

Being involved

by Scott Grant

High anxiety

I heard a woman tell a story about her 7-year-old son. The boy was on the high dive for the first time, and as he looked down over 10 feet of air he had never plummeted through before, and a pool of water he had never penetrated with such force before, he was terrified. He wouldn't jump. The instructor, observing from below, climbed the ladder to offer encouragement. Then he told the frightened boy, "We'll jump together." So the man wrapped the boy in his arms and cradled him safely to his chest, and they jumped off together. The boy found the courage to leap because the instructor was with him. He believed that the instructor would not allow him to be harmed. He trusted him. And the scared little boy successfully completed his first high dive.

Like the little boy, we are called to plunge ourselves into life. We are to be involved in God's plan for people, which means we are called to be involved with people. But like the little boy, we're frightened. We're afraid of life, particularly people. We're afraid to dive in, because we're afraid of being hurt. But as the instructor was "with" the little boy, God is with us. He climbs up the ladder and speaks to us face to face. He wraps his arms around us, cradles us to his chest and tells us, "We'll jump together." And so we dive into life - dive into people's lives - with God. And if God is with us as we jump, how can the jump not be successful? It may not be artistic, and it may hurt, because we may be new at this diving stuff, but if we leave the safety of the board for the unknown of the air and water, and God's arms are wrapped around us, we'll be successful. Simply jumping is a wild and joyous victory. God calls us to be involved with his plan for people, and he promises success.

God called Moses to be involved in his plan for the people of Israel, and God promised success. Moses was terrified. He had to dive into the teeth of his biggest fears. But God told him, "I will be with you."

First, God prepared Moses for being involved.

Preparation for involvement (3:1-4)

Moses was a shepherd. The other chief leader of Israel, David, was also a shepherd. Jesus, though he was a carpenter, is called the chief shepherd (1 Peter 5:4). God's prototype for leadership is a shepherd. Here Moses is pasturing and leading the flock of another. Moses learns to care for and lead the sheep, just as he would care for and lead the people. He learns to work for someone else, not himself. Ultimately, Moses would learn, as he led the flock of God's people, that he was working neither for himself nor for the people, but for God. The work in and of itself would not satisfy himself. The people would follow him one day and complain about him the next. But God would always be there, wrapping his arms around Moses and encouraging him to take the next jump.

At this time, Moses is seemingly on the shelf. Forty years he spends in the wilderness (Acts 7:30). It may seem like wasted time. But in the wilderness, he's learning to be a shepherd. He's learning lessons that will be invaluable when he returns to Egypt. We may feel that we're on the shelf. Nothing of significance is happening. It may seem like the days are wasted. But God doesn't waste a minute. He is busy preparing each of us for involvement with his plan for people.

I spent four years in college training to be a journalist. Then I worked as a reporter and editor for newspapers for 11 years. For 15 years, I never thought about doing anything else, until the end. Then I started to get an inkling to be more involved in the deeper issues in people's lives. I started longing to study and teach the

scriptures. In my journalism experience, I learned to interview people. I learned all about people. I learned how to ask the important questions. Quiet and shy by nature, I learned to converse with people - which is what being a pastor is all about. As a writer, I learned how to communicate what I wanted to say - which is what teaching is all about. As a copy editor, I learned how to process what other people had written - which is what studying the scriptures is all about. I could identify no desire within me to be a pastor, yet God was preparing me. God doesn't waste a minute.

Moses was alone. He was in the wilderness. He came to Horeb, which means "desolate wasteland." For Moses, it is probably an apt picture of his life. He was a complete failure in Egypt, and now he's wasting time in the wilderness. The landscape of his life is a dry, barren wasteland. Nothing is happening, and nothing has happened for 40 years. If we were to photograph the landscape of our lives, at times we may come up with a picture of Horeb, a "desolate wasteland." Life is dry and barren, and worst of all, we're all alone.

Then again, maybe we're not alone. Maybe we only think we're alone. For Horeb, the "desolate wasteland," is called "the mountain of God." What is "the mountain of God" doing way out here? The last place Moses expected to meet God was Horeb. The last place we'd expect to meet God is that dry, barren, lonely place in our lives. Yet that is where God shows up. He meets us in our desolate places.

Moses sees the angel of the Lord, who turns out to be the Lord himself, in the middle of a burning bush. Although Moses was in the wilderness, the bush was "blazing" with the presence of the Lord. But the bush continued to burn without being consumed. Moses approached the bush in order to find out why it was not consumed. The text never gives us a direct answer, but in the bush we see a picture of Moses. There was nothing extraordinary about it, except that God chose to be in the midst of it, just like he chose to be in the midst of Moses. And if God is in the midst of Moses, Moses would expect to be destroyed by God's holiness (Exodus 24:17, Deuteronomy 4:24). God is telling Moses, a common man, that he can stand in the uncommon presence of the Lord and not be destroyed.

Like Moses, we may feel like a common bush that would be consumed by the holiness of the Lord if he got anywhere near us. So we're inclined to keep our distance. But God, in all his holiness, still wants to dwell with us.

Moses, upon seeing the bush, said, "I must turn aside now." Forty years earlier, before he rose up to deliver one of his Hebrew brothers, he looked "this way and that," but he didn't look to God. Now he turns to God. The wilderness has prepared Moses to meet the Lord.

The Lord is watching for how Moses will respond. God does not speak to Moses until he sees that Moses has "turned aside to look." God does not speak to us until we're ready to listen. In the desolation of the wilderness, after we've exhausted all our efforts to make life work, we're ready to listen to God. Perhaps we thought we were ready all along, but internally we offered fierce resistance. At a very deep level, we insisted on protecting ourselves from the pain of life, so we resisted God, who wanted so desperately to lead us into life. But the loneliness of the wilderness can soften that resistance and open our ears to the Lord. The wilderness can make someone humble, like Moses, who was called "very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3).

When the Lord calls, Moses says, "Here I am." This is a response of trusting availability, the same response that Abraham had when the Lord approached him to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:1, 11) and the same response that Isaiah had when God called him to speak against Israel (Isaiah 6:8).

The gift of the wilderness breaks us. The wilderness prepares us to meet God. It prepares us to listen to God. And it prepares us to be available to God. The wilderness prepares us to enter into life, to involve ourselves in God's plan for people.

When God prepares us, he prepares us for something. So after he prepares, he calls.

Call to involvement (3:5-10)

Moses is ready to meet God. Before anything else, he needs to learn about God. We all have distorted concepts of God. Externally, we may assent to all the right doctrines, but internally we've developed some incorrect ways of thinking about God. We have some deeply held, and incorrect, beliefs, some of which we may not be aware of - beliefs such as, "God should do much more for me than he does," "God has forgotten me," "God doesn't care about me," and "God has no place for me." These are all examples of wrongly held beliefs about God. No doubt Moses has some wrongly held beliefs as well. So God reveals himself to Moses. In these verses he tells him four things, which we may assent to externally but rebel against internally: 1) God is holy. 2) God is faithful. 3) God is compassionate. 4) God has a plan.

First, God is holy. The Lord instructs Moses to remove his sandals, because he is standing on holy ground. Sandals collected dust. Still in most parts of the world, a person removes his or her footwear before entering a house because he or she does not want to dirty the house of a respected host. Similarly, Moses is entering the house of the Lord, so to speak, a piece of ground God has chosen to inhabit. Morally, God is a completely different being. He is "other." He is pure and clean, but our sandals are dirty. Morally, he is galaxies above us, and that calls for reverential awe. He is not to be approached casually or flippantly. He is not "the big boss," "the man upstairs" or "my good buddy." When exposed to the holiness of God, the people of God are first of all struck by an emotionally violent sense of unworthiness (Judges 6:22, Isaiah 6:5). The first thing we need to know about God is that he is holy. But God, in all his holy purity, enters our dirty world. Astoundingly, not only does he enter it, he does so with faithfulness, compassion and action.

Second, God is faithful. In verse 5, the Lord first tells Moses that the ground he is standing on is holy, but he doesn't tell him that its holiness is attributable to God's presence. But in telling him that God is there, he tells him of God's faithfulness. He tells Moses, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." God made his covenant promises to these men, and by invoking their names, he is invoking his faithfulness. At this point, Moses knows who he's speaking with and turns away in fear. He's afraid of being consumed by God's holiness. But the bush wasn't consumed, and neither is Moses. When God finally reveals that it is he himself who is speaking with Moses, he does so in a way that also reveals his covenant faithfulness. He is God, yes, in all his holiness, but he is also the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in all his faithfulness. God shows up in our lives not to destroy us but to help us.

Third, God is compassionate. He has "seen" the affliction of his people, he has "given heed to" their cry and he is "aware" of their sufferings. Moses responds to God in fear. God answers that fear by speaking of his compassion. Compassion disarms fear. God cares deeply for his people. Our sufferings move God deeply. In fact, they move him to action.

Fourth, God has a plan of action. His plan is to take his people to a better place. Currently they are suffering in Egypt, laboring under the oppression of the taskmasters. God will take them to "a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey." This is always God's plan for his people - to take them to a better place.

This should all take our breath away. God is holy, faithful, compassionate and active. He has an awesome plan to take his people to a better place. More amazing than all of this, perhaps, is the final revelation: Each of us is part of the plan!

God tells Moses, "Therefore, come now, and I will send *you* to Pharaoh so that *you* may bring my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." God has a plan of redemption for other people, and we're part of the plan. Nothing should be more exhilarating. Here is the chance to be free from our self-made purgatories, where fear and self-preservation rule. Here is the chance to move forward into life, into the lives of others. Here is the chance to see the expansive heart of God for people - his faithfulness and compassion, which we can't see in our protective little purgatories.

Al Andrews, a counselor at the Institute of Biblical Counseling, tells of a time that he met a woman in a town away from his home. They spent two days together and seemed to like each other. Nevertheless, he was terrified: "If I'd had access to a car that night, I might have tried to escape to the airport. Without one, I decided instead to pray. I asked God to remove the anxiety. He didn't. I asked him to give me a sign. He remained silent. The panic continued into the night. It was an anguishing and frightening time. After a time of waiting and wrestling, something very new came out of me. 'These feelings are inaccurate!' I yelled. 'I'm 34 years

old, and sick of running from women. I'm lonely, because my panic always wins. I like her, and I'm not leaving this time!' I was in a battle and I knew it. I also knew that the fight I was having was bigger than this relationship. It involved something more. It involved my stubbornness, my fear to move, my lack of willingness to take a risk, my tendency to flee from passion." That is the day he began to move out of his purgatory and into the exhilaration of involvement.

Although moving forward toward involvement in people's lives is exhilarating, it is nonetheless frightening. In calling Moses to involvement, God is calling Moses to walk into the teeth of his biggest fears.

Assurance for involvement (3:11-17)

In response to God's orders to return to Egypt, Moses has five objections: 1) Who am I? (3:11). 2) What is your name? (3:13). 3) What if they don't believe me? (4:1). 4) I am not eloquent (4:10). 5) Send someone else (4:13).

In verse 4, when God first spoke, Moses said, "Here I am." Now he says, "Who am I?" He may be "here," but Moses isn't sure who he is. Who does he think he is? Moses thinks he's a failure. Back in Egypt 40 years earlier, when he tried this deliverance thing, he failed miserably. None of the Israelites followed him, and Pharaoh put out a death warrant on him. He fled in fear. The last person he wants to go to is Pharaoh, and the last people he wants to lead are the Israelites. Make no mistake: When God is asking Moses to return to Egypt, confront Pharaoh and lead the Israelites, he is asking him to confront his biggest fears. God could not have asked him to do anything that inspired more fear. Moses is going to be completely out of control, exposing himself to a man who wants his head and thousands of his own people whose expectations he will no doubt dash, if he even gets them to follow him in the first place.

Here is God's call to us: to be completely out of control. He calls us to expose ourselves to untold risks and to people whose expectations for us we will fail to live up to. No doubt we will be a mammoth disappointment to people. Like Moses, we have already felt the sting of failing to live up to expectations, and we are deeply wounded because we feel that we have been a disappointment to people. The scene of our biggest disappointments is the lives of people. So in order not to be a disappointment, we've withdrawn. When God calls us to return to people, openly and vulnerably, he's asking us to do what we deem impossible. Make no mistake: God is asking us to confront our biggest fears. The scariest thing in the world may be telling someone in your family what you really think. It may be picking up a phone, dialing a number and speaking to a person who talks back. It may be just opening yourself up to a conversation that goes beyond, "How are you?" It may be simply looking into someone's eyes.

Moses asks God, "Who am I?" He entertains monumental doubts about who he is. We entertain such doubts as well, which keep us from entering life. They can only be answered by the answers to another question: "Who is God?" God says he is holy, faithful, compassionate and active on our behalf. The answers to the deepest questions we have in life are the answers to the question, "Who is God?" When our fears rage within us, are we asking the right question? Are we asking, "How in the world can I protect myself?" or are we asking, "Who is God?"?

The answer includes five powerful words: "I will be with you." These words serve as an ever-assuring refrain throughout the scriptures. God says repeatedly, "I am with you." Among those receiving such assurance are Abraham (Genesis 26:4), Joshua (Joshua 1:1:5), Zerubbabel and Joshua son of Jehozadak (Haggai 2:4). The name Immanuel, another name for Jesus, means "God with us." In the new heavens and new earth, "God himself shall be among them" (Revelation 21:3). The issue for Moses, and for us, is not "Who am I?" but "Who is God?"

When God says he is with us, it means that he is loving, supporting, encouraging and enabling us. He commands us to move forward, into our fears, but he also tells us that he will be with us, each step of the way. Each step of the way, we can share all of our hearts with God, who wants desperately to hear it all. Perhaps best of all, when we step out, trusting God, we see his heart of faithfulness and compassion not only for us but for others as well. God is with us, and he is with us to share with us his heart. Consider the little boy on the high dive. Didn't he see something of the heart of the instructor as they plummeted through the air

wrapped around each other? This means everything. This means we can step out into our fears.

As I was leaving for work one day, I crossed paths with a 6-year-old girl I lived near. She was trying to drag a large tub of water into the back yard, but the big tub wasn't budging. I could have picked up the tub by myself and taken it into the back yard for her. But I said, "Jordan, I'll help you. Let's do it together." She said, "OK." So Jordan grabbed one handle, and I grabbed the other. And we completed the task together. In those precious 15 seconds, I saw something of God's heart, something of the way he longs to be with us, as I longed to be with Jordan. I didn't want to watch her suffer, trying to do the impossible. Yet I didn't want to do it for her; that wouldn't have been any fun. I wanted to help her, but I wanted her to know that she had an important part to play. I think more than anything else, I wanted her to know that I wanted to be with her. I wanted her to know it was more important to me to be with her than go to work. I wanted her to see my heart. If we step out into our fears, if we let God help us, we'll see his heart.

God says he'll give Moses a sign, but not until after he's done what God is asking. We look for signs from God, to see if it's safe to move forward. More often, he gives us signs afterward, confirming our step of faith.

The revelation that God is with him is not enough for Moses, just as it usually isn't enough for us, either. Moses wants some specifics. So he does what many of us do: He takes his mind to the future and devises a possible scenario. He doesn't trust God with the future, so Moses visits it himself, preparing the way for his arrival, making sure all bases are covered. This is something I find myself doing with unfortunate regularity. I don't move forward into the future confidently trusting God; I have to first figure out everything that could go wrong and prepare a multitude of contingency plans. It's exhausting, and ultimately it's ineffective, because I don't know the future. It's better to trust the Lord. "Therefore, do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself" (Matthew 6:34). Nevertheless, God doesn't chastise Moses for this lack of trust, but he works with him.

Moses figures that the people might ask for the name of God. In the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, new revelation from God was often accompanied by a new title (Genesis 16:3). Perhaps the people would want to know if the same had happened with Moses. The name of a god, just like the name of a person, tells something about his nature. If the people asked for God's name, they would be asking about his nature. In other words, they'd want to know who, exactly, is this God?

God tells Moses, in so many words, to tell the people exactly what God has told him: that God is holy, faithful, compassionate and that he has a plan. The variation here concerns God's holiness, which his name expands upon. In this case God doesn't speak directly of his holiness, but he speaks of his name, which speaks of his holiness.

God says "I am who I am." This speaks of God's self-existence. No one created God; he simply is. Unlike everything and everyone else, God is not created. This is another way of saying that God is holy - he is different; he is utterly unlike anything or anyone else. That means that God cannot be used for our purposes; he is outside our purposes. We flourish only insofar as we serve his purposes. We languish when we serve our own.

God seems to indicate that his name is "I AM" (or "I WILL BE"), for he tells Moses to tell the people that "I AM" has sent him. This is the first-person singular form of the verb "to be." God has used it elsewhere already in this passage in conveying his nature. In Exodus 3:12, he says, "*I will be* with you." Although in the New American Standard translation, the name "I AM" and the verb "I will be" appear to be different tenses, they appear in the same Hebrew tense, and they are one and the same word. Based on verse 14, God is self-existent, or God is holy, and based on verse 12, God is with us.

Then God twice identifies his name with a word translated "the Lord" (3:15, 16). This word is likely the third-person singular form of the verb "to be" and means not "I AM" or "I WILL BE" but "HE IS" or "HE WILL BE." The transliteration from Hebrew into English, near as we can tell, is "Yahweh." This is God's covenant name, to which were attached many of his attributes. For example, Abraham called the place where Isaac was spared "The Lord Will Provide," or "Yahweh-jireh" (Genesis 22:14). Gideon named a place "The Lord is Peace," or "Yahweh-shalom" (Judges 6:24).

In his holiness, God simply is. But in his faithfulness and compassion and plans, he is with us. He is the Lord who is faithful, the Lord who is compassionate, the Lord who is active. He is utterly holy yet intensely personal. That is exactly what God instructs Moses to tell the people in verses 16 through 18. God tells Moses to tell the people what God has already told Moses.

Evidently, it's not that complicated. We don't have to envision a multitude of scenarios and frantically figure out what we have to offer in response to each one. What we have to offer is what God has already shown us about himself - what he has already shown about his holiness, faithfulness and compassion, and what he has already done in our lives. We can speak into people's lives with our own experience, our own stories of God. None of us has all the answers, but each of us has some stories. They may seem small and insignificant, but if they speak of God, they are big and powerful. Stories are more compelling than answers, anyway. If we think we have to have the right answers for each scenario, fear will prevent us from moving into people's lives. But if we just have to tell them a story or two, we can move forward, trusting in God. The stories of our lives can tell others that God has plans for them to take them to a better place.

I had lunch with a man not long ago who ministered to me in precisely this way. He didn't have all the answers for a particular issue that I was wrestling with. But he did have a story - a story of wrestling with a similar issue and watching God take him to a better place. His story gave me hope.

Despite all the assurance that God offers, the fear doesn't go away. God does not take the fear away; he simply commands us to walk into the fear, trusting him. But if God is with us as we move forward, good things will happen.

Success of involvement (3:18-22)

God answers Moses' unasked question about the response he will get in Egypt. Moses is fearful of both the Israelites and the Egyptian king. The Lord says that people will listen to Moses. Indeed they did (4:31). There was an initial receptivity that the Lord promised that Moses apparently needed. But the people quickly proved to be fickle (5:20-21). As for the king, the Lord promises something quite different. The king will fight Moses every inch of the way. God is calling Moses to walk into his fears, but his fears will in many ways prove to be justified. It won't be easy.

We won't move forward into people's lives without making a million mistakes and asking just as many questions and entertaining just as many fears. But 3 million mistakes, questions and fears are overridden by one trusting step forward. Sometimes we won't know anything else to do except take one more step forward into what seems like an abyss.

But even if it is an abyss, God is with us. And if God is with us, God will be successful. God's purposes for people will not be defeated, and if we move forward with God, he'll bring about the change he desires. He'll use our involvement and take people to a better place.

Moses returns to Egypt, but God strikes Egypt. Forty years earlier, Moses struck down an Egyptian, but it had no effect, because Moses acted independent of God (2:12). This time God is with Moses and God himself strikes Egypt, God grants the people favor and God fills the people's hands with gold, silver and clothing when they leave. We move forward into people's lives, risking, loving and speaking, but only God delivers. We can be faithful, but only God can be successful.

God is wildly successful. Not only will the people be freed from their horrible bondage, they'll leave with all the good stuff: the best gold, silver and clothing. And God will take them to a better place with the good stuff in tow.

If this is what happens, if this is how God uses our involvement in people's lives, isn't it worth risking a step or two forward. Isn't it worth trusting God? Isn't it worth believing that he is holy and that he is faithful, compassionate and active? Isn't it worth picking up the phone?

Dive in

God calls us to be involved with his plan for people, and he promises success. In the wilderness of our lives, God prepares us to meet him. He shows us who he is; then he calls us to involvement with people. He assures us of his presence with us. And he promises that he himself will answer our involvement with his success in people's lives.

Isn't it worth diving in?

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