

Homiletics Analysis: Exodus 3

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Exodus 3 records the pivotal encounter between Moses and the LORD at the burning bush in the wilderness of Horeb. Moses, a fugitive shepherd four decades removed from Egypt, is arrested by an unprecedented phenomenon — a bush that burns but is not consumed. The LORD calls him by name, identifies Himself as the God of the patriarchs, declares that He has seen the affliction of His people, heard their cry, and is now descending to deliver them. He commissions Moses as the human instrument of that deliverance, promising his return to this very mountain as the sign that the mission is from God. Moses raises the first of his objections: who am I to go to Pharaoh? The LORD's answer is not a résumé — it is a presence: "I will be with you." Moses then asks the deeper question: who are *You*? What is Your name — the name I am to give when Israel asks who sent me? The LORD answers with the most arresting self-disclosure in the Old Testament: *I AM WHO I AM* — YHWH, the God who simply and absolutely *is*, whose being depends on nothing outside Himself, who was and is and is to come. He instructs Moses to gather the elders of Israel, announce the impending exodus, and go before Pharaoh. The chapter closes with a preview of what is coming: Pharaoh will resist, the LORD will strike Egypt with wonders, and Israel will go out with plunder.

This Text — Intent

God is not merely informing Moses about a rescue operation. He is doing something with Moses, and through Moses with Israel, and through the text with every subsequent reader. The intent is threefold and integrated: *first*, to reveal who God truly is — not the impersonal cosmic force of Egypt's pantheon, not the absent deity of four hundred years of silence, but the self-existent, covenant-keeping, personally-engaged LORD whose name is Being Itself; *second*, to confront the reader's instinct that God's plans depend on human adequacy — Moses is nobody, and God's answer to that is not Moses's credentials but God's own presence; *third*, to assure the reader that God sees, hears, and acts — that suffering does not disappear into a divine void but arrives at the ears of a God who descends. God is seeking to produce in the reader both a theological reorientation (this is who God *is*) and a relational recalibration (this is how close He stands to His people in their need).

Subject Sentence: The self-existent LORD who sees His people's suffering commissions a nobody to deliver them.

Primary Claim: The God who needs nothing outside Himself has nonetheless bound Himself to His people in their affliction — and that God’s presence, not human adequacy, is the only answer to the call He places on anyone He sends.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Divine Name — *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* (v. 14)

The most contested exegetical question in Exodus 3 is the meaning of the divine self-disclosure in verse 14. Three significant readings require evaluation.

Ontological reading (classical Reformed and patristic tradition): *Ehyeh asher ehyeh* — “I AM WHO I AM” — is a disclosure of God’s self-existent, eternal being. God’s name is Being Itself; He is the one who simply *is*, without derivation, without dependency, without beginning or cessation. This reading grounds the name in God’s aseity and has the strongest philosophical and theological pedigree, running through Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin. It is corroborated by the New Testament’s use of ἐγώ εἰμι language in John’s Gospel and by Revelation’s “who is and who was and who is to come.” The Reformed reading affirms this interpretation as primary.

Relational/covenantal reading (favored in much twentieth-century biblical scholarship, including Childs and Brevard’s canonical approach): The name emphasizes not abstract ontology but dynamic, active presence — “I will be what I will be” or “I will be there as I will be there.” On this reading, the disclosure is not a metaphysical statement but a covenantal promise: I am the God who shows up, who will be present, whose identity is known in action. This reading rightly captures something the text itself presses — the immediate context is deliverance, not a philosophical seminar. The Reformed reading *qualifies* this: it is not either/or. The text’s emphasis on presence and action does not exclude — and indeed *requires* — the ontological ground. A God who is contingently present is not a trustworthy savior. God’s presence is absolute *because* His being is absolute. Both dimensions are exegetically real; the ontological is the foundation on which the relational stands.

Evasion reading (occasionally proposed, sometimes from a skeptical direction): The name is a divine refusal to be named — “I am what I am” as a deflection, paralleling Judges 13:18 (“why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful?”). On this reading God declines to give Moses a handle. This reading should be *refuted*: the context explicitly sets up the question as one requiring an answer Moses can bring back to Israel (v. 13), and God proceeds to give exactly that answer in verse 15 (“the LORD, the God of your fathers... this is my name forever”). The name is a disclosure, not a deflection.

The Burning Bush as Theophany

Some traditions (certain strands of Charismatic/Pentecostal interpretation) read the burning bush as paradigmatic for ongoing dramatic revelatory experiences — God appears in fire, the believer waits for the fire. This overreads the theophanic particularity of the text. The bush is not a template for the individual believer's prayer life; it is a singular covenantal disclosure marking a new redemptive-historical moment. Acknowledge: God does encounter His people, sometimes dramatically. Qualify: the normative form of divine encounter is the Word, not the fire — Moses himself will spend the rest of his life reading and applying what was spoken here, not waiting for more burning bushes.

The Commission and Human Resistance

Arminian and Wesleyan readings often emphasize Moses's free response to the commission and the real weight of his objections — reading Moses's resistance as morally significant and his eventual compliance as an act of genuine human decision. The Reformed reading does not deny the reality of Moses's objections or the genuinely dialogical character of the encounter. It insists, however, that the text's resolution is not "Moses overcomes his resistance by exercising his will" but "God's promise of presence overrides the legitimacy of the objection." The commission is not conditional on Moses's willingness — it is effective because God gives it. Moses's objections serve to draw out the theological answers the reader needs to hear, not to demonstrate the contingency of divine plans on human consent.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 12:1–3; 15:13–16** — God's covenant with Abraham established the promise of a land and anticipated the Egyptian sojourn and exodus four centuries before it occurred. Exodus 3 is the hinge on which that promise turns from declaration to fulfillment; Moses's commission is the activation of a covenant already sworn.
- **John 8:58** — Jesus's "Before Abraham was, I AM" is the New Testament's own exegesis of Exodus 3:14 — applying the divine name to Himself and claiming the same self-existent, eternal being. The connection is not incidental: John frames the entire Gospel with *ego eimi* language precisely because the I AM of Sinai has become flesh.
- **Isaiah 43:1–7** — The LORD addresses exiled Israel with the same constellation of themes: "I have called you by name, you are mine... I will be with you... I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." The God who spoke at the burning bush speaks the same identity to every generation of His afflicted people.
- **Acts 7:30–34** — Stephen's sermon in his defense before the Sanhedrin recapitulates Exodus 3 explicitly, reading the burning bush as a christophany — the Angel of the LORD who speaks as God. This is a significant canonical marker for

how the New Testament reads the divine presence in the Old Testament theophanies and points toward the pre-incarnate Christ.

- **Romans 8:31–39** — Paul’s “If God is for us, who can be against us?” is the New Covenant articulation of the same promise Moses received: God’s presence with His people is the answer to every objection, every fear, every human inadequacy. The logic of Exodus 3:12 (“I will be with you”) runs directly through to Paul’s climactic assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Aim: To demonstrate that the God who disclosed Himself to Moses as the self-existent, covenant-keeping I AM is the same God who stands behind every believer’s calling — and that His presence, not our adequacy, is both the warrant for obedience and the ground of confidence.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Moses shepherding Jethro’s flock; led to Horeb, the mountain of God	Horeb = Sinai; the geography is significant — God will bring Israel back here (v. 12). Moses is forty years into obscurity.
2	The Angel of the LORD appears in a flame of fire from the bush; bush burns but is not consumed	“Angel of the LORD” here speaks as God (v. 4) — a theophany. The unconsumed bush is the arresting anomaly that stops Moses.
3	Moses decides to turn aside and see this great sight	His curiosity is the human response that positions him to be addressed. The turning aside is morally neutral but providentially significant.
4	The LORD sees Moses turn aside and calls to him from the bush: “Moses, Moses”	God calls him by name twice — urgency and intimacy. The LORD sees before Moses fully arrives.
5	“Do not come near; take off your sandals — this is holy ground”	Holiness creates distance and demands reverence. The sandals command is a

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6	God identifies Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Moses hides his face in fear	boundary marker: Moses is not approaching an equal. The covenant chain of names grounds the encounter in prior redemptive history. Moses's fear is the appropriate response to holiness; he does not collapse it into curiosity.
7–8	The LORD has seen the affliction, heard the cry, known the suffering of His people; He has come down to deliver them into a good and broad land	Three verbs: seen, heard, known. The divine descent is the answer to centuries of suffering. The land described in lavish abundance.
9	The cry of Israel has reached the LORD; He has seen the oppression the Egyptians are imposing	Repetition of “seen” and “cry” — God is not casually observing; He is responding with full attention.
10	“Come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt”	The commission: God will send; Moses will go; the people are God's. The mission belongs to God; Moses is the instrument.
11	Moses's first objection: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?”	Not false humility — Moses knows what Egypt is and what happened the last time he tried to intervene (Exodus 2:11–15).
12	God's answer: “I will be with you. And this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”	The answer is not credentials but presence. The sign is prospective — Moses must act in faith before the sign is fulfilled. This is the structure of all faith.
13	Moses's second objection: “If the people ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”	A strategic question, not merely an identity question. In the ancient world, names disclosed character and

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		gave access to power. Israel needs to know <i>whose</i> word they are trusting.
14	“I AM WHO I AM... say to the people of Israel: I AM has sent me to you.”	The most dense theological disclosure in the Pentateuch. YHWH = self-existent, eternal, underived being.
15	“The LORD, the God of your fathers... this is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.”	The personal name YHWH (rendered LORD in English translations) is the eternal memorial name — connecting every future generation back to this moment.
16–17	Moses is to gather the elders of Israel and announce: the LORD has appeared, has seen their affliction, and will bring them out to the Promised Land	The content of the first message Moses is to deliver — witness to what God has said and promised.
18	The elders and Moses will go to Pharaoh with the request to let Israel go three days into the wilderness to sacrifice	“Three days” journey — the stated request. Pharaoh’s refusal will be the occasion for the plagues.
19–20	God already knows Pharaoh will not let them go except by a strong hand; He will strike Egypt with wonders	Divine foreknowledge of Pharaoh’s resistance and the plagues are not contingency plans — they are the plan. Nothing that follows surprises God.
21–22	Israel will find favor with the Egyptians; each woman will ask her neighbor for silver, gold, and clothing; they will plunder Egypt	The plundering of Egypt is divinely orchestrated restitution — wages for four hundred years of slave labor. It also fulfills Genesis 15:14.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	The Arresting Encounter: Holy Ground and the God Who Calls
2	7–10	The Compassionate Declaration: God Has Seen, Heard, and Come Down
3	11–12	The First Objection and Its Answer: Not Who You Are, But Whose You Are
4	13–15	The Second Objection and Its Answer: The Name That Is Being Itself
5	16–22	The Commission Detailed: Message, Mission, and Guaranteed Outcome

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The self-existent LORD who sees His people’s suffering commissions a nobody to deliver them.

Primary Claim: The God who needs nothing outside Himself has nonetheless bound Himself to His people in their affliction — and that God’s presence, not human adequacy, is the only answer to the call He places on anyone He sends.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe who is actually present in your suffering (*Mind/Belief*)

Moses’s burning bush moment is not a private mystical experience — it is the culmination of a divine testimony about what God has been doing during four hundred years of silence: seeing, hearing, knowing. Israel thought God had gone absent. He had not moved. The application is not “wait for a burning bush.” It is this: the God who spoke the divine name has declared that suffering does not disappear into the void — it reaches Him. When you are convinced that heaven is silent, Exodus 3:7–9 requires you to reconsider the evidence. The three verbs — seen, heard, known — are not poetic. They are theological claims about what the LORD is doing *right now* in the suffering you think He has missed.

2. Stop mistaking the question “Who am I?” for a reason not to obey (*Will/Behavior*)

Moses's objection in verse 11 is the objection every called person makes: I am not the right person for this. The text does not answer the objection by upgrading Moses. It answers it by pointing past Moses entirely: "I will be with you." The application is concrete: identify the specific act of obedience you have been deferring because you believe you are inadequate for it — the conversation you haven't had, the role you've declined, the risk you haven't taken. Moses's objection is not honored by the text as a valid reason to stand still. The presence of God is the only credential the mission requires. Stop negotiating about yourself. The question is not whether you are enough. The question is whether He is.

3. Let the divine name recalibrate what you are actually trusting (*Affections/Worship*)

YHWH means that God's being depends on nothing outside Himself. He is not sustained by worship, not weakened by neglect, not reactive to circumstances. He simply *is*. The application presses into the affections: what in your life is functioning as the thing that must exist for your world to hold together? Career, marriage, approval, financial stability, health — these are things that might not be, that can cease to be, that depend on other things. The I AM is the only ground that is not itself dependent on a further ground. Worship recalibration is the response — not merely thinking rightly about God but directing the heart's trust toward the only One who cannot be destabilized. Let the name do what it was designed to do: transfer the weight of your security onto the One whose being is secured by nothing and threatened by nothing.

4. Understand that God's answers to your objections are meant to build the whole church's faith, not just settle your personal doubts (*Mind/Belief*)

Moses's questions in verses 11 and 13 are not private therapy. The answers God gives — "I will be with you" and "I AM WHO I AM" — are the theological foundations on which the entire subsequent Old Testament rests, and on which the New Testament builds. God answers Moses's objections in such depth because the answers are for everyone who will come after Moses. When you read your own inadequacy into verse 11 and God's presence-promise into verse 12, you are receiving truth that has been load-bearing for God's people for three millennia. This text is not self-help for the reluctant. It is theology for the redeemed. Receive it as the church's inheritance, not merely a personal comfort.

5. Grieve honestly about what it costs to see suffering the way God sees it (*Affections/Worship*)

Verse 7's "I have surely seen the affliction of my people" is God describing what He has been looking at for four hundred years. The response the text calls for is not clinical acknowledgment that God is omniscient. It is something closer to worshipful grief: the God who has no needs, who lacks nothing, who cannot suffer as we suffer — *chose* to attend to the suffering of slaves with the full weight of His knowing. The application is to cultivate the same attending. Much of Christian life in comfortable contexts requires the deliberate, costly act of seeing what God sees — the afflicted, the overlooked, the crying — and letting it register. This is not activism. It is participation in the seeing of a God who does not look

away. Let the passage produce not just information about God's compassion but a formation of your attention toward what He attends to.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Exodus 3 is one of the most theologically dense chapters in all of Scripture. At its center is the self-disclosure of God's own name — *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*, I AM WHO I AM — a disclosure that grounds all subsequent biblical theology of divine aseity, immutability, and eternal self-sufficiency. God is not a contingent being among other beings; He is Being Itself, the uncaused cause, the one who depends on nothing outside Himself for His existence or His purposes. This ontological reality is not abstract — in Exodus 3 it is immediately covenantal: the God who simply *is* has bound Himself, in freedom and in love, to a people who exist only because He called their father Abraham. The chapter also establishes the foundational pattern of divine response to human suffering: God sees, hears, and descends — not as a reactive accommodation but as the outworking of covenant faithfulness stretching back to Genesis 12. Every subsequent act of divine deliverance in Scripture, culminating in the Incarnation, follows this pattern.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Exodus 3 is the Old Testament's fullest statement of what the Reformed tradition calls divine *aseity* — God's absolute self-existence and independence. The Westminster Confession's affirmation that God is "most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory" is exegetically grounded, in part, here. But the chapter equally displays the Reformed insistence that divine sovereignty is not cold abstraction — the I AM of verse 14 is the same God who in verses 7-9 is moved by the cry of slaves. Furthermore, the commission structure of Exodus 3 is paradigmatic for how Reformed theology understands the relationship between divine sovereignty and human instrumentality: God's plan is utterly certain (Pharaoh will resist; Israel will plunder Egypt; the mountain will be the place of worship), yet God works through a very specific, very reluctant human agent. Moses's adequacy contributes nothing to the outcome; God's presence guarantees everything. This is the Reformed understanding of calling: God does not elect the qualified — He qualifies, accompanies, and carries the elected. The passage also presses toward Christ: the I AM who speaks in Exodus 3 is the one who will say "before Abraham was, I AM" in John 8, revealing that the covenant God of the burning bush has always been the triune God in whom salvation is secured.

Main Takeaway

The God who needs nothing outside Himself — the I AM who simply and absolutely *is* — has seen your affliction, heard your cry, and knows your condition in full. And the answer He gives to every objection you have about your own inadequacy is the same answer He gave Moses: not a better version of you, but His own presence. You are not being asked to be enough. You are being asked to go, because He is.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching Moses as a personality study rather than a theological disclosure.** The most common homiletical failure with Exodus 3 is turning it into a sermon about Moses's reluctance and how we can overcome our own fear and inadequacy — a motivational message with Moses as the case study. This inverts the text. Moses is present in the chapter to ask the questions; God's answers are the sermon. The passage is not about what Moses learned to do; it is about who God revealed Himself to be. Every time the preacher says "we can learn from Moses's courage," a theological alarm should sound. Moses's courage is not the point. God's presence is the point.
- **Treating the burning bush as an invitation to seek dramatic revelatory experiences.** The bush is a singular redemptive-historical event — it marks the inauguration of the exodus, the arrival of the covenant-fulfillment moment, the commissioning of Israel's deliverer. It is not a paradigm for the individual believer's devotional life. Preaching that says "God wants to give you your own burning bush moment" misreads the genre and flattens the canonical singularity of the event. God does speak to His people — through His Word, through His Spirit, through the ministry of the church — but the burning bush is not the template for how that normally works.
- **Leaving the divine name undeveloped or reducing it to a slogan.** "I AM WHO I AM" is among the most theologically significant four words in Scripture. Preachers frequently quote it, italicize it, and move on — treating it as a mysterious-sounding label rather than a claim requiring careful exposition. The congregation deserves to know what the name actually means: God's being is self-derived, self-sustaining, self-sufficient, eternal, and therefore utterly reliable. If the divine name goes unexpounded, the theological foundation of the passage has been skipped.
- **Missing the prospective sign as a model of faith.** Verse 12 is exegetically striking and homiletically rich: the *sign* that God has sent Moses is Moses's *arrival back at this mountain with Israel* — something that cannot possibly be verified until after Moses has already obeyed. God gives a sign that can only be seen in retrospect. This is not a design flaw; it is the structure of faith. Preachers who skip this detail

rob the congregation of one of Scripture's clearest windows into how God's promises are meant to be trusted before they are seen confirmed.

- **Moralizing the compassion of God in verses 7–9.** “God sees the suffering of the poor — so should we” is true as far as it goes, but it collapses the primary claim of verses 7–9 into a secondary application. The primary claim is not about what we should do but about who God has revealed Himself to be: the God who has been watching, hearing, and knowing for four hundred years of silence is not a distracted deity but a covenant-keeping LORD whose timing is not indifference. The application to human compassion is legitimate and worth drawing — but it must come second, grounded in the character of the God who establishes it, not first as the passage's main burden.
- **Disconnecting the passage from Christ.** Exodus 3 points toward Jesus not merely through typological implication (Moses as a type of the greater deliverer) but through direct New Testament exegesis: John 8:58, Acts 7, Revelation 1:8. A sermon on Exodus 3 that never arrives at the God who became flesh to do what Moses could only begin — personally descending into the affliction of His people, not merely to commission a deliverer but to be the Deliverer — has read the passage in canonical isolation. The I AM of the bush is the I AM of Bethlehem and Calvary. Let the connection be made explicitly, with exegetical warrant, not as a sentimental flourish.