

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 18 NOVEMBER 2012
Worship Leader: Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Exodus 3

“Names”

The Word Exodus means departure. And that is what, at first sight, the book of Exodus is about: the departure of the people of Israel from Egypt and their journey through the desert to the promised land.

In the Hebrew scriptures, however, the book is called ‘Names’ and not departure. And there is a good reason for that.

Titles are funny things. They tend to guide us in what we understand the meaning of a book to be. Unless they don’t make any sense at all of course.

Names. Perhaps not a very appealing or imaginative title at first sound. But as meaningful as Exodus or even more so at closer inspection. Because this book is about names. Two names: The name of Moses and the name of God.

The figure of Moses, larger than life, gets filled in in this book, his character coloured in with stories and detail about who he was, how his life journey develops and how he came to mean so much to his people. And very much the same happens with God: the book fills us in about him as much as about Moses. Step by step, all through the book, we discover as much about God as about Moses.

In today’s passage the story is told of how they meet each other for the first time.

In the desert.

So far, in the book, there has not been any talk about God. We’ve heard about Moses and the difficult situation his people find themselves in after the Pharaoh has forgotten the memory of Joseph and how he and his people came to Egypt, saving the people of Egypt from famine and devastation many years ago.

Moses, we are told, is born in a time of terrible hardship for his people where a mighty pharaoh tries to keep his anxiety about what he sees as just another, ethnic minority threatening the riches of his country. A country kept under control by killing any boy babies that are born as well as working their parents to death through slavery. Moses escapes this fate, through the ingenuity of his mother and the courage of his sister and receives a good education in the bargain at the palace of the oppressor when he is pulled out of the Nile by the daughter of Pharaoh. (And that is where he gets his name, Moses, “pulled from the water”)

After he has grown up we hear that Moses has his heart in the right place; we hear that he remembers his people and stands up for them. He becomes a freedom fighter.

Unfortunately for him he also has a nasty and not so easy to control temper: On one occasion where he seeks to support a fellow Israelite against the oppressor he commits murder, and has to flee for his own safety.

From a political activist Moses becomes an asylum seeker who seeks refuge in the desert. There again he proves his heart is in the right place. His first action in the desert is to help a group of shepherdesses stand up against their bullies and is then introduced into the household of Sippora and Jethro, his future wife and father in law. Moses settles in the desert and becomes a shepherd, making a living by tending the sheep of his father in law. Something that would probably have helped him to bring that terrible temper under control. Shepherding is a very tedious job and sheep not the most intelligent of species. Moses would have needed to develop a lot of patience in the desert, and a lot of ingenuity to get his job done. It would have been good training for a man to learn how to lead, to guide, to care, to watch, to be patient, to pay close attention to his environment and use his muscle and brains to protect the flock under his care.

Ears of experienced bible readers will be pricking up by now: difficulty at birth or straight after, an irresistible inclination to stand up for the rights of the poor and oppressed, a time out in the desert, and the shepherding of sheep are all indications, anywhere in scripture that a leader is being born.

Moses, David, Elijah, and eventually Jesus, they all fit the same mould, they all fit the same profile: they are shepherds, they spend some time in the desert to get to know themselves and to get to know God and learn some skills that will stand them in good stead later on, and they all stand up for the rights of the oppressed, even where it means considerable hardship and trouble for themselves. With Moses probably the mould of moulds, the one the others will all be modelled on. His story probably, together with some of the stories about Abraham, one the most ancient of them all, written down some time before David became King and before most of the other books of the bible were written.

We don't know what, if anything, is historical about Moses and the stories in Exodus, or the book of Numbers. Scholars think that different stories from different groups were clustered around the figure of Moses as those different groups started growing into a nation, seeking to establish identity and trying to figure out where they had come from and how they had ended up where they were now. Developing their thoughts and belief in God while they were at it, trying to figure what the mysterious force was that had brought them together and held them together and somehow brought them here, in the land of milk and honey where others lived too, serving other gods that seemed at odds with their own understanding of who God was and what he was about.

Our God is a liberator they said, he stands up for the oppressed. He stays close, he listens and he hears his people cry, he has travelled with us, nurtured us, helped us, cared for us, every step of the way. This God is awesome. You can't put a finger on him, he is hard to describe and to give him a name really escapes us. A couple of syllables, the image of fire, or a cloud and the deep sense that he has led us, from wherever we came to this place. That is really about as far as we get.

And they project it all onto Moses, their own experience of God, their own story with God, as well as the experience and story of those who've gone before them.

Helper, liberator, presence, something, somebody, fire, cloud, don't know what, but something, actively involved in our life and our history.

In today's story they tell how their greatest leader ever who started out as a baby in a basket, a murderer who had to flee and seek asylum, a shepherd minding his father in law's business in the desert gets called by God.

Suddenly and unexpectedly. Who would expect God to speak from a burning bush? And in the process they tell us their experience is that God appears in unexpected places, asking unlikely people for help, calling to ministry and leadership those who are hardly suited to the job: a murderer, a refugee, a shepherd. They tell us of the experience that the fire of God's presence will suddenly flare up where we least expect it, authorising people to do things they would never have expected themselves to be called on to do.

Moses comes up with five good reasons why he cannot answer God's call, and yet he somehow finds himself in Egypt not much later, standing up to Pharaoh and his might to lead his people out of slavery.

Throughout history this has happened to people time and time again. Somehow they've been called, often when they least expected it. Unlikely people, like you and me, who are often, at first sight not at all suitable or equipped for the task God calls them to. People who don't feel they are worthy, or capable, have the skills, or the character, and yet...

And yet through them and by them miracles start to happen. Because somehow they answer to that call and allow their lives to be led and shaped by it.

In the book of Exodus, or the book of Names as the Hebrew scriptures call it, we will hear a lot more about Moses, and his journey with God. A journey he begins by stuttering the name of the one he encounters in the desert: I am who I am, I was who I was, I will be who I will be, I am, I'll be and I have been who has called Moses to work with him and lead his people out of slavery.

And we hear a lot more about God. As God calls Moses to work with him, stay with him and journey with him through thick and thin through the most unlikely

places we get to know God intimately as we share in Moses' journey with God.

It's a tale of two friends, falling out and making up, holding on and letting go. Deeply involved in each other's life, deeply engaged with each other's dreams and visions. An intimate relationship, emotional, intense, with angry exchanges as well as times filled with harmony and mutual affection. Picturing a God that is at the same time immeasurably far and incredibly close.

A tale that provides a template for every person of faith who seeks to negotiate the journey of life with God by his or her side. A story to refer to, to engage with, to measure ourselves up against. Look at Moses' journey, asking ourselves how we compare, what the similarities are and what the difference, positive or negative, and what we can learn from them.

One of the first times I told this story in Sunday school I asked the children what they would have done if they had been confronted by a burning bush. "Well, call the fire brigade of course" responded one of my lovely pupils, one who loved the red fire engine he brought to Sunday school with him.

As one who has been confronted with that mysterious voice a couple of times, tried to resist it, tried to convince it with more than five reasons why, I was definitely not the one to be asked for a certain job, and had some pretty emotional, challenging and intense encounters with a presence that I find more difficult to describe. I know there is no calling the fire brigade when that kind of fire starts to burn.

I'm convinced that fire is burning still, here and now, calling you and me, time and time again, hoping we will receive its claim on our lives with joy, prepared to follow and be guided to whatever it is it calls us to on a journey that leads out of slavery and hardship. Even where we may feel totally inadequate and unworthy for what is asked of us, we are called out on a journey towards another world where wholeness and peace will reign.
Amen.