

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH
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SCRIPTURE: *Exodus 3:1-15*

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SERMON: *“Slavery – God Becomes Real”*

(Acknowledgment to Tim Keller for his series titled “The Language of Salvation” and Luke Keefer Jr. for his book Everything Necessary.)

Slavery.

Sometimes you find yourself hard pressed to put a positive spin on certain words, and slavery is one of them.

There is obviously that dark stain from our nation’s history as we were active participants in the African slave trade, forever separating husbands from their wives, fathers from their sons and daughters...but modern day slavery still exists, primarily in the form of human trafficking.

For those of us that travel Interstate 95 to get to Myrtle Beach or some other destination here on the East Coast, our thoughts are on the traffic, how mundane the scenery, how soon we can get off of here.

But for others, Interstate 95 is all about human trafficking. It’s people in power recognizing and gaining the trust of these young girls – many who come from broken homes and are between the ages of 12 and 14 – and bringing them into a world of modern day slavery, where these girls are sexually exploited.

I have read that there is an incredible amount of human trafficking taking place at truck stops all along the I-95 corridor. Here in Pennsylvania, we’re viewed as a “pass through” state, with

traffickers moving young girls back and forth, all along the East Coast, from New York to Florida.

It's horrific, and so let me take this opportunity to mention a local ministry called "She's Somebody's Daughter." Doing great work in this area of human trafficking, and see me if you want to know more about this ministry.

Human trafficking is a form of modern day slavery, but the truth is, we've all been slaves at some point throughout the course of our lives.

And you might say, "How can that be? I've never been in a situation that I couldn't get out of." But slavery is far more subtle than that. Because the fact is, **whatever controls us, enslaves us.**

And *all of us* have found ourselves controlled – yes, by someone, or yes, by something...at some points in our past, and maybe even here in the present.

The common examples include food, drugs, alcohol, porn...but let me suggest a few possibilities that might fly under our radar.

I wonder how many in our modern culture have become slaves to a certain lifestyle, maintaining a certain standard of living....bringing incredible stress into our lives in an effort to do so. The financial stress...the time that it demands. Life was never meant to be crazy, but many of us make it that way. And so for some, this desire to maintain or elevate our standard of living controls us.

It's easy to be controlled or enslaved by the need for acceptance and approval. Throughout all of my life I have seen people just "get weird" and start talking and acting in a way that is totally not them, in order to gain the approval of others, or one person in particular. I'm sure I've gotten weird myself through the years...enslaved by the need for acceptance.

I think some parents find themselves controlled – enslaved – by their children and the need for their children to experience success. If our children aren't successful, if they're not first team,

first chair, honor role, you name it...it's not just a reflection on them, it's a reflection on us and so we've got to push.

I read an article a year or so ago about the tremendous amount of money that we spend on our kids when it comes to sports...camps and equipment and all kinds of things. And this is not just money lying around...it's parents taking on debt. I've seen videos and read stories about parents going ballistic at other parents, coaches, even other kids because they are so controlled by the need for their child to be "successful." It enslaves them.

The possibilities are endless...the obvious and the not so obvious. And they not only bring stress into our lives, they also keep us from experiencing this incredible freedom – the release of stress, the lifting of this burden - which comes through an **intimate relationship with Jesus.**

We kick off this series that will take us through this month of August, and it's called ***From Slavery to Intimacy.***

And to get started, I'd like for us to just take a moment and give God an opportunity to point out if there is something that might be controlling or enslaving us at this time.

For some, it won't take us but a second, because it's so obvious. But for those of you who haven't really thought about it, let's quiet our hearts and give God a chance to speak to us.

"Lord, we are asking you to speak into our hearts, help each of us to see: "Is there anything in my life that is controlling me?"

"Is there someone or something that I feel I need to have, more than You?"

"Lord, make me aware, not to be shamed by it, but to be set free from it. Help me to receive whatever it is you want me to know."

Okay, what we're going to do is look at how God has worked in the past, bringing His children, the Israelites out of slavery. And into a relationship with Him that becomes personal. And this

will enable us to see how God works to bring *us* out of slavery and into a *far greater* level of intimacy...and how He does this through Jesus.

Now, before God will lead anyone out of slavery...the Israelites or us, He has to become real. More than just a loosely held belief, more than just words on a page. And so this morning's message is called ***God Becomes Real***.

So let's...

1. RECOGNIZE WHAT'S HAPPENING

...as the Israelites find themselves living as slaves in the land of Egypt.

The first book of the Bible, Genesis, tells the story of how God calls a man by the name of **Abraham**. He's the very first Israelite, and God promises Abraham that He is going to become a great nation and many will be blessed through him. God chooses Abraham to begin the Messianic line that will one day lead to Jesus.

In Genesis the Messianic line continues through Abraham's son **Isaac** and then Isaac's son **Jacob**. And Jacob has 12 sons, and one of those sons – **Joseph** – is sold by his brothers as a slave and ends up where? In Egypt.

Joseph – there in Egypt - is eventually reconciled with his brothers and because of a great famine the entire family - about 70 in all - move to Egypt and settle there as shepherds. This is how the Israelites came to reside in the land of Egypt.

This is how Genesis basically ends.

And when the 2nd book of the Bible – Exodus – begins, more than 300 years have passed. That group of 70 family members has multiplied greatly, and they are no longer shepherds, they are now slaves. The Egyptians made the Israelites their slaves, and it was *hard*.

Exodus 1:14 They made their lives bitter with hard labor in brick and mortar and all kinds of work in the fields; in all their hard labor the Egyptians worked them ruthlessly.

That's bad – back breaking work, day after day. But what is even worse is that God seems nowhere to be found. Upon settling in Egypt...100 years go by, 200 years, 300 years...generation after generation the Israelites would simply tell their children the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as those three men grew more distant in the rear view mirror.

This was how the Israelites would refer to God, calling Him “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” The God of our fathers. Because He sure didn't seem to be *their* God.

But this was about to change. Moses is born, and even though he is an Israelite, or a Hebrew as they were called, he was actually raised in Pharaoh's household.

Exodus 2:11 One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor.

Suddenly he takes notice of an Egyptian beating an Israelite – one of his own people - and making sure that no one is looking, he intervenes and ends up killing the Egyptian and buries his body in the sand.

The next day Moses sees two Israelites fighting each other, again he intervenes, but one of them says to Moses, “Are you going to kill me like you killed that Egyptian”...and Moses realizes that what he had done the day before had become known. And somehow it became known to Pharaoh as well.

Exodus 2:15 When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian...

A distant land hundreds of miles away...where he lived as an exile for the next 40 years. During those years he marries, has children, and lives the life of a shepherd – feeling like an alien in a desolate and foreign land.

Then came this one day, after Moses had taken his flock to the far side of the desert, to Mount Sinai, while tending to his flock, he takes notice of a bush that is on fire.

And no big deal, bushes could and would spontaneously combust and burn in the hot, arid desert. But there was something unusual, something that caught Moses' attention.

Exodus 3:2b-3 Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up."

When he drew closer, suddenly a voice is heard coming from within the bush. That would have been mind-blowing in and of itself, but consider the words he heard, "Moses! Moses!"

"Oh my goodness, this bush knows my name!" But you've got to give Moses credit, he stays cool, calm, collected: "*Here I am.*"

Exodus 3:6b "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob."

Wow...the God that he had been told about...the stories about the promises this God had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob hundreds of years ago...now *this* God is speaking directly to him, telling Moses that He is sending him back to Egypt – to Pharaoh – to lead the Israelites out of slavery.

But in order for this to happen, God must become more than "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." And so He actively engages with Moses in order to become real to Moses through a genuine spiritual encounter.

Let's take a closer look at this encounter, because if He's going to bring you and I out from under whatever is controlling us, He's got to be real to us.

So to get started, let me suggest that if you're looking for a genuine encounter with God, you'll want to first....

2. RECOGNIZE THE DETOURS

As we look at this narrative, we see that Moses is on a detour. And a big one at that.

Moses had been raised in Pharaoh's household; it would appear that his was going to be a life of privilege. But then he goes and kills a man and he has to flee, has to escape...and so he ends up living as an obscure shepherd in the land of Midian. This was *not* the way his life was supposed to go.

So he's on a detour. And it's been going on for 40 years now. And then on what seemed to be a day like any other day, Moses takes notice of a bush that's burning...and burning...and burning...not burning up. So he takes another detour – albeit on a much smaller scale – and decides to take a closer look.

Exodus 3:4 When the LORD saw that Moses had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush...

The Hebrew for “gone over” means to “turn aside”...to take a detour. Moses was headed this way, and then something catches his eye...a bush that just keeps on burning. He could have thought: *“Interesting...but, oh well”*...and kept right on going. *“That’s strange but I’ve got to get my flock from here to there.”*

But he doesn't just keep going. He “goes over”...turns aside...takes a detour in order to check it out.

And because he did, he has a personal encounter with God, and God became real.

Do you ever feel as if your life has gone off on some kind of detour? Maybe you never expected to be living here in South Central Pennsylvania. Maybe you're working a job you never thought you'd be working. Maybe important relationships in your life are not working out at all the way you expected.

How about this one: Everything in your life is going *just* the way you expected. Where you live is good, job is good, family is good. But...there's still something missing. You think you should be content. Life *is* good. Still, you feel there has to be something more.

In the summer of 1983 I'm sitting in jail, thinking I've pretty much thrown my life away. But fast forward 10 years and by the summer of 93 my life had changed dramatically. I married Karen 4 years earlier. I was actively serving here at Five Forks. I had a job that - on the day I was promoted to management and was told how much money I'd be making - I remember driving home with this incredible feeling...this warm glow inside. It's amazing what the thought of money can do to us.

All this to say that life was good, very good. But there was something missing. I felt it. Recognized it. You see, God was actively engaging with me in order to get me to turn aside - recognize and take this detour - which would take our relationship to another level.

And I would bet for many of us, God is looking to become more than what we have allowed Him to be.

And some in here may not be sure if God has *ever* become real to you. Maybe you believe in God because of what your parents or grandparents told you... you've read your Bible enough to know and believe some the things that God has done. And you *do* believe in Him. But you've never had a personal encounter with Him...to know for sure that He's real.

It should encourage you to know that God became real to many people when life wasn't working out the way they expected. Unexpected detours give us reason to pause and reflect...to look at our lives and think about who we are, what we believe and what we're about.

Detours are important, but perhaps none more important than those small scale detours that come our way, probably more than we know. It is in these moments when God does something in the course of our day that gives us reason to pause.

He's actively engaging with all of us right now. And it should give us reason to pause.

And I know it would be so easy to just keep right on going. To say, *“Interesting passage. But, oh well.” I’ve got flocks I need to get from here to there...*” Whatever it is that feels more important.

But listen, God called Moses by name and I can’t imagine that He’s not calling your name as well. When God is calling, you can say, “Too busy” or, like Moses, you can say, “Here I am” and see where He wants to go next?

He will do it through the Scriptures, through a song that you hear, through a conversation with a friend...when something gives any of us reason to pause, recognize that it might be God, wanting us to turn aside – a detour to take – because He’s got something to say to us.

“I’m here to deliver you from slavery. I intend to set you free.”

If God has your attention, what would he want us to recognize in order to be set free? For one, He would want us to...

3. RECOGNIZE HIS NAME

This is easy to miss but it’s so important. Here is God, appearing in the form of fire to Moses. And...

Exodus 3:13-14 Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘the God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, “What is his name?” Then what shall I tell them?”

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I AM’ has sent me to you.”

Now this is very powerful and yet somewhat puzzling. Powerful because it’s so strong, so straightforward. *“I AM WHO I AM.”* At the same time it’s puzzling because it raises questions in regards to what God really means. But let’s think about what’s unfolding here.

Throughout this encounter, Moses isn't being all that receptive to God; he keeps pushing back: *"Who am I to take something like this on? I've don't speak all that well. I'd think you better send someone else."*

It's in the midst of this push back that God gives Moses a name, and that name is: "I AM WHO I AM."

What He *doesn't* say to Moses is, *"I am who you want."*

You see, in order for God to use him, Moses has to see God for who He really is, and not who he would like God to be.

This has to be established from the start if God is going to use Moses to free His children from slavery. And in the coming week's we'll see that this *does* get established.

But I'd like to take just a few minutes before we close and remind us that in this series, we're looking not only at how God used Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery, but how Jesus frees us from slavery and into an intimate relationship with Him. And so, "Where is Jesus in all of this?"

And the answer is, He's right there on the mountain. Let me explain what I mean.

Some of you might be familiar with an exchange that took place between Jesus and some religious leaders one day, and at one point these men say to Jesus: *"We're children of Abraham...are you greater than our Father Abraham? Who do you think you are?"*

John 8:58 "Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"

That answer – the grammar - doesn't make any sense.

Except it does.

Because Jesus *is* God. Before Moses, before Abraham, before time began..."I AM." And so Jesus doesn't say to any of us, "*I'll be whoever you want me to be*". So who is Jesus, exactly?

And this is where the imagery of fire can really be helpful. You see, when God appears to Moses as fire on Mount Sinai, it is just one of numerous times throughout the Scriptures that God appears in that form. Why would that be?

Well, you can take a lump of clay and you can use your hands to manipulate it, shape it and mold it. You can stick your hand in a bucket of water and displace it and make the water level rise. You stick your hand into fire, and instead of you impacting it, it's going to be impacting you.

Fire has this capacity to be both beautiful and terrifying at one and the same time.

I like watching a fire burn. We had a fireplace in our house when I was growing up, and I remember just sitting by the fire at times, almost mesmerized by the flames, just watching them dance, with no two alike. People used to build fireplaces to heat their homes, now we build just to watch the fire.

But fire can also be terrifying – awe-inspiring – right? If you've ever stood by a bon-fire or a burn barrel, you know how intense the heat can be...it's lethal, and you've got to respect it.

In the same way, Jesus is both beautiful and awe-inspiring.

But there are some who just want Jesus to be one or the other. There are those who want Jesus to be so attractive and inviting that sin isn't really taken seriously. They don't want a Jesus who says "*Stop that...and stop that...and don't go there*". They want a Jesus who accepts people just as they are and never expects them to change.

And then there are those who want a Jesus that is terrifying and demanding. They will say, "Preach fire and brimstone!"

And the Bible makes clear that neither “Jesus” is real.

Is He welcoming, accepting, inviting...willing to meet us where we are at...no matter where we are at? Yes.

Is He really serious when He says, *“Do not look down on others with contempt, do not lust, speak with integrity, forgive as you have been forgiven?”* Is He serious? Yes, He’s very serious.

I don’t know who is sitting here this morning in bondage, in slavery right now, but if this is you, I know that He is looking to set you free. But you have to see Him for who He is. And He is fully capable of doing His part. What is yours to do?

Is it to simply receive His love and mercy and grace? For some of you, this has been an obstacle. You don’t believe that Jesus could possibly love you, forgive you...and you couldn’t be more wrong.

Or maybe your part is to “stop that”...and “that”. Whatever “that” is, it’s been your obstacle, and maybe you think those things don’t really matter. And you couldn’t be more wrong.

He wants to set you free, but He has to be more than the God you have read about and have been told about.

I came across this quote from Pastor Tim Keller as He’s describing Jesus, and it speaks to me and I hope it will speak to you. ***Jesus, who has a zero tolerance for anything evil...and yet He burns with a passionate love that refuses to stop until He’s made us His own.***

This is Jesus, and it is my hope that you have had a personal encounter with Him here this morning, and that He is real to you.

I’d like to invite you back next week for Week 2 of this series, where the word will not be Slavery, but **Salvation**.