Called to Go (reluctant or not)
Exodus 3:1-15

Over the next few weeks, we're going to do something slightly different. Rather than work our way through a book of the Bible, we're going to look at different passages and how the gospel, the good news of Christ, is enduringly relevant for us and for the people we mix with. Which is why we're calling it, Christ for the City and Campus.

And my hope is that, as we prepare to move into our new building, and a new neighbourhood, this will be an encouragement to be confident about your faith and to talk about your faith, if you're a Christian. And if you're not yet a Christian, that you'd become one.

And paired with this series, starting end of January, beginning of February, we're going to run a seven week module on Sunday evenings, led by Colin and Emma, to practically equip us to do that. More on that later in the month.

Now, you might hear the idea of talking about your faith and your heart leap with joy, or sink with dread. Or at least you might sense some inner reluctance. Because, talking about Christ and faith to others, is for others to do.

So we're going to start by looking at Moses, the most reluctant of men. Because if when Isaiah the prophet had that earth-shaking encounter with God in his glory, in the temple, and he felt and knew his unworthiness and inadequacy and cried out, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips", when the Lord then asked "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah instantly replied "Here I am! Send me."

But Moses is very different, isn't he? He too experiences God's glory in the burning bush but when the Lord says, v10, "Come. I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt" his response was anything but, 'here I am, send me!'

Verse 11, "But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" 'Er, God, I think you've got the wrong man, I am not cut out for this.' And by chapter 4:13 he says, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else." And maybe you feel much the same. When it comes to talking about faith, are there the Isaiahs among us, 'Here I am - send me'? Sure. But there are also the Moseses "Please Lord send someone, anyone, else!'

Now, later on, what becomes clear is that part of what's driving Moses' reluctance is his lack of skill with words. But what also becomes clear is that that reluctance and resistance is less to do with humility, and more to do with insecurity and unbelief.

So in choosing and sending Moses, the Lord hasn't choosen a man of deep faith and a can-do spirit! He hasn't chosen a guy brimming with courage and overflowing with evangelistic zeal. He's chosen a guy who is all too aware of his inadequacy and who struggles to trust God that things could be different. And the point is, he's not wrong about himself, is he. But the point's also, it's not about him. It's about the One who sends him.

And Moses does go, and grows into a man of courage and faith. And what I want us to see this morning is that all of us can make that same move from reluctance to obedience. The question is, how?

An Encounter with the True God

Look how it all begins. Moses is working as a shepherd, in the desert, for his father-in-law, when, v2, 'The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.' And the word for *angel* simply means messenger - a representative of the Lord. But both here and elsewhere, the angel of the Lord and the Lord himself are so closely aligned it's difficult sometimes to distinguish the two. Because if this is the angel of the Lord, by v4 it's the Lord himself who's talking to Moses from the bush.

And yet, before the Lord talks, did you notice what it is that catches Moses' eye? Verses 2-3: '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." And apparently, in a desert, that a bush catches fire is common enough, but that it's not burned up… that's a different matter.

So why doesn't it burn up? Is this a symbol of God's sovereign power over creation, or as some commentators suggest, as sign that Israel's light will never go out, or a beacon of Moses' divine calling? Maybe. Except this is *the* foundational event when God reveals himself and his name to Moses, the man who will reveal him to Israel.

And how does he do that? Through a fire that burns but never burns out. Through a burning flame that's never extinguished. So before God says anything, Moses is encountering a God who never fades, who never grows dim, who burns and never goes out, whose nature is eternal with no beginning and no end, and who needs nothing and nobody for his self-existent life — not even a Moses.

And he represents himself by fire. By the thing you cannot live with and yet cannot live without. By the thing that refines and purges and purifies. And in the last few weeks we've seen the terrible power of fire. But here, this fire burns but does not consume. It blazes but does not destroy.

And it's that God who calls Moses: v4, "Moses, Moses!" And [Moses] said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." Now, you know what it's like to stand in front of a fire as it radiates heat outwards. And you'll have seen a surgeon mark out a sterile field with green sheets. Well, here, God radiates and spreads his holiness outwards. A holiness, a separate-ness, a do not approach-unless-you-die-ness that Moses must not cross.

And yet, how does this unapproachable God call Moses? By name. Now maybe you remember the time when Jesus encountered a man shackled by chains and tormented by demons, who Jesus set free and sent off to tell of all the Lord had done for him. But before he delivered him, Jesus asked him, "What's your name?" And what was his reply? "Legion", three, or four, or five thousand. He'd been reduced to a number. It's what sin and darkness does to us. And we become just another statistic. Another life wrecked, or marriage broken, or dignity trashed.

But this God who is too holy to approach, who burns but does not burn up, who purifies but does not consume, this God calls this fearful man by name. Just as he knows you, and calls you, by name. And he is utterly different - but he is not distant.

In fact, he says, v6, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." In other words, 'I'm the God of redemptive-, salvation-, promise-keeping history. I'm the God who promised Abraham that from him would come one who would bless the world; the

one who promised that while Israel would be enslaved I would free them.' So this is not a god of Moses' - or your or my imagination. This is the God of the great redemptive story line of the Bible.

Now, is that the God you know, or is your god much smaller?

You see, in v7-8, the Lord says, "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." So, is he eternal, and sovereign, and too white-hot holy to approach? Yes - but he's also the God who comes down, and draws near to the suffering, and the afflicted, and the oppressed. The God who sees tears and hears cries and does not stand aloof or smile at your suffering like a Buddha - telling you it's all illusory. And he doesn't tell you to grin and bear it, like the atheists, and their goddess Mother Nature, and it's just survival of the fittest, so get used to it. No, while Moses cannot draw near to God, it's God who draws near to him, and to all his suffering people.

Again, is that the God you know? The God of absolute holiness but full of compassion?

Later on, after Moses leads Israel out of slavery, God meets with him again, and proclaims his name before him: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty." (Ex 34:6-7).

But hang on, how can God forgive iniquity and sin - but by no means clear the guilty? How can he declare the guilty not guilty but still punish the guilty? Or here, with Moses, how can he be so holy that we can't draw near and yet he draws near to us?

Well, it's when the answer to that has sunk into your heart, and in a sense you've encountered and you know this God, rather than a god of your own imagination, and you know he is unspeakably holy but overflowing with grace, that you begin to understand why there's a message worth taking.

This God is with You

So God calls Moses by name and tells him he's sending him to Pharaoh. And Moses' response? Verse 11, '*But* Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" I mean you know my story God, you know I've already failed to bring about that liberation, and I've lived with the consequences of that failure for years; and you know I'm bad at public speaking, and you know people didn't listen to me back then when I was a prince, and now I'm a nobody no-one's going to change their mind!"

All of which is true - except God has his own buts, doesn't he? In the life of Joseph: 'you meant this for evil, but God meant it for good.' The buts of the psalms: 'My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart.' And the but at the heart of the gospel, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And here, Moses is looking only at himself. And could it be that our reluctance to speak is down to the same tendency? But it's not Moses who matters, is it: v12, God said, "*But* I will be with you."

It's the same promise Jesus made to the disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations… and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:19-20). It's the same promise he

gave Paul when he was facing mounting opposition: ‘And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking… for I am with you.” (Acts 18:9-10)

And so if like Moses, you’re all too aware of your limitations - God’s word to him is his word to us: ‘True, but I am with you.’ With you round the dinner table as you talk to your kids; with you on campus or in the office as you talk with your friends or your colleagues about what you got up to over the weekend. ‘Moses - and all of us - it’s not about who you are - it’s about who I am, and I am with you.'

The Response is Not Down to You
Verse 13, ‘Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ What shall I reply to them?”

Now, that’s not Moses just wanting to get his facts straight, is it? And it’s not that he wants to be clear who his new employer is before he signs the contract. It’s that Moses isn’t just worrying about his own inadequacy, he’s worrying about the inadequacy and credibility of his message: ‘Lord, if I go to Egypt and say you’ve sent me, and this is your message, they’re never going to believe me. ‘O sure *God’s* sent you, well which god would that be exactly?’

And like Moses we can worry about how others will respond if we talk about faith, and like Moses we’re afraid we’ll be lost for answers. Or maybe it’s not people’s response that bothers you, but the lack of it and it’s their indifference that can make you doubt the credibility of the gospel.

And yet, while we should do all we can to make an attractive, believable case for Christianity, the results of that are not down to us. Like we’ve seen, when Paul was up against it, the Lord promised him his presence, but he also promised him, “I have many in this city who are my people.” (Acts 18:10). In other words, ‘keep preaching the gospel Paul, and don’t be discouraged, because you may be facing opposition, but I’m going to save multiple people in this city.’

So Moses asks, ‘what am I going to tell them your name is? How am I going to persuade them this is credible?’: And God’s response? Verses 14-15, ‘God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you’…Say to the people of Israel. ‘The LORD… has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever.’”’

So it’s not just that God knows and calls Moses, and you and me, by name, he also has a name. And he’s not some impersonal power - he too can be known.

And his name is there in v15, which our English Bibles typically translate with an all-caps LORD. And it’s the four consonant Hebrew word YHWH. And because Hebrew was written without vowels there’s debate as to how to pronounce it. But we have a good idea what it means, because right before, the Lord says, “I AM WHO I AM” - a phrase built off the verb ‘to be’ - and which uses the same consonants as YHWH.

So why can Moses have confidence in his message? Because God is YHWH, I AM WHO I AM, the one and only true God, while all other gods, from the gods of Egypt to the idols of modern secularism, are not.

So Moses, you don't need to worry about your or my credibility. I'm the God who knows the end from the beginning. The God who determines the results. The God who knows and calls people to himself. So Moses, you just need to be obedient and leave the results to me.

And when, like Moses, you understand that is who God is, you can relax. Because you don't need to strong arm people or manipulate them to believe. And You don't need to water down the gospel to make it more culturally palatable. And you don't need to try and be clever. I AM WHO I AM has it covered and he has many people in this city who he's calling to himself.

The God who Sends

Now, there is something slightly odd about this whole encounter, isn't there? The Lord sends the angel of the Lord to Moses to tell him to go to Pharaoh. Why doesn't he just go himself? I mean, if the Lord can send the angel to Moses, why not send him to Pharaoh?

Or take the apostle Peter going to Cornelius, the Roman centurion. An angel appears to Cornelius, telling him to send for Peter who will explain the gospel to him. So Cornelius sends some men, asks Peter to come, Peter goes, and Cornelius and his household are converted. Great! But wouldn't it have been more efficient if the angel had just explained the gospel to Cornelius in the first place? Why the need for a Moses? Why the need for a Peter? Why the need for you and me? Wouldn't it be better just to cut out the middle man?

Well, obviously not. And maybe to the confusion of all the engineers amongst us, maybe efficiency and stream-lined processes are not the most important thing to God.

Instead, he uses fearful, doubting, and even reluctant people like Moses, or you and me, to take his message to the world. It's why Paul says, 'For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"'(Rom 10:13-15). How do people come to believe and be saved? By God sending people like you and me into their lives to proclaim and share the gospel with them.

But of course, God is not a God who sends just because he sends angels and men. He's the God who sends his Son. As Jesus himself said, "For God so loved the world that he…" what? Sent an angel? Sent you and me? No. "He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17)

And so if here God sends Moses, in Jesus he sends the One greater than Moses. Because here, God promises Moses, "I will be with you" but Jesus was and is Immanuel - God with us; who said of himself, "Before Abraham was" - and by implication before Moses was, "I AM." I'm the God of the Burning Bush. I'm the God of the fire that burns but never burns out.

And yet the light of his life was snuffed out. For a time. Because if Moses was a shepherd tending his father-in-law's flocks, Jesus said, "I'm the good shepherd who lays down his life for my father's flock." You see, how can God be so holy that no one approach him and yet he comes close to us? How can he forgive sin yet not let the guilty go unpunished?

Because at the cross the One sent by God became sin for us, taking our guilt upon himself, and the punishment for sin that was ours to bear. And he, the innocent took the wrath of God against the guilty, that we the guilty might be declared innocent.

And in doing so, he brings about a far greater exodus than Moses ever did, as he leads all who put their trust in him out of slavery and into freedom, not slavery to Egypt, or Rome, but from sin and death. Because if at the cross the light of his life was snuffed, in his resurrection the flame leapt to life again.

So why should we tell others about him? Because we've experienced the gospel in our own lives. Because in Christ, we've encountered the God of Moses for ourselves. Because we know that when we go, however inadequate we are, he is with us. And we can relax, because the results are down to him. Because Jesus is the great I AM. And he came for us, so we go for him.