

---

## *Moses, Leadership, and a Vision of Fire*

[Listen to the podcast.](#)

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler**  
**The Third Sunday of Lent**  
**Exodus 3:1-15**

*"Moses said to God, "Who am I? , Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh ..."  
Exodus 3:11*

Last Wednesday night, at our Lenten series, Tom Key quoted the powerful poem of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Who Am I?" I commend both the poem and Tom Key's presentation to you, as Tom helps us to contemplate the true self. The season of Lent is an opportunity for self-examination: "Who are we?"

At some point, each of us asks the question, "Who am I?" And we hear the same question from others, directed to ourselves, "Who are you, anyway?"

"Who are you?" Yes, that was also the question Moses asked of God. "Who are you?" "Who shall I say is calling?" God answered, "I AM Who I AM" (Exodus 3:14); and what a mysterious answer that was, an answer that does not exactly clear up the issue at all.

What if that question were asked of us today. "Who are you?"

Today, I say that you are a leader. You are a leader. Maybe you don't think of yourself that way. You feel pushed and shoved around like the Hebrews did in ancient Egypt. Maybe you feel powerless like they did (Ex. 3:7). Maybe you feel confused and ineffective and unable to speak, as Moses felt (Ex. 4:10).

But, I believe that each of us "in some capacity or another" is a leader. We are called, at some point in our lives, to lead something. It might not be a country or a company, or a church or a team. But it sure might be a family, or a relationship, or even ourselves. Especially ourselves. We are definitely created to be a leader for our true self.

The characters of the Bible can help us learn how to lead, and they can teach us the costs of leadership. Today, the Bible may offer no greater example of leadership than the person of Moses. Several weeks ago, in the Sunday Dean's Forum, I noted at least five characteristics of leadership for which Moses is a prime example.

For one, Moses knew himself; he knew where he came from, he went on pilgrimage to a distant land (Ex. 3:1), and he returned to serve his people. That true self-knowledge gave him the gift of self-differentiation. He could lead without succumbing to the anxiety of the crowd.

Secondly, Moses persisted in the face of adversity; that adversity appeared in the face of the Pharaoh, for sure; but it also appeared in the faces of his own people, the people whom he was liberating, but who then complained against him bitterly in the wilderness, and who even fabricated a false god in their idolatry (Ex 16, Ex 32). Moses persisted, and persevered.

Third, Moses loved his people. At one point, in the astounding thirty-second chapter of the Book of Exodus, God himself wants to destroy these unfaithful Israelites and start over with a new line, a lineage descended from Moses instead of Abraham (Ex. 32:7-10). And Moses, arguing with God, actually changes God's mind about that destruction (Ex. 32:14). Moses loves his people so much that he defends them before God. And Moses saves his people.

Fourth, Moses delegated. He may have learned that wisdom from his father-in-law, Jethro (Ex. 18). Moses was willing and able to let some of the spirit which was on him, to be distributed to seventy other leaders. He didn't even mind when two other men, Eldad and Medad, also prophesied, without proper authorization. "I wish that everyone had that gift," he said (Numbers 11). Moses was flexible in his delegation.

But it is today's scripture lesson, from the great third chapter of Exodus, that gives us a fifth characteristic of leadership. A leader has to see something, and Moses did. Moses had a vision.

It happened as Moses was journeying away from his home, away from Egypt. He was in the wilderness of Midian, and he paused—he paused—to discover a marvelous thing. It was a bush on fire. The bush was burning but it was never consumed. I marvel at that very observation.

Most of us, when we see a fire, we note it as fire. But it takes time to see a miracle. We are required to pause, sometimes for a long time, if we are to observe that the fire is not consuming anything. It had to have taken Moses some time to figure this out. He had to take off his shoes. It takes a while, it takes patience, it requires taking off your shoes and getting down to earth, to figure out that the bush was not being consumed. He was fascinated.

That burning bush is the symbol of the name of God forever: "YAHWEH" was the name spoken to Moses. We usually translate that word as, "I am who I am." But it can also mean, in Hebrew, "I am becoming who I am becoming." And the word can also mean, "I will be who I will be." In other words, God is never complete. God is still becoming. And creation itself is still longing for the completion of the children of God.

This fire of God burns and gives forth light, yet it never consumes us. That is what Moses saw in the wilderness. That was his vision.

One of the great German philosophers of the early twentieth century described religious experience this way. God, he said, was "mysterium tremendum et fascinans." A tremendous and fascinating mystery. The mystery of God is tremendous, but it does not confound or frighten us. Rather, it fascinates and attracts us.

The fascinating experience of love is like that, isn't it? I hope every one of you here has been in love before. (I hope you are in love right now!) Well, true love has this same characteristic. When you are in love with someone, you feel like—no matter how well you know your lover—still you do not know everything about him or her, and you want to know more. You are fascinated. A tremendous and fascinating mystery.

And the more we love, the more love we have. Love replenishes itself the more we use it. That is its miracle. Why do we give everything we have for the one we love? Because we know that our love will provide more in the future.

Yes, the only way to get more—the only way to get more love!—is to give more love. That is one of the great principles of the Christian faith. The only way to get things is to give them away. The only way to be forgiven is to forgive someone else. The only way to be loved is to love someone else. The only way to gain your life is to lose it.

*And in the end, the love you take  
Is equal to the love you make.*

(That's the way Paul McCartney and John Lennon expressed it.)

The love and the presence of God never run out. That is what Moses saw; that was his vision. There is some mystery, some fascinating mystery about God that both amazes us and fascinates us—without end. It is worth pursuing because the more we seek, the more we find, and then the more we want to seek some more.

God is like that fire that never burns out. And we can find that fire, that passion, in all sorts of ordinary experience: from people and flowers in the gardens, to conflict and grief in the city, to bushes and solitude in the wilderness. Every piece of God's creation can show us something of the eternity and majestic grace of God.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning said it this way:

*Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God:  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries.*

The fifth characteristic of good leadership is that the leader has a vision, and Moses truly had the most tremendous vision possible. *This* was the vision that enabled him to persist and to persevere; *this* was the vision that empowered the leadership of Moses.

Moses did not see just anything. Moses saw the eternal love of God. Moses saw that God's momentary presence is eternal. God burns, but does not burn up. God loves us, but does not consume us. As the God of Abraham, God is connected to the old, but God is also becoming the new.

That is the truly fascinating and tremendous mystery. God's love burns, but it does not burn up. God blazes forth a love that is never consumed. May that mystery inspire our own leadership, wherever we are—at home or in the wilderness. May the fire of God lead each of us during this holy season, and during this holy life.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip