**Equipped by a Leader**

**Text: Exodus 3:1-15**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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I love to drive. I love the rush of accelerating into traffic. I enjoy cruising across this beautiful continent. I appreciate the precision of the traffic flow when folks are following the rules of the road. And I love eating in diners along the way.

So I was eating lunch at Bob Evans the other day – did I mention that I love eating in diners? – I was eating at Bob Evans, and I got to thinking that where we’re headed as a congregation is kind of like driving across country; kind of like a long journey or a road trip. We have our destination, as described in Our Future Story. And now we’re accelerating into traffic.

What do you need if you’re a group taking a road trip? Well, you need at least 3 things: you need a leader, you need mile markers, and you need to follow the rules of the road. You need a bunch of other things too, of course; but these 3 jumped out at me as I thought about the journey that we’re on, and the car trips of my childhood, while eating meat loaf at Bob Evans and reading the Book of Exodus.

First of all, you have to be equipped by a leader. That’s the theme of today’s sermon. We’ll turn to the mile markers and the rules of the road over the next two weeks, before stopping at the diner on World Communion Sunday.

A people on a journey have to be equipped by a leader. On the road trips of my childhood, that was my dad. Mom and Dad were co-leaders of the family over all, but when we were on the road, Dad was in charge. Mom didn’t even learn to drive until I was in high school. So Dad was the driver, he had an excellent sense of direction, he was the tour guide who told us the history of the land that we were crossing, and he led the singing in the car. When we were on the road, Dad was the leader. And he got us to where we were going.

A people on a journey have to be equipped by a leader. In the story of the Exodus, Moses was the human leader, but that was only because God had delegated that task to him. Overall, on that journey from slavery to freedom – on that journey from the painful past to the promise-filled future – *God* was in charge. It is God who leads and equips the Church on *every* journey. The same God who led and equipped Moses – and then, through Moses, led and equipped the Israelites – on their journey into the future.

It all started at the burning bush. Moses was taking care of his father-in-law’s flock when he noticed the start of a brush fire. This was a cause for concern because that fire could quickly spread and panic his flock and perhaps consume them in its flames. But as he turned toward the fire and prepared to take action, he realized that there was only one bush that was burning, and it wasn’t being consumed. And he must’ve thought, “This is weird! What were those leaves that I put in my pipe this morning?”

And then God called him. “Moses, Moses!”

And Moses replied, “Here I am.”

Let’s pause right there for a moment. Because, whatever you might think about the burning bush – whether you think it’s an historical fact or a literary device – you have to agree that it’s a heck of a marketing tool. It got Moses’ attention, and it gets ours. Kind of like a catchy ad that gets you thinking about taking a trip. If you’re of a certain age it’s like the driverless car going down the road and then a driver gets dropped into the car from the sky. “Let Hertz put you in the driver’s seat,” we’re told. Marketing gets your attention and encourages you to do something that you might not otherwise do: whether it’s renting a car or renting a camp or rending asunder the chains that are holding your people in bondage. A leader has to get the attention of those whom she intends to lead. And that’s what happens at the burning bush.

So God is a leader who uses clever marketing to get the people’s attention. But who is this God? He or she or whatever this mysterious voice is; it’s unknown to Moses. He’s been raised in Pharaoh’s household. At some point he was told that he had Jewish ancestry but he knows nothing of the traditions or beliefs of his birth family. Moses is struggling to figure out who it is that is addressing him, so he says, “What’s your name?”

This is more than asking “Who are you,” because there’s a certain amount of control that comes with knowing a name. When you know someone’s name it increases the chances that they can be at your beck and call. Like my short mother calling, “Bruce, come here; I need your long arms.” Or the dreaded, “Bruce Donald Ervin, you come here this instant!” If you know the *whole* name, there’s even *more* control!! So Moses, in a bid, perhaps, to take control of the situation – Moses, son of Pharaoh, who perhaps wants to be the leader who orders God around – Moses says, “What’s your name?”

But God isn’t about to turn over control to Moses. God isn’t about to be caught in Moses’ trap. The son of Pharaoh vies for power against the Ruler of the universe, and you know that ain’t gonna work. Pharaoh’s son asks for a name and the Sovereign of all responds with a riddle. “I am who I am,” God says.

What does *that* mean!?

Well, it’s not really a name, it’s a sentence. Essentially, it’s a subject and a verb: I am. God goes on to say, “When they ask who sent you, say, ‘I am sent me.’” And even that verb is a riddle because…there’s no past, present or future tense in biblical Hebrew. It’s not at all clear how to translate the Hebrew verb into English. It could be translated, “I am who I am.” Or “I was who I was,” or “I will be who I will be.”

So God’s in charge, but it’s not at all clear who God is. God’s the leader, but that leader is hiding behind a riddle. And God is going to lead God’s people somewhere, but for all Moses can tell it could be back to the past or forward into the future. I mean, are we dealing with “I Was” or I Will Be?” What is going on here?!

Well, several things. First of all, the mystery is the main point. God is beyond our knowing. God is beyond anything that we can comprehend with our brains. We can’t see God, we can’t understand God, and we certainly can’t control God. And I think most North American Christians don’t get this. Conservative Christians think that can know and understand God because, of course, they’ve got every word that God literally said right here in this book and all you have to do is read the book and you’ll know God and you’ll be saved. Simple as that. Liberal Christians tend not to know nearly as much about this book, but they’ll cherry-pick all the passages about social justice and they know exactly how to save the world and if God wants to come along and help out a little, well that’s okay.

Most North American Christians, in their ignorance and arrogance, think they can know God and control the agenda. Not unlike Moses. But God is the leader who’s hiding behind the riddle. Who’s in charge? The God who is shrouded in mystery. We can’t see God and we can’t know God, but we can *trust* God. Like my dad, driving through a blinding snow storm, and at one point he missed an on-ramp and turned on a parallel road instead. But he knew that we were going in the right direction and even though *we* didn’t know that and we couldn’t see anything, we trusted him. And at the next interchange, he got us back on the highway.

“Where I cannot see, I will trust.” I think it was Holocaust survivor and Christian activist Corrie ten Boom who said that. We can’t see God, we can’t know God, but we can trust God, wherever God might be leading us. It’s enough to know that we are being led to a Promise Land; a land flowing with milk and honey. We are being led to a place filled with God’s abundance.

The mystery is the main point; we simply have to trust the One who is leading us. That’s the first thing that’s going on here as we stand with Moses at the burning bush and receive our call. We have to trust the One who is leading us, and where we’re being led – where the Great I Am and I Was and I Will Be is leading us – is indeed into the future; but with an eye cast occasionally toward the past. Kind of like when you’re driving down the road: you have to occasionally check your rear-view mirror. We can’t go *back* to the past, but we have to *remember* the past as we follow God into the future. We have to draw values and principles from the past that will *guide* us into the future. I mean, we’re not just revitalizing a camp here. We’re not just rebuilding a congregation here. Yes, we’re doing at least that, but we’re doing so as part of God’s grand vision of leading people from bondage to freedom. That’s what God was doing with Moses and the Israelites more than 3,000 years ago; that’s what God was doing when he led European immigrants here 150 years ago, and that’s what God is doing in *every* age and place. The future toward which God is guiding our Camp, under the new leadership of our Camp Manager, Chuck Bair, it’s not just about getting more rentals and creating more revenue. It’s also about helping trapped youth see new possibilities that they never dreamed of. It’s about giving community organizations and local corporations the space to imagine their way into God’s future. They may not recognize the hand of God in that, but *we* do, so we’re going to give them the space to follow the Unseen Hand of the One who is calling *all* Creation into a new and glorious future. It’s about making resources available to those who may think that they have no resources, and thus moving forward the work of justice, and pointing our neighbors toward God’s abundance. With one eye cast toward the past and the lessons that it can teach us, we are on a journey into the future, following our Leader toward a Promise Land filled with abundance. It is the God of our ancestors who is leading us forward, and though we cannot see, we will trust and we will follow and we will find that the promises of God will ultimately be fulfilled!

We stand at the burning bush: trusting in the Mystery who leads us and following that Leader into the future. But we do so in fear and trembling because, like Moses, we’re not at all sure that we’re equipped to do what God is calling us to do. “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt,” Moses asks. He seems to fear that he doesn’t have what it will take to fulfill the mission. And God says, in essence, “I will *give* you what you need.” God says, “I will be with you, and in the power of my presence you will be equipped with *everything* that you need. You don’t have all that equipment now, but you’ll have it when you’ll need it.

The Unseen One whom we trust, the One who leads us into the promise-filled future, will equip us with *everything* that we need; *when* we need it. I mean, a year ago we started dreaming about a revitalized Camp, and a Camp Manager, and something called the Friends of Camp Bedford. None of that existed. We had none of the equipment that we needed. We were just making stuff up. Well, it was really God who was making it up. And God can imagine things into being. So today we *do* have a Camp Manager, and we *do* have Friends of Camp Bedford, and we *do* have the financial resources: some already given to us and many more on the way.

And all of this is possible because, again, God is in charge: the One who was, and is, and is to be. The One who calls us into a future that is uncharted and unknown, yet full of promise. At least, it is unknown to us. It is very much known to God. We don’t have to see it; at least not yet. All we have to do is to trust, and to follow. Amen.