

[PRAYER] Well, here we go, we're about to hit the Fall season full-force. I hope and pray that you're ready for a fall that will celebrate a church that is alive, growing and filled with our dedication to God's promises! We are blessed to have this place of grace, blessed to have one another, and blessed to be in a community with so many families who can grow in Christ as part of their story.

And I feel particularly blessed to have you folks as the ones who I serve now in this place, even though the honeymoon magic might be wearing off a little. I am, after all, a stranger to these parts, and that means that people want to know how a stranger fits in with their culture. I've been asked all kinds of questions, from all across the spectrum of people's expectations and convictions. People with deeply held beliefs on the right, the left, and everything in-between, come my way with some regularity. I welcome people expressing their convictions with me; I see it as a sign of trust. But if you think that my outlook and my faith can be put in any box of your liking, whatever the box, I am sure that you'll be disappointed.

You see, I am here with one agenda, and one agenda only - to help make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. That means helping people of all backgrounds and all walks of life to find a common path to God's righteousness, a path that's not of my making, your making, or any human making. We all need grace. We all need God and one another to find it. Period. And the people who we least expect to be the ones who will help us to find that path, are, more often than we'd like to admit, the very ones who we need most to find it.

This is the upside-down, mind-blowing, and soul-saving reality of real faith. None of us - and I do mean NONE of us! - are going to wind up in heaven, and say, "See, I was right! They were wrong!" If we do think that, then we had best check the name on the mailbox by the gate, because it's probably not going to say "God's place!" Our God wants us to seek righteousness above everything else, and righteousness is not about being right. It's about letting God be right, no matter what, and accepting that the only convictions that can offer us salvation come to us through God's redeeming grace. It's about accepting that God is God, no matter what, above absolutely everything else, beyond everyone else, no matter who, no matter where, no matter when. God is not an idea, a "man upstairs," or something that fits easily into our heads and hearts. God is beyond every human expectation. Forever.

And yet, since God is God, God surprises us in ways that only God can. And if there was anyone who we can say was surprised, it was a man called Moses, a man who was a refugee, in the hills of a desert hundreds of miles away from where he was born in Egypt. Given the circumstances, the encounter that Moses had with the living God on a mountain has to be one of the most surprising and amazing stories of all time.

Who was this man Moses? We know only a few things about his life before the moment when he meets God. He was a child of Israelite parents who had to be raised by the daughter of the Egyptian king, Pharaoh, to escape death. Moses was neither fish nor fowl, a man of unknown loyalties, and unknown beliefs. He may have been favored by

Pharaoh at some time, but when he killed an Egyptian who was beating an Israelite slave, Pharaoh wanted Moses dead, and the Israelites didn't trust him. He fled from Egypt, rejected, confused, needing redemption.

Redemption came for Moses in a very unexpected way. By God's grace he wound up helping Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, a priest for the shepherd tribes of Midian. Just like Jacob took on the spiritual name Israel, Jethro's spiritual name was Reuel - "God's friend." God's friend loved this strange man Moses, and offered his daughter Zipporah to Moses as his wife. They had children. Moses tended to Jethro's sheep. God's friend, Jethro, seems to have given this man Moses what he needed - a sense of being loved, and valued.

Moses began to open his heart, and his eyes. He began to wander, far from his new home, into the mountains, where God had spoken to his ancestors. One day, he saw something there that changed his life, something that changed human history forever. Moses saw God. And God wasn't like anything that he, or anyone, could imagine.

A common bush glowed with bright light, as if it were on fire, and yet it did not burn. As Christians, we know this light - we call it God's Holy Spirit, the same light that touched the disciples of Jesus on Pentecost, the event that we have been celebrating now for thirteen weeks in our Christian calendar. This light was alive, but more than just part of creation - it was upon creation, in creation, and yet, beyond creation. The light didn't change the bush into something else, but somehow, creation itself now had God's own voice coming from it. God's voice was alive! And God wasn't "the man upstairs" - God had come to give Moses a close-up relationship with God, one that perhaps Moses had started to yearn for, but never expected.

Why did God choose this man? Why a murderer of a foreigner? Why someone who even his own oppressed people had rejected? Why a fugitive from the law, who was now just an insignificant wandering shepherd? Why a nobody, in the middle of nowhere, who had done little good, beyond helping a foreign woman? Why a man who had run from Israel's people, rather than help them?

Perhaps it was for all of these very reasons that God chose Moses to speak to, because God needed someone for a very special mission. You see, God had seen the same oppression, cruelty, and injustice hurting the Israelites in Egypt that Moses had seen. God heard the cries of the Israelites for help, but there was no one to lead them to the help that they needed. Israel needed God, and God had not forgotten their needs, but they needed more than freedom from slavery in Egypt. They needed freedom from the things that led them to be slaves. They needed righteousness, not rightness. They needed dedication to God, not a quick fix from God. They needed godly leaders, not just another bunch of rich people and politicians, who would throw them under the bus at a moment's notice.

And so, in the foggy mountains of Midian, God found a man humbled by the failure of his self-righteous murder, a man who was rejected by the fat cats and the powerful, who had returned to the land of his ancestors, and found friends of God who sought little more than to live righteous lives with whatever God gave them. It was in these mountains that Israel would wander under Moses' leadership to discover the righteousness

of God. So God chose Moses, a man who needed God's salvation badly, and appointed him the leader of Israel's salvation. God chose a sinner, to speak to him about liberation from sin.

Moses had come to holy ground. He had come, not knowing what to expect. He simply came. He had come, saying the only thing that anyone has ever needed to respond to the living God: "Here I am." He had come, and, rather than running, or assuming anything about anything, he decided to accept his close-up with God, and to let it be what God needed it to be. It was scary, at first. God expected humility, not even allowing Moses the pride of a pair of sandals. God expected respect. But most of all, God wanted to be God with God's people, to bring God's holiness to earth, for their, sake out of love, the people who God wanted to have promise and hope. God wanted to be who God really is in close-up moments, so that we would trust God, forever - and so God told Moses God's name.

"Eyeh-asher-eyeh:" Let's say it together: [CONGREGATIONS REPEATS TWICE] a name that sounded like a breath of wind, the breath of God's Spirit. "I AM WHO I AM." "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE." The God who we cannot put in any box. The God who will always be whatever God needs to be, whenever and wherever God needs to be. The God who is righteousness itself, beyond all human right and wrong. The God who, as God's Son Jesus Christ put it in today's reading from Matthew, we can only have when we lose hope in everything, everything except our hope in having our life in God's loving hands.

We have come together on God's holy ground, today. God has invited us into God's holy house, to have a taste of what our close-up moments with God can be for all time. And through God's one and only Son, Jesus, Christ, God invites us to a close-up filled with grace at God's very own table today. Approach this table of grace today with gladness, joy, and hope, for it is fueled with grace from the living Spirit of God's very self. God wants to have close-ups with us now, AND forever. It can start right here, right now, and last until we visit God's holy home.

Leave your agendas at the door. Lose all of your rightness, and accept the righteousness of God as our only hope for salvation. Come to God's holy ground, and say, "Here I am, LORD." Let it be our most sacred privilege, and our deepest joy, to do so. Amen.