

Dealing with Disaster
Exodus 3:1-12, Psalm 121:1-8

In 1975 South African filmmaker, Jamie Uys made a documentary called *Animals are beautiful People*. This film offers a glimpse into the fascinating world of the Kalahari Desert.

It is proof that if you are willing to wait and watch, the desert which looks empty and desolate, in fact is full of fascinating animals and phenomena, and perhaps none is more fascinating and famous than the burning bush. Uys patience and skill has allowed him to capture this phenomenon on film as well.

And since U-tube wasn't around in 1975 I'm going to have to describe it for you.

We watch a little weaverbird building his nest in small tree sometime in the late morning. He flies back and forth gathering materials and adding them to his home.

He picks up dry grass, twigs, and other bits of material and weaves them together to build his nest

And on this morning it just so happens that on a particular branch in this particular tree there is a drop of water; which happens to catch the sun's rays at just the right angle, and at just the right distance from the weaverbirds nest.

This small drop of water focuses the sunlight on the nest like a magnifying glass and pretty soon a wisp of smoke appears followed by a small flame. And with-in minutes the entire nest is on fire and the small tree is in danger of being burnt to the ground.

All the weaverbird's hard work has been destroyed and he must start all over again and we are left contemplating how this convergence of events came together to cause this disaster

And in our scripture passage this morning Moses is also witness to such a fascinating convergence of events.

It happens as Moses is making his way across the desert, an empty wasteland, lonely and desolate with no one for company but a large herd of sheep.

Moses is eighty years old, and he has been occupied with this mundane profession of shepherding for quite some time. It was 40 years ago that Moses the prince of Egypt had fled his regal and exciting position in Pharaoh's court and ended up as a shepherd.

Moses was a bit of a phenomenon himself, a special child with a rags-to-riches story. Born of a Hebrew slave family he had been spared when Pharaoh had ordered the murder of all baby boys, when he was put out in a basket of reeds on the Nile river and the daughter of the Pharaoh had found him, adopted him and raised him as her own.

He had been a privileged Hebrew, placed in power and position. He often wondered why he lived in a palace and received an education, while others were forced to do backbreaking labor under the cruel whips of their Egyptian taskmasters.

Perhaps, he thought, he was saved in order that he might help his people by using his power and position to improve their situation.

Then that fateful day when the years of watching his people suffer and his desire to do something exploded into rage as he saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave.

Moses killed the taskmaster and his political career with the same blow. What reckless actions, perhaps if he had done something different he might have been able to continue to fight for the cause of the Hebrews, but he had failed.

His actions had forced him to flee for his life. He had left Egypt and relocated to Midian and was reduced to a shepherd – the profession that Egyptians despised the most. And today like every other day he was tending sheep.

This disaster had cause Moses to go from riches to rags. A prince of Egypt had become an insignificant man, doing an insignificant job, in an insignificant place.

He might have well thought - my life is like that bush on fire over there, everything is going along well and then it bursts into flames and is consumed and there's nothing left but ashes.

Friends, I know there will be times in life in our lives when we can relate to this.

Everything seems to be going along fine, we are hard at work building our life, just like the little weaverbird building his nest and then circumstances, or our actions; or our mistakes, or bad decisions focus the rays of misfortune on our efforts like that droplet of water... and disaster strikes and our life seems to go up in smoke.

It seemed like every other month in the past two years we've heard about some sort of disaster that's happened somewhere in the world when I watch the news.

From natural disasters like tornados, earthquakes, tsunamis, and fires to man-made disasters like the Sub-prime mortgage fall-out and the current economic disaster in Europe, or the massive Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

And we live in such a global village that even disasters that occur far away have a ripple effect that eventually touches all of our lives in some way.

Our retirement investments have taken a hit, people have lost jobs, and many people now feel a level of anxiety and uncertainty about the future that we didn't before.

I can relate. Back in 2001 Amoriza and I had just moved to Toronto where I had taken a part-time position in a church with the intentions of developing myself for a future in ministry as a church planter.

We settled our family into the community, found jobs, built relationships with people, used the gifts and talents that we had to help grow the ministry... we were hard at work building a life for ourselves. We were on a good path towards a desirable future and things seemed to be going along well.

However, eleven months later there was a convergence of events that caused my part-time ministry position and training for church planting to come to an unexpected end.

To make matters worse I was also laid off from my other job because of the economic fallout from the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

I had nothing to fall back on. I had no training to do anything else other than work for the church, and even there I wasn't ordained so my options were extremely limited.

I remember the feeling of helplessness and frustration as my once promising future seemed to go up in smoke.

I remember sitting down putting my head in my hands in despair and saying I can't believe this is all falling apart, if only I had done this, or maybe I shouldn't have done that.

Friends when life comes apart at the seams and we go through these kinds of disasters it is hard to recover our sense of confidence and purpose.

It is easy for a disaster to cause us to become cynical, bitter, and to rightly or wrongly blame ourselves about what we could have done or should have done to prevent it.

We may even resolve that we will never again believe that an amazing opportunity or something good will come our way and resign ourselves to whatever we had to do to survive the

disaster. Life can seem bleak and desolate – much like the desert.

Friends, when disaster comes into our lives – how can we deal with the fallout? Well let's look at what happens with Moses.

Moses watches and waits to see the bush burn up and burn out perhaps feeling it was an good illustration of his own life. But he notices an unusual thing. The fire does not consume the bush!

He is curious and decides to investigate this strange situation. And as He goes over He hears his name being called out. Moses Moses. "Here I am! He exclaims.

It had been a long time since he had heard anything but the sheep bleating and the wind howling, and now from this strange fire that burns but does not consume he hears someone calling him by his name.

So he eagerly moves closer to engage with the mysterious voice that had called him, unknowingly, and rather recklessly approaching The LORD God, maker of heaven and earth.

However God allows Moses to approach Him and be near to him, so that He can reveal Himself to Moses!

But when Moses hears God reveal himself as the God of his ancestors, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - He becomes afraid to face him. After all Moses has failed his ancestors and their descendants. His disaster has come back to haunt him.

So Moses stands there trembling, barefoot before the God of his ancestors wondering what will become of him now.

But God is not going to visit the fire of judgment upon him; rather out of the fire God speaks about an issue that once burned close to Moses heart.

God says that he has seen the misery and the suffering and hardship of His people in Egypt. He is concerned about them, and now He has come down to rescue them.

God wanted take the Israelites, scorched by slavery in Egypt and transplant them into fertile land promised to Abraham where there was room to grow and prosper.

God knows about Moses' disaster and how the consequences have affected his life, but God is going to use him anyways. God will be with him and work through him and this time He will not fail.

The aftermath of Moses disaster had him wandering in the desert – where it seems there is nothing but desolation. But it is not as desolate as it seems God uses the phenomena of a burning bush to show Moses that He had a plan for Him. God would not let disaster have the last word in Moses life.

God had been preparing Moses in the desert for what he was born to do – lead the Israelites out of slavery and across the desert to the Promised Land.

So friends, when disaster strikes in our lives - whether you had anything to do with it or not - and it seems like everything we

have been working so hard for is going up in flames, where the prospect of life after a disaster feels desolate like a desert...

Remember the story of Moses; remember the story of the burning bush that did not burn up, where the purpose is revealed in the desolation – because God appears there.

Disaster will not have the last word in your life friends!

This is why the Apostle Paul writes “*And we know that in all things – (even disasters) God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*”
(Rom 8:28)

I know this from personal experience as well, it was only because that ministry opportunity fell apart that I finally decided to start Seminary, which I had been resisting before.

And it was my training and mentoring relationships at Tyndale Seminary that were responsible for putting me on the ministry path that has eventually lead Amoriza and I here to Valleyview where God has blessed us in ways I couldn't have imagined.

When you are in the midst of a disaster friends, it is very tempting to believe that God has abandoned you. But Moses' story reveals to us that even though we may not be aware of it, or see it right away or God is with us in the midst of any disaster and is using it to shape us for his plans.

That doesn't make going through a disaster any less painful, or difficult or make the losses we experience any easier to bear... in fact it might make it a bit harder...God worked on Moses for forty years...because of the task that lay ahead of him.

But! We can be assured that God WILL eventually put it to good use and in the end it will all be worth it – even if the only good thing that comes out of a disaster in this life is that it helps us avoid a disaster in the next life by causing us to turn and put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

I was sixteen years old when I was in a disastrous motorbike accident – and even though it occurred at low speed, my injuries were substantial and I was laid up with a broken leg that took nine months to heal.

But that accident was a turning point for me as a teenager and it helped me to avoid being laid up for an eternity of separation from God by coming to a realization that I needed to respond wholeheartedly to Jesus and follow Him.

In fact as I look back over my life at all that has occurred which I would have considered disastrous – in every single occasion God has brought something good out of it.

Friends in all things God works for our good.

We should write this verse down on a piece of paper, and include the story of Moses with it, and put them in with the bottled water, the matches, canned food and first Aid supplies that we have in our disaster preparedness kits!

Because friends disasters can cause us to panic, and in our panic we might run to the first thing that looks like it can offer us help and frantically grab on to it as if it is our *only* hope.

When the disaster of a serious illness strikes we may frantically grab on to the medical system. When a natural disaster occurs

we hope that the fire department or search and rescue can save us. When economic disaster strikes we may cry for the government to save us.

I was so desperate to try to find a job to make decent money that I grabbed onto the false promises of a multi-level marketing organization which had me believing I could easily become a millionaire.

It's like the beginning of Psalm 121 where David says "I lift my eyes up to the mountains...where does my help come from?"

Those mountains around Jerusalem had indeed helped shelter and save David when his life was threatened by his enemies in times of disaster.

But David knew that in fact those mountains were simply used by God to help him in times of disaster – so he proclaims instead "My help comes from the Lord the maker of heaven and earth"

The medical system, fire fighters, search and rescue, governments or other kinds of help are all ways in which God may come to our aid in a time of disaster – and we need to be reminded of that. Otherwise we may be rescued physically only to perish spiritually.

When the massive earthquake happened off the coast of Japan back in 2011. The residents of a small fishing village on the island of Miyatojima, knew that they had to get to higher ground because a tsunami was on its way –

despite the fact that their local tsunami warning tower was damaged by the quake and offered no warnings.

But instead of fleeing to the nearest hill, which appeared to be high enough to avoid a tsunami wave, they took the risk of fleeing to higher ground which was farther away. Why?

Because of a story which had been passed down from generation to generation.

You see a thousand years ago the villagers of Murohama fled to the nearest hill to escape a massive tsunami – however they were unaware that another tsunami wave was approaching from behind as well – traveling up an inlet which jutted into the island.

The hill to which they had fled was at the exact point where the two tsunami waves met and the collision killed all those who had sought refuge on that hill.

In memory of the dead and to offer a warning to future generations a shrine was erected on the hill.

So, fifty generations later, when modern science and technology failed the villagers of Murohama, they were saved by the warning left to them in the ancient story that their ancestors had passed down to them.

And from their vantage point on the high ground from farther away they witnessed the same phenomena occur again – the two tsunami waves colliding on the hill nearest their village.

If they had believed the story to be a “legend” or a “myth” from the past and ignored its warning they would have perished.

Friends I don’t think you can find a better example which illustrates how we should pay attention to the ancient story of Moses and the burning bush that has been handed down to us from generation to generation. And to listen what it says about how God can use disaster to shape us for his plans.

To go through a disaster without experiencing God in it is really the ultimate disaster!

We may be tempted to run to the nearest hill – whatever that might be – medicine, science, technology, investment strategies, job opportunities that sound too good to be true... because it may look like it offers us safety from disaster but we are unaware that there is an eternity coming up behind us and we are entirely unprepared for it.

Friends take the extra time to flee to God instead, even though in a disaster your first response is “I need to do something”

Meditate instead on the truths of scripture contained in the story of Moses and the burning bush.

It will help you to come to a place where you come to know God in a new way and discover how he has shaped you through your experience and give you a new meaning and purpose for your life –

Your life will once again be on fire – but this time it won’t go up in smoke. Amen