride, or a false god of some sort, or some baggage we leave in God's way. We refuse to bend the knee to God no matter what, because we're busy bending the knee somewhere else.

That's why those flashy sorts of miracles are so rare, I think. They're just the announcements, teasers, attention-getters to — hopefully — help people see the *real* miracle, that God is calling people to Himself, that people are being changed in ways that they cannot do on their own, that people are being healed and relationships are being restored and forgiveness is being gratuitously offered to anyone who will take it, regardless of race, color, or worth; people are loved by God. *That*, not a thousand burning bushes, is a miracle, evidence of God, because nobody else can do that.

What is setting a bush on fire without it burning to the God who lit the stars? Bushes don't put up a fight. What is parting a sea to the God who created the cosmos? Seas don't talk back. The burning bush is just the sauce for the steak, and the parted sea is just the frosting on a much bigger cake. The greater miracle is that God has set people apart for worship and He has given them the means to live lives of worship. The greater sign of God's trustworthiness, the better evidence that God is alive, is that He pulls people from the pit and brings them back to life, He heals the relationships between Himself and individuals and between people themselves, He takes those who have made their lives futile and meaningless and He gives them purpose and worth. The Exodus is not just a release *from slavery*, it is a release *for worship*, and it is still continuing today.

Worship, therefore, is both a miracle of God in us and our response to that miracle. Worship is a life lived with a willingness to see God at work, a longing to be close to that which is greater than we are, a humbling of the ego to admit that maybe, just maybe, there is something greater than I am and I cannot do all things, a decision to stand in awe or to kneel in reverence for that One who is worthy to

be revered. Maybe I can't do everything, maybe I don't know everything, maybe I am proud and arrogant and selfish, maybe I do need to be saved and maybe I can't do it myself, and maybe I'm so far gone that I don't even fully know what it *means* to be saved, maybe there is something more, and maybe there is *someone* more. A person bending the knee of their soul, taking off their sandals in recognition that there is holy ground and they are standing on it, that is a true miracle, a wondrous work of God, and it calls us to live lives of worship in response.

This is what I want to see in us. Worship is more than just singing church songs, and it's more than just coming to church for an hour per week of "worship time." I want to see us continually living out our salvation, not only following God's lead out of slavery, but also following Him to the mountain where He teaches us a new way of life as His people. Conversations, work, time with family, even rest, become opportunities to proclaim the greatness of God in big ways and small ones, they become ways to honor Him, to do what is worthy of Him and to take a small part in that great act of making all things new. It is a choice to make your life an offering to the one greater than you, to make an investment of time and commitment into the relationship as God has in you. It is God who invites us into the saved life of worship, as He beckoned to Moses on that mountainside, as He worked to free His people from slavery so that they could come and worship Him. Live this life, and invite others to join you.



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