

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 9th August 2020
Andy Banks
1. God's Character
Exodus 3:1-15

Intro:

Life is a bit strange at the moment, isn't it? And it keeps changing! And constant change can be unsettling, or make us feel anxious. You may be looking forward to going back to school in September and seeing your friends again. But you may also be a bit nervous about how it will all work in what people are calling the "new normal." The same is true if we haven't yet returned to work.

And the same will be true for us at Trinity, as we adjust to another change to how we do church. Hopefully we'll be livestreaming from the church building [here](#), as we begin the journey towards meeting together again, which the writer to the Hebrews urges us not to give up doing. But meeting together will probably still have restrictions, and so it won't feel like the normal we were used to. And we will have to work hard at ensuring we remain a whole church family together, especially as that some will not be able to come back immediately.

Personally, I don't like the term "new normal." Although these restrictions may last a while, I don't believe they will be here forever. These ways of meeting and working are merely a "*temporary normal*" – a stepping stone towards the *eventual new normal* that will be far better! And we need to hold on to that hope, because often the temporary normal will not feel as good as the old normal was.

So how do we hold on to hope in a temporary (and lesser) normal? I believe there are a number of parallels to the Israelite's experience in the wilderness in-between their old normal of slavery in Egypt, and the new normal of abundant life that God had promised them in their own land. So, over the next five weeks, I want to look at some lessons we can learn from their experience that can help us through our in-between experience today.

Object lesson (outside):

I've just popped outside to give a little clue to our reading today. I wonder if you can guess which story it is?

[Light the match, and with it light the wood]

It's a story that involves fire. A lot more fire than this, actually!

But I want you to pay attention not the flame itself, but to what is happening to the wood as the flame burns.

I'm sure you know that fire needs three things to exist – if you've ever done a fire safety course, you'll remember the fire triangle. What three things does fire need? It needs heat – the friction between the match and the box created that, and then the heat was passed to the wood. It needs oxygen, which is in the air all around me. And it needs fuel – the wood itself. If you take any one of those three things away, the fire will go out.

But what happens to the fuel – the wood – as the fire burns? It burns up, doesn't it? It disappears. Yet, our story today begins with a fire that burned without any fuel. A bush appeared to be on fire, but the bush itself did not burn up.

Shall we find out why?

[Blow out flame]

Reading (back inside):

Here we are, back inside. And I'm going to read from Exodus 3:1-14.

Exodus 3:1-14

1Now 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. 2There 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. 3So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up.'

4When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!' And Moses said, 'Here I am.'

5'Do not come any closer,' God said. 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.' 6Then he said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.' At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

7The LORD said, 'I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. 8So 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, a land flowing with milk and honey – the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. 9And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. 10So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.'

11But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'

12And God said, 'I will be with you. 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.'

13Moses said to God, '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?'

14God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you."'

Before we look at what we can learn from this reading, we're going to play a game. I'm going to read out five clues all about the same fictional character. Hopefully, both children and adults should know all the characters, and the five clues build on each other to help describe the one character. After each clue, there'll be a short gap for you to write down a guess as to who I'm describing. Pause the video if you want more time. If, the next clue still works for the character you wrote down, write the same name down again after the next clue; if it doesn't still work, write down a different guess. After I've given all five clues, I'll give the answer, and you score five points if you guessed correctly after the first clue, four points after the second clue, and so on down to one point for a correct guess after the fifth clue and no points if you get it wrong at the end. There are five characters in all, each with five clues to help identify them. See how many points you get either as a family, or as individuals.

Game: Who Am I (answers at the end of the document)?Character 1:

Clue 1: This character often gets into trouble. Write down a guess as to who it might be.

Clue 2: This character often gets into trouble *and wears a blue coat*.

Clue 3: This character often gets into trouble, wears a blue coat *and likes carrots*.

Clue 4: This character also gets a cold from hiding in a watering can with water in it.

Clue 5: Mr. McGregor chases this character with a rake.

Character 2 (this is a different character):

- Clue 1: This character has a very strange dream
- Clue 2: This character also lives in Kansas
- Clue 3: This character also has red shoes
- Clue 4: This character is also helped by a wizard
- Clue 5: This character also meets a scarecrow, a tin man, and a lion

Character 3:

- Clue 1: This character is based on a real-life person
- Clue 2: This character also lives in a wood
- Clue 3: This character is also friends with lots of animals
- Clue 4: This character also goes to Buckingham Palace with Alice
- Clue 5: This character also organises an expedition to discover the north pole

Character 4:

- Clue 1: This character has a very low opinion of himself
- Clue 2: This character also has a sister called Sally
- Clue 3: This character also struggles to fly a kite
- Clue 4: This character also wears a yellow T-shirt with a black zig-zag
- Clue 5: This character also has a pet white and black beagle, called Snoopy

Character 5:

- Clue 1: This character goes on a long and dangerous journey
- Clue 2: This character can also speak to whales
- Clue 3: This character also helps a friend who is looking for his son
- Clue 4: This character is also blue
- Clue 5: This character is also very forgetful

Total up your scores. How did you do?

A person's character is very important. As we get to know people, we find out if we enjoy being around them or not. We find out how kind they are, and how trustworthy they are. And all sorts of other things.

And a hard situation can be made easier if we know there is someone kind and trustworthy to help us in that situation. So, children, think about when you go back to school. You may have already met your new teacher. Do you think your teacher can be trusted to look after you and help you cope with the changes in school? The answer is yes, because otherwise they wouldn't be a teacher. So, even though you might not know *everything* about what school will be like when you return, you can be confident that your teacher will care for you and help you. And just knowing that can be a big help.

Likewise, when we come back to being at church, your parents or carers will be there to look after you. Things will be a bit different, but it helps to know that there will be people who you can trust to help you through it and keep you safe and well. And later, when we can start GodZone groups again, your GodZone leaders will be there to look after you.

And there even better news is that God is even more trustworthy. He promised that he will never leave us or forsake us. And his name that he told to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM," reminds us that God never changes. His character will always be good, full of love, holy and right. We're going to look a little bit more at that after the next song, but you were also sent some activity you could do while you're listening if you like. Because this next bit will be a little bit more detailed for the grown ups and older children.

[Song]

1) God's permanent character: I am who I am

I want to return for a minute to the burning stick with which I started. There is a rich symbolism in the way that God appeared to Moses as a self-sustaining fire – a fire that did not need fuel to keep it burning. It is a powerful reminder that God is far from constrained by the rules that govern creation. For he is not part of creation; he is the Creator. Everything in creation is dependently sustained; God alone is self-sustaining. That's reflected in the shortened form of his name, "I AM." God is life, and God gives life to his world and everything in it.

In a situation of a virus that we far from fully understand, that is a great comfort. God understands. God is *able* to bring an end to this virus. He will probably do so through people he has made – through inspiring medical advances that will combat the threat of it. But God is able to bring about a truly life-giving "new normal" that is free from fear. And I firmly believe he will. Because, not only is he powerful, but his character is unchanging: "I AM WHO I AM." Or that could even be translated "I WILL BE WHO I AM." The God, whose image is exactly represented in the person of Jesus Christ remains and will always remain the same holy God of love that he has always been. That is his *permanent character*, symbolised to Moses in a self-sustaining fire, and declared in his name: "I AM WHO I AM."

2) God's past blessings

Secondly, God reassured Moses by reminding him of his *past blessings*; how he had personally protected Moses himself: "I am the God of your father (singular, i.e. Moses' own personal father, Amran). Moses no doubt remembered what his mother, Jochebed, had told him about how she and Amran had defied Pharaoh's orders to kill all the Israelite baby boys, and of how Moses had been hidden in a basket in the reeds of the Nile and protected by Pharaoh's own daughter when she found him. Such was God's protection of him.

And then God takes him further back to his blessings to Moses' ancestors – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the great patriarchs of the Israelite people. Moses would have remembered God's promise to Abraham that, though his descendants would be enslaved in Egypt for 400 years, God would rescue them and bring them into their own land (*Gen 15:13-16*). Since God had always proved himself faithful to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Amran and Jochebed, and since God does not change, he could be relied upon to fulfil his promises to Moses and the Israelites now.

3) God's present presence

Thirdly, when Moses doubted his ability to challenge Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of slavery to their own good land, God reassured him with a promise of his *presence* in the *present*: "I will be with you." God's past actions demonstrate the reliability of his words. And, as Paul says in Romans 8:31, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Or *what* can stand against us? I firmly believe that, ultimately, God has a better plan for his people and for our collective worship than socially distanced, small, silent groups. And if God has a better plan, nothing will prevent that plan from being a reality!

4) God's promised future

And so, we come on to our last lesson from this passage: *God's promised future*. God assured Moses, "I have come down ... to bring them [God's people] ... into a *good* and *spacious* land." This was the same promise he had given to Abraham, more than 400 years before. In effect, God said to Moses, "I have not forgotten my promise; it is still what I'm going to do." Because God's character does not change, and neither do his plans for his people.

So what are God's plans for his people today? Firstly, they are plans to *prosper* us and not to harm us; plans to give us a *hope* and a *future* (*Jer 29:11*). He will work *all* things for the *good* of those who love him (*Rom 8:28*). It is always and unchangeably God's will that his people will unite together to sing his praise. Covid-19 hasn't ended that – even if it has temporarily disrupted it. And it is always and unchangeably God's will that his people should be a symbol of his goodness to the watching world and his mouthpiece to tell of his great love. Covid-19 hasn't ended that either.

So, God *will* clear away all obstacles to those purposes. In this strange in-between world, these truths can anchor our hope securely: God's permanent character ("I AM WHO I AM"); God's past blessings (personal and corporate); God's present presence ("I will be with you"); and God's promised future ("a [metaphorical] good and spacious land"). Before we close with some more sung worship, why not pause the video now and take some time to thank God for who he is and for what he has done and will do for us.

"Who am I?" quiz answers

Character 1:

Answer: Peter Rabbit

Character 2 (this is a different character):

Answer: Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz

Character 3:

Answer: Christopher Robin

Character 4:

Answer: Charlie Brown from Peanuts

Character 5:

Answer: Dory from Finding Nemo and Finding Dory