

“Any Old Bramble Will Do”

Exodus 3:1-10

Those of you who are familiar with Major League Baseball will know the name Cal Ripken, Jr. As a baseball standout he had a stellar professional career. When it was all said and done, Cal Ripken, Jr. became an extraordinary ball player by doing an ordinary thing—he showed up for work. He did it again and again and again, for a record 2,632 consecutive times. The Hall of Fame shortstop and third baseman first appeared in the Baltimore Orioles starting lineup on May 30, 1982. His name wouldn't be absent from that lineup until September 20, 1998. In 1985, Ripken sprained his ankle in just the second game of the season, but he finished the game and was back on the field for the very next game, a mere two days later. The baseball world was on notice that injury or no injury, Cal Ripken was going to show up. And show up he did. On September 6, 1995, in a game against the California Angels, Cal Ripken Jr. set a mark for the ages, playing in his 2,131st straight game on national television and before a home field crowd that honored him with a 22-minute long standing ovation. In 2019, he published a book in which he told his story and it was appropriately given the title, “Just Show Up.”

Something can be said for people who ‘show up.’ Now, it might not be that they stand head and shoulders above everyone else when it comes to talent or ability. They may not be beyond ordinary, but for whatever reason, they just show up. They can be counted on to do their thing, and to do it with consistency. In reality...

C.S Lewis—*“There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal... But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”*

In other words, human beings have been created uniquely in the image of God and, for that reason, are anything but ordinary. Each of us are uniquely created, uniquely gifted and wired. And yet most of us would say that ‘ordinary’ is the word that best describes us. The fact of the matter is that God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things,

but it is God who makes the difference. He doesn't take delight in a man's strength, but delights in the one who is keenly aware of his need for God's grace.

That is something we learn in the early chapters of Exodus involving the life of Moses. As someone who was raised in the palace of Pharaoh, Moses was the adopted son of the Pharaoh's daughter and a prince of Egypt. We would say that he came from extraordinary privilege. But as divine providence would have it, there came a point in Moses' life when he walked away from it all, and by faith he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing instead to be afflicted with the people of God than to enjoy the temporary pleasures of sin. Hebrews 11:26 says that he considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. So in faith, he turned his back on Egypt.

In verse 1, that word 'wilderness' is used to describe the place where Moses ends up. Moses flees to the land of Midian where he will settle down and lead someone else's sheep in the backcountry wilderness. That is significant, for most of his life is going to be spent in this wilderness. His first forty years are spent in Egypt, his next forty years will be spent in the wilderness of Midian, and his last forty years will be spent leading Israel through this very same wilderness.

“Wilderness”—*translates the Hebrew word ‘midbar’ which comes from the root word ‘dabar’ which means to speak*

That's very important because it suggests the wilderness is a place where God speaks, where He communicates some of His most important words, where He teaches us some of the most important lessons we need to learn. For Moses, the wilderness of Midian proves to be a formative place and an educational experience like no other.

Spiritually, the wilderness will be an enriching place for Moses. The 'midbar' of Midian was the perfect place for God to make Moses into the man He wanted him to be. The wilderness is a place where he will meet God, a place with no distractions. Cut off from the rest of civilization and reduced to nothing but his basic necessities, Moses is forced to throw himself on the mercy of God's gracious providence. It is there that God

revealed His truth to him. We see this same pattern is repeated all throughout the Bible. It was in the wilderness that Jacob met God in Genesis 28. It was in a wilderness that Elijah heard the still, small voice of God in 1 Kings 19. It was in the wilderness where John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance according to Matthew. It was in a wilderness where Jesus was triumphant over the devil's temptation according to Matthew 4. It was in a wilderness where Paul spent the first two years of his Christian life while studying the Old Testament scriptures according to Galatians 1. It is in the wilderness of Midian where Moses comes face to face with God in what prove to be the most formative experience of his spiritual life.

Relationally, the wilderness will be an eye-opening place for Moses. Moses is going to learn about the faithfulness of God. It's during these forty years that he becomes a husband and father. Verse 21 says that Moses is content to dwell with Reuel or Jethro, marries the man's daughter Zipporah, and they have a son. Moses will name him 'Gershom' which means sojourner. His reason is seen in 1:22 — "For I have been a sojourner in a foreign land."

Practically, the wilderness will be an equipping place for Moses. One of the things he learns there is geography, for later on when he leads God's people out of Egypt, he will know his way around. Vocationally, it is in the wilderness that Moses becomes a shepherd. God wanted a shepherd for His people, so His chosen man had to learn how to look after someone else's sheep. It would hardly be the profession that he would have chosen for himself in Egypt! Do you remember that small cultural detail from Genesis 46? Shepherds were loathsome to the Egyptians. So we consider the humility of the situation as this once proud man who was reared in the palace of the pharaoh is now a shepherd. Moses may well have been educated in all the wisdom and learning of the Egyptians, but God is going to enroll him in 'Wilderness 101' and make him a shepherd, a thing that will teach him valuable lessons for much later on when he leads the flock of God. Those years spent in the wilderness of Midian will be very practical for Moses. But beyond the practical side is the spiritual education that he will receive. Before he will lead Israel out of Egypt, God is going to get Egypt out of

Moses. And before Moses gives God's Word to His people, Moses will first have to receive it himself. That's what happens in chapter 3.

It is amazing how your life can change from one day to the next. On a day that began like any other day, Moses went out with the flock. But it was a day that would change his life, for this would be the day that would mark his call from God to deliver Israel.

1—A SIMPLE routine (3:1)

“Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.”

We have seen how 40 years pass between verses 10-11 in chapter two. Well, 40 more years pass between the end of chapter two and the beginning of chapter three. For some 40 years, Moses has been in the wilderness of Midian. As a lowly shepherd, his job involved watching over the flocks that belonged to his father-in-law, Jethro. His daily routine involved leading them through the wilderness where they could graze at the edge of the desert, up to the base of Mount Horeb. Moses had done this every single day for 40 years. This was his life, and it was a far cry from the palace of Egypt. He learns the lesson of being faithful in the ordinary humdrum routine of everyday life. Remember that Jesus said to be faithful in the little is to be made ruler over much. So it will be for Moses.

We read in chapter 3 that it was a day like any other. The sunrise was just like any other, a day just like any other day during the past 40 years of Moses' life. But little did he know that it would be one in which God would break a 40-year silence and powerfully reveal Himself to Moses.

Chuck Swindoll—*“The night before, as he was sleeping out under those bright desert stars with his flock, perhaps under the looming shadow of Sinai, he saw no meteor flash across the sky. He heard no voice. No angel tapped him on the shoulder at breakfast that morning and said, ‘Pay attention, Moses. God speaks today.’ There were no hints,*

no premonitions, no special signs to alert him to the fact that God Himself would break the silence that day and that life would change forever.”

No, it was just an ordinary day in which Moses was going about his ordinary routine. After 40 years, there had been 14,599 other days just like this one. It was day like any other, Moses is in the wilderness tending sheep, simply minding his own business. That’s how God works in our lives, isn’t it? A person never knows when his life might be changed forever by an encounter with the living God. Not a chance, random encounter. It may seem like that from our perspective, but it is never that way from God’s point of view. It was God’s providence that led Moses to the far side of the ‘midbar.’ God’s ever watchful eye was on his life. There had not been a day in his life where God was not providing for him, watching over him, preparing him. I imagine that many of those days, Moses felt like a failure. As he reflected back on his former life, he maybe thought he was all washed up, hung out to dry, a man who had good intentions but dropped the ball. But Heaven had a different perspective.

Much later on in Israel’s future, they would find themselves in a wilderness of exile, carried off into captivity due to the idolatry and disobedience of the nation. They would be in Babylon for 70 years, yet God makes the promise to ‘visit’ them and fulfill His promise to bring them back into their land. God says to His people:

Jeremiah 29:11 – “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

God knows the plans that he has for Moses’ life, and he is not out of God’s reach there in the ‘midbar.’ God knows where to find you, too. When He speaks, it will be without warning, on some ordinary day while you are going about your ordinary routine. Moses is doing the same thing he had done every single day for forty years, but God is about to change the trajectory of his life. We often forget the fact that 99% of life is ordinary. It’s the same old stuff day after day. You get up in the morning, take a shower, put your clothes on, eat breakfast, get the kids ready for school, go to work, come home, go through your evening routine, flop into bed dead-tired, and then get up the next

morning and do it all over again. That's the way life is, and sometimes we forget that God is in the midst of the ordinary.

Maybe some of you are needing a word for some season of life you now find yourself in. How can I determine the will of God? You begin by doing what you already know to be the will of God in your present situation. I don't need to worry about God's will for tomorrow or the next day, much less next week, next month, or next year. Just get up each day and do the will of God for that day, and in the doing of God's will today, we will discover God's will for tomorrow.

It has been my experience that God won't write the details of His plan for you in the sky. But He will guide you each and every day as you look diligently to His Word, trust His providential hand, and 'do the next thing' just as Elisabeth Elliot reminded us.

*Many a questioning, many a fear,
Many a doubt, hath its quieting here.
Moment by moment, let down from Heaven,
Time, opportunity, and guidance are given.
Fear not tomorrows, child of the King,
Trust them with Jesus, do the next thing

Do it immediately, do it with prayer;
Do it reliantly, casting all care;
Do it with reverence, tracing His hand
Who placed it before thee with earnest command.
Stayed on Omnipotence, safe 'neath His wing,
Leave all results, do the next thing.*

Let me tell you, Moses got up one morning to 'do the next thing' and it was a day in which he met God. That is the way He works, men and women. He uses ordinary people, on ordinary days, in ordinary places. You may be checking into the office tomorrow morning. Or climbing into a truck for a 900-mile stretch of monotonous highway. Or facing a classroom full of students. Or slipping behind the wheel of your patrol car. Or changing a baby's diaper, while another little one clings to your leg.

That's your day, your routine. It may be that on such a normal, standard-issue day, God will choose to impress something precious upon your soul. It may be the day when He breaks through and sheds light on some long awaited need. In the meantime, do the next thing! When you feel empty and alone, confused and even wondering which way is up, when you are in a wilderness of doubt and disillusionment—do the next thing—all while keeping your eyes on Jesus. You will discover that He is faithfully guiding you every step of the way. Just like the song by Zach Williams says:

*In the waiting, in the searching
In the healing and the hurting
Like a blessing buried in the broken pieces
Every minute, every moment
Where I've been and where I'm going
Even when I didn't know it or couldn't see it
There was Jesus!*

He knows what He is up to with your life. There's a day fixed on God's calendar, a day that relates to the second coming of Jesus Christ. Jesus said that His return will be a lot like what it was before the flood in Noah's day. He said:

Matthew 24:36-39—“But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the days of Noah so also will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.”

In other words, Jesus said His return will be just like any other day. People will be going through the regular routine of life when He breaks into history in glory and power. It will be an interruption when it happens. In the meantime, while we wait, you and I simply need to do the next thing.

2—A SUPERNATURAL encounter (3:2-6)

“And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, ‘I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.’ When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ The He said, ‘Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’ And He said, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.”

While Moses is going about his simple, daily routine, there is something that catches his attention. He witnesses a thing that is so out of the ordinary, something so incredible that it defies explanation. Notice in verse 2 that he has what can only be described as a supernatural encounter.

What he saw

Verse 2 says, “And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.” A bush in the desert is not extraordinary. Nor is it unusual that a bush is burning in the desert. After all, it’s hot and dry, and the temperature can easily rise so that fire is a common occurrence in those conditions. The Hebrew word that is used here refers to a bramble, a thorn bush that is common to the area. I’ve been to that part of the world and have seen these. I just happened to take a picture of one of these a few years ago when I was in the middle east. Just a plain old bush and really nothing out of the ordinary. There is nothing at all supernatural about the bush itself, for it was a natural, common bramble bush doing what bramble bushes naturally do.

But what is extraordinary is the fact that this bramble bush was burning but it was not consumed. That’s what really catches Moses’ attention. It is not just something strange—it’s downright incredible. The kind of thing that does not happen. If we were to see the same thing, we would walk over to take a closer look. That is what Moses does, and he sees that what is happening to this bramble bush was ‘supernatural.’ As he turns aside to see what it was all about, he is astonished to discover that although

the bush was burning, it was not being reduced to ashes. From his vantage point, the fire was coming from within the bush itself. The significance of his statement that the bush was not being consumed indicates that the bush itself was not burning—no, the fire was in the bush, but not of the bush. The fire was independent of the bush, and it was not using the bush for its fuel. That’s why the bush was not being consumed. It was burning from its own power, a self-generated, self-existent flame of fire that was dependent on nothing for its own existence. How can such a thing be explained?

The text says that it is the angel of the Lord who appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of the midst of the bush.

“Angel of the Lord”—*associated with an appearance of the glory of God in some manifest way; theophany*

The word ‘theophany’ means God made manifest so that His glory is visible in some way. Scripture teaches that God is spirit, and His invisible substance cannot be seen by the human eye. And yet there are rare occasions in the story of the Bible where the invisible God makes Himself visible by some kind of manifestation. That is what we refer to as a theophany, and it is what we see here with the burning bush. What Moses saw in this flame of fire was a supernatural, visible manifestation of the glory of God.

What he heard

Verse 4 says, “When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush.” Once God has Moses’ attention, He then begins to speak to him. That word ‘when’ in verse 4 means at the same time. The idea is that God speaks to Moses at the same time he turned aside. He stopped his forward motion, he stepped aside from his responsibilities only for a few brief seconds and headed in another direction. He moved in a direction toward the event that had captured his attention. I find it significant that it is only after Moses turns aside that God calls out to him. God had his undivided attention in that moment of time. I imagine that throughout the years, Moses had seen some things in the wilderness, don’t you? Most men that I know who have spent significant time outdoors have some stories to tell. But this was a sight that he

had never seen before. It stopped him in his tracks, arrested his attention, and captured his curiosity.

Chuck Swindoll— *“At that moment, I don’t believe he had the foggiest idea that God was in the bush. He was simply curious, as any of us would have been. This is also God’s method. In the common, ordinary, everyday circumstances of our lives, He occasionally does something extraordinary. He burns a bush, as it were.”*

We like to call these ‘coincidences’ or chance encounters, yet we’ve determined that as men and women who have faith in an omnipotent God, the word ‘providence’ is more appropriate. Not coincidence, but providence. That is not to say that every random circumstance is God’s burning bush in your life. Neither can we say that the details of our lives are inconsequential. God may use an ordinary event or circumstance to get your attention in an extraordinary way. He may use something out of the blue that intrudes into your daily life to say, “Hold up, wait a minute, I have something to show you.” Like a burning bramble, it could be anything that God uses in an extraordinary way to get our attention so that He can show us something. I can’t help but think that much too often we are so caught up in the busyness of life that we are inattentive to the still, small voice of God calling out to us from the brambles of life.

Chuck Swindoll— *“Moses moved toward the event that had captured his attention. It isn’t easy to get people to do that. Bushes burn, planes crash, cars are totaled, lives are taken and spared, questions cry out for answers, and strange events pass across the landscape of our lives like the shadows of wind-driven clouds. And what do most folks do? They shrug it all off, chalking it up as nothing but coincidence. They traffic right through the midst of these events as though surrounded by a thick hide of leather. If there is a bush burning, they don’t trouble themselves with it...If there is a voice speaking, they’re too busy to pay attention. Why bother? It means nothing. They’ve got more important things on their minds.”*

But not Moses. He turns aside to see what was going on, and it turns out to be a providential encounter with the living God that changes his life.

What he did

When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' That is, once God has his attention, He calls Moses by name. He deals with us on a personal and individual level. Verse 4 says, "And he said, 'Here I am.'" In other words, it's me, I'm here, and I'm listening. That's the proper attitude.

In verse 5, "Then He said, 'Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'" That is, it is set apart and made distinct, separate and devoted. The ground itself was not holy, but was made holy by the presence of the One in the midst of the bramble bush. The question is who is He? Who is this calling out to Moses, telling him to remove his sandals? The big reveal comes in verse 6, "And He said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."

3—A SPECIAL assignment (3:7-10)

"Then the Lord said, 'I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hives, and the Jebusites. And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.'"

I'll come back to this later on, but God has a very special assignment for Moses. He reveals Himself to Moses and declares his intentions to save His people. Yet He intends to use Moses as an instrument of deliverance for the sake of the Israelites. It's one thing for God to say that He has seen their suffering and has come down to save them. It is another thing for Him to say to Moses, "Come, for I am sending you." We will discover that Moses is reluctant and sees himself completely inadequate for the

task. Yet the message of God in the midst of the bramble shows us that it is not the bramble that makes the difference, but the radiance of God's glory. The story of the burning bush is an illustration of how any old bramble will do, so long as it belongs to God. The success of Moses would not be seen in his abilities, it would not come from his resume, nor is it an issue of him being well-connected. Moses is simply an ordinary bramble, having been stripped of all his comforts and pride. But any old bramble will do, so long as it has been set on fire by God.

Application points:

- Remember that God uses the ordinary experiences of life to accomplish extraordinary things.
- Rejoice in the truth that our God is both transcendent and immanent as Immanuel.
- Respond with confidence to the assignment that you have been given by God.