

# “This Mysterious God”

a sermon by

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Text: “Then he said, ‘Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground’ (Exodus 3:5).

Several weekends ago I had the opportunity to visit my daughter, Lucy, who is living and working in Washington, D.C. One of the sights we visited was the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. It is an historic church and over the years had a number of very outstanding ministers. One of the interesting highlights of the church is the “Lincoln Pew,” which was the pew named for Abraham Lincoln. Although Lincoln was not a member of a church, his family attended there, as did Lincoln. One of the features of the church is a special entrance, which is reserved for the President of the United States. The Secret Service has the only key to this door, and every President since Lincoln has come to this beautiful sanctuary for worship and prayer on Lincoln’s birthday.

Abraham Lincoln was our most profoundly religious President. He studied the Scripture with a great deal of attention and his insights in the Christian faith show a remarkable depth is not easily matched. Many historians have seen in Lincoln a dramatic change that became evident in the latter years of his life. It is manifest in the Second Inaugural Address of 1864 and in the Gettysburg Address of 1863. In his Second Inaugural Address he reached out to a South on the edge of defeat with his call for “malice toward none and charity for all.” When asked if he

thought God was on the side of the North, Lincoln responded by saying, "Let us not say that God is on our side, but let us hope that in the end we will be found on the side of God."

Those who knew Lincoln well understood that he was a man who had suffered a great deal. He had experienced a great failure in business and lived for many years with strong financial losses. The death of his son affected his life in a profound way and his wife's illness was also a source of great sorrow for him. He was also subject to very strong moods of depression. When he became President in 1860, he presided over some of the most difficult and troubled years in our nation's history.

And yet, in a remarkable way, his life demonstrated a deep faith in the providence of God and his faith aided him during the darkest days of the Civil War.

## I.

One of the most amazing aspects of the Bible is its testimony to individuals, who in difficult situations, did not lose God, but found him. One of these individuals was the great prophet and leader Moses. In Exodus, chapter three, we read that Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the Priest of Midian, when Moses had a strange experience. He was in the wilderness of Sinai when he came across a strange sight. There was a burning bush, but the bush was not consumed. Moses was curious about this strange phenomenon, so he went to see what it was. When he came close to bush, he saw an angel. And he heard the voice of God saying, "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

Now, Moses was in a difficult situation, to put it mildly. Raised in the court of the King of Egypt, he had fled to the wilderness after he had killed an Egyptian taskmaster, who was beating an Israelite slave. He was a hunted man and he had fled to the wilderness of Sinai to escape certain capture and death. To his utter amazement he was confronted with the fact that God was present in the midst of the most isolated wilderness that one could imagine.

Sometimes we think that God is encountered only in the lovely places of life, in the beauty of a sanctuary, in the presence of great art or music, in one of the great joys of life: a birth, a baptism, a wedding, or a graduation. To be certain, God is present in these things, but sooner or later all of us will come to a place where, if we are going to find God at all, we will have to find him in the wilderness.

There are many today who find themselves in some wilderness: the death of a loved one, a divorce, some debilitating illness, or a troubling problem at work and at home. Oftentimes, these wilderness periods can be very troubling. Many are tempted to give up on God. And yet, some of the momentous discoveries of God have been made in the wilderness.

In 1754 George Washington was in a very troubling situation. His troops had been defeated at Fort Necessity, often largely through his misjudgment. His officers were called "drunken debauchees." His enemies denounced his report on the French plans as a crooked

scheme to advance the interest of a private land company. It appeared that Washington's once promising career was now ended. But, as one his biographers put it, "what seemed to be an outrage turned out to be a preparation." So from Moses to Washington, women and men have found God in a wilderness.

So, let us ask the question: what went on inside Moses that made it possible for him to discover holy ground even in the midst of a wilderness?

## II.

For one thing, he found something to be angry about. For most of his early life Moses had lived a soft life. He had been brought up as the son of the Pharaoh's daughter in the royal court. But one day he saw something that made him mad. He saw an Egyptian taskmaster beat a Hebrew slave, and he became so mad he killed the Egyptian.

Now, that was a terrible thing for Moses to do. It did no real good, but it did do one thing. It changed Moses's life forever. He was no longer a playboy in the royal court. He was a fugitive who would be hunted for the rest of his life. But Moses was angry at something that was unbearably wrong.

Now anger is not something that is usually presented as a Christian virtue, but it has its place. Martin Luther once said, "When I am angry, I preach well, and pray better." William Ellery Channing, a famous New England Unitarian minister, once observed, "Ordinarily, I weigh one hundred and twenty pounds, but when I am angry, I weigh a ton."

The gospels remind us that on a number of occasions Jesus was angry. Mark tells us that when the Pharisees criticized Jesus for healing a man on the Sabbath, Jesus looked at them with anger. And when he saw the way children were being treated in his day, "he was moved with indignation." On another occasion when Jesus observed the way that the moneychangers in the temple were cheating the pilgrims who had come for Passover, we read that Jesus took a whip and chased them out of the temple.

In I Corinthians 13 the Apostle Paul wrote one of the most eloquent treatises on love ever penned. But in his letter to the church at Ephesus he wrote, "Be angry and sin not" (Ephesians 4:26). In other words, Paul is saying, "Control your anger. Do not abuse it." But still, in the face of some evil, you are not a Christian, if you are not angry. Great character is not soft; at its very core there is indignation at some things that are intolerably wrong.

Sometimes I wonder what it will take to get people angry today with some of the terrible abuses that take place in our society. Hardly a day goes by that we don't read in the newspaper about children in our community being sexually abused, being killed, being neglected. We have children in our school system that come to school without food or money for food and yet, those of us with power and money don't seem to be too concerned. We have witnessed the terrible abuses at Abu Ghraib and the terrible torture taking place at the prison in Guantanamo, and yet, we have not uttered a word.

When Elie Wiesel was here in Charlotte some years ago, he said that the greatest problem our society has today is apathy. We have lost the capacity to demonstrate any anger in the face of evil.

### III.

The second thing that Moses did in the wilderness was to face himself. Surely, there is no more difficult task for any of us than to face ourselves. Most of us are masterful at seeing a speck in our neighbor's eye, but when it comes to looking at the log in our own eye, we are blind.

One of the things that Moses had to do was to come to grips with himself. In Exodus 6 there is a remarkable exchange between God and Moses that ought to sound familiar to all of us. When God told Moses to go to Pharaoh and to demand that the people of Israel be allowed to return to their land, Moses was incredulous. How was he, a shepherd, to stand in front of a king? Moses had no power. He was not even a good public speaker! How did God possibly expect Moses to lead his people? Moses knew he was supremely unqualified for such a huge job.

Some years ago a physician by the name of Wilfred Grenfell found himself in a terrible wilderness. He was burned out by the practice of medicine and his life was in chaos. He knew he needed to get away for awhile. A friend suggested that he visit Labrador on a vacation cruise, which he did, visiting for fun a strange and faraway place. Yet, something powerful happened to Grenfell on that cruise. He found a large group of people who had never seen a doctor. He wrote in his diary, "I attended nine hundred people who never would have seen a doctor if I had not been there." That got him! He had to come back. He spent the rest of his life as a medical missionary in Labrador. He found himself in a wilderness and that wilderness turned out to be holy ground.

### IV.

The third thing that happened to Moses in the wilderness was that he came face-to-face with God. One of the most remarkable witnesses of Scripture is its witness to those individuals who have found God in some wilderness: Moses in the desert of Sinai; the great Isaiah in Babylon with his exiled people; Job, out of his tragic calamity, saying, "I have heard of you with the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you." As for the New Testament, there is Calvary. Who would have ever imagined that you might find God hanging on a cross? That too was holy ground.

Soft occasions do not bring the deepest faith in a person--never! Rather faith is found in those dark hours of the soul where everything seems to be falling around us. Where did Jesus say, "Not my will, but thy will be done?" In Gethsemane. When did Martin Luther write his great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God"? When he was risking his life. When did Sir Thomas More say, "I die the king's good servant, but God's servant first?" On the scaffold.

I do not know where this hits you in your personal life, but I bear you this witness. My deepest faith in God did not come in those Galilean spring times of my life, when everything was

going my way, but in those times when the rain descended and the floods came and the winds blew and beat and God was there so that the house did not fall.

One final word. When any of us finds God in some unlikely wilderness, one may be fairly sure that he or she first found God in some likely place. Some beauty touched our lives; some love blessed us, some goodness made us aware of God.

There are places where God is likely to be found: in beauty, goodness, loveliness, nobility of character, unselfish sacrifice, and moral courage.

Find God in those likely places that you may find him in the unlikely places as well.

Amen