

**OPENER:**

What does the voice of God sound like?

In the most famous film about our Old Testament lesson, 1956's classic *The Ten Commandments*, Charlton Heston, already playing Moses, convince Cecil B. DeMille that *he* should also voice God in this scene.

Is this a classic case of Hollywood leading man arrogance? Or that God is supposed to sound like James Earl Jones, like your grandfather, like the patriarchal authority figure in your life?

Or is the theological takeaway that we hear God through our own conscience, that God speaks to us in ways that we would recognize?

**MORE MOVIES:**

Fast-forward to 1998, another movie about Moses, *Prince of Egypt*, this time animated. The creative team thought extensively about how to portray the scene of Moses and the Burning Bush. Specifically, they worried about the gender of the sound of the voice of God, and, in the editing process, at one point they blended the many different voices of all the different characters in the movie.

The theological takeaway then would be something like the voice of God is all of us, the sum of our existence, a cosmological blend of humanity.

But this composition ended up sounding a little too polytheistic, like the many gods of the Egyptian religion that Moses and the Jewish people were opposing.

So they decided to do the same thing as in *The Ten Commandments*: Val Kilmer, the voice of Moses, also voices God in that movie.<sup>1</sup>

One more, fast-forward to 2014 to the film *Exodus: Gods and Kings*. This movie depicted God's voice as coming from a shepherd boy because the director wanted the voice to come from someone like a young Dalai Lama—both innocent and commanding.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.filmsound.org/studiosound/postpro.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/29/movies/exodus-gods-and-kings-portrays-the-deity-as-a-boy.html? r=0>

Well, Christian groups were up in arms—with God being displayed in human form, and the movie was a critical flop.

## **BIBLICAL WITNESS**

What does the voice of God sound like?

The question, certainly, goes deeper than this film-by-film comparison can provide.

The Bible, of course, is helpful in this regard, describing the voice of God in a variety of different ways.

There is the “still, small voice of God’ in Elijah’s ear.<sup>3</sup> There is Samuel who confuses the voice of God for that of his teacher Eli.<sup>4</sup> More dramatically, in Jeremiah, the voice of God sounds like “fire... like a hammer that breaks rocks in pieces.”<sup>5</sup>

In the book of Genesis, in one of the very first conversation between God and humankind, God asks Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden: “Where are you?” A spiritual mentor of mine used to talk about how you *hear* God’s voice when you read that story, is where your spiritual life is at that moment.

Do you hear God plaintively calling?

Is it a stern rebuke?

Is it an actual earnest question about one’s whereabouts?

My confession in all this would be: If you were to put me on the spot, I think in my heart of hearts I would probably say that I think the sound of God’s voice sounds a lot like Charlton Heston’s.

## **EXODUS:**

Let’s return then to our text, to this multi-faceted and complicated account in the book of Exodus that we have heard many times, but maybe need to hear again.

What are the conditions in which Moses hears God speak to him?

What is the context in which this event, perhaps the most pivotal in all of the Old Testament, occurs?

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Kings 19:12

<sup>4</sup> 1 Samuel 3

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 23.29.

When Moses hears the voice, Moses is hiding, he has fled from Egypt after having killed a man. He has found some measure of peace as an obscure shepherd in the wilderness. He does not know who he is though: adopted Egyptian... biologically Hebrew... criminal... hero...

Helpfully, to that point, he asks God “Who am I?” Unhelpfully, God does not answer that question, the voice does not provide an answer, but it gives him a mission.

When Moses hears the voice, Moses is working as a shepherd, believing that is his vocation, going about the most every day of tasks- corralling animals. The epic quality of Moses’ story and our knowledge of the films distracts us from the utter ordinariness of the setting for this conversation.

He was tending his sheep, he was knee deep in the muck of working with these animals.

In other words, Moses is filling out the TPS reports, grading papers, entering data into the spreadsheet, on a conference call.

It’s maybe not where and how we expect to hear God’s voice, but God speaks to Moses when he is at work. That’s important to remember, as much as one would privilege a church or a religious building as a place to hear God’s voice. Moses joins with Samuel, Amos, Gideon, with Paul and Simon and Andrew and James and John who all hear God’s voice when they are doing their jobs.

What a challenge for us, to hear God in those places, as a fisherman, as a farmer, as a banker, as a lawyer. What a gift that God will speak to us there, that God will also speak to us when we are on the run, hiding, trying to get as far away from hearing that voice.

### **NEXT:**

While he was working, God called to him. “Moses, Moses” that famous repetition of one’s name that appears so often in the Bible.

Moses gets in some good questions in: “Who am I?” and “Who are you?” But it’s God’s voice that dominates the exchange.

God assures Moses that this is not a strange God, but the same God, whom his people has been worshipping for generations. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When pressed for clarification, God's voice does not budge, but affirms the mystery of God: "I am who I am."

This is the enigmatic answer to the question of the identity of God corresponds to the present and hidden quality of God. It's all we or Moses get.

God says: "You are standing on holy ground." Remove your sandals, get in the dirt, the dirt that I made you from. The dirt that you will return. God will water and fertilize the space around in order to make the ground holy.

In this season of Lent, we are reminded that we can't do that watering by ourselves but God can and does. In the end, we are called out by God not because who we are but because of who God is.

## **BUECHNER**

Frederick Buechner writes: "I think if you have your ears open... every once in a while some word in even the most unpromising sermon will flame out, some scrap of prayer or anthem, some moment of silence even, the sudden glimpse of somebody you love sitting there near you, or of some stranger whose face without warning touches your heart, will flame out—and these are the moments that speak our names in a way we cannot help hearing. These are the moments that, in the depths of whatever our dimness and sadness and lostness are, give us an echo of a wild and bidding voice that calls us deeper still. It is the same voice that Moses heard... (a)nd for as long as the moment lasts, we suspect that maybe it is true—maybe the ground on which we stand really is holy ground because we heard that voice here. It called us by name."<sup>6</sup>

## **CONCLUSION/ LENT:**

Moses can never quite shake it. Moses—who is "slow of speech" whose voice was weak and pathetic—can never quite get God's voice out of his head, out of his bones. Moses became that burning bush in his own person and something changed forever on that side of the mountain, such that the sound of God's voice would echo throughout the ages in ways that one could never imagine. **AMEN**

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<sup>6</sup> Buechner, Frederick. 2007. "Hope" in *Secrets in the Dark: a Life in Sermons*. New York, NY: HarperOne. 76.