Exodus 3:1-6, John 3:1-21

“Encountering the Savior”

 I hope you all had a wonderful Thanksgiving. I guess Strasburg did survive the 23 Bronkemas that came to Strasburg. You have no idea how good it feels to be in a place where you can have all of your family over. We are so glad to be here. The 10 cousins all under 16 absolutely loved being together. Our last evening my mom had brought up boxes from Florida with some of my dad’s things and the boys divided it up among ourselves.

 It was great to go through it and so many memories came back. But I was especially pleased that the children of the boys were there experiencing first-hand what it means to grow up in this family. I pray also that in some small way we are also able to pass on that faith from one generation to the next. Well, this Sunday we being our Advent journey together as a large extended family. I hope Advent becomes more than just a frenetic time of the year when every year we are committed to another church program. I hope it continues to be a time when each one of us is given an opportunity to meet Jesus Christ face to face.

 We begin our new sermon series today as well, and it is entitled encountering Jesus. We are going to be looking at different aspects of who Jesus is and what he means to us today in our personal lives. We are going to be looking at different encounters between people of God and God. Today we find Nicodemus who meets Jesus as Savior. I would argue that today’s topic present us with the most important aspect of who Jesus is. Simply put, Jesus is our Savior.

 The purpose of this sermon series is for the sake of each one of us encountering Jesus, the Jesus I know and love, the one of Scripture, our Savior. Encountering, meeting the Savior allows you to have eternal life which is why we are gathered here today. We will look at both Moses and Nicodemus, the burning bush and John 3:16 as we prepare to meet our Savior.

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 We have all heard of the story of the burning bush. I love art history and there is one depiction by the baroque artist Domenichino with Moses in the middle of this beautiful lush countryside cowering in terror before a bush in flames. Well, the artist gets it wrong on a number of counts. The verdant green scenery is contrary to Scripture that tells us that they went to mount Horeb which means literally wasteland or desert. But he does get it right in that you have to look closely in order to see what is happening because the landscape is so expansive and Moses and the bush are so small.

 You need to remember that Moses is on the witness protection program ever since he grew up in Pharoah’s house and killed an Egyptian. I kind of see Moses as the reverse story of Joseph. Moses was leading an uneventful maybe boring life out watching his father in laws sheep. Nothing exciting, nothing scandalous, no tabloid headlines. You know, I’m often thankful for the uneventful life that a pastor leads, and especially this pastor. Last night Stacy and I went to my 25th high school reunion and stayed out later than we have stayed out in a long long time. It was interesting to see over 150 people that I had not seen in 25 years and who obviously lead much more interesting lives than I did, or at least it was obvious once they hit the dance floor.

 But there was Moses leading his normal life, until, well, God comes and meets him today. He walks by the burning bush and the Scripture tells us that once he saw it he was curious and wanted to know more as to why it wasn’t being burned up by the fire that was surrounding it. So many times God makes use of human curiosity for his own purposes. What would have happened if Noah wasn’t curious about whether this whole boat thing was for real or not. What would have happened if the little boy wasn’t curious to see if Jesus could really multiply bread and fish. Curiosity, as long as it doesn’t lead to disobedience, is a real way in which God reveals himself to us.

 But verse 4 in this Scripture tells us that as soon as Moses reveals himself as being open to seeing what it was, God then took that opportunity to address Moses as a willing participant. God took the initiative first by making himself known and present and seen, but Moses follows through in pursuing the presence of God himself.

 So now, in verse 4 the encounter between God and Moses takes place. We are going to be looking at these encounters until Christmas. God commands Moses first to take off his shoes because he is on holy ground. Being in the presence of the Lord is not anything we ought to ever take for granted. Sometimes the informality of our encounters with God rise to the level of not taking seriously what we mean, or totally missing what we mean when we say that we are going to meet God.

 Moses, take your shoes off because you are on holy ground. It reminds me of when Jesus tells the women do not touch me just now. Our encounters with God are holy encounters and in these Scriptures we are reminded that God is totally other, but at the same time the encounter with the Savior reminds us that he is one of us as well. But in this day and age we tend to err on the side of seeing Jesus more as our BFF, than as the one who tells us to take off our shoes in His presence, because, well, he is Holy. You see, the place is holy not because of its location, not because it is Horeb, but because Almighty God is present. The church is not a sacred space by itself. There is nothing overtly holy about this sanctuary. It is the presence of God that makes this place holy and any other place where He may manifest himself.

 God then introduces himself in a very specific way. Moses, I am the God of your Father, and of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob. Notice he starts with your Father. The faith that each one of us has today does not come in a vacuum. I don’t care if you were saved completely outside anything church related, the faith of your family, or of a youth leader, or of a pastor, or a friend has had a tremendous impact upon you.

 Last week was such a great celebration. I know outreach has a note of thanks but we ought to thank them for all they did to make it what it was. It reminded us all, I hope at least, that our encounter with our Savior has been preceded by encounter after encounter of members of this church with our Savior. Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush provided a very clear and unarguable opportunity for him to renew his relationship with His God that maybe had fallen a bit by the wayside.

 Our New Testament reading very clearly lays out and depicts Jesus as our Savior. I know it was a long reading, but it is important to understand the context. The encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus beings at vs. 1 with a meeting at night between Nicodemus and Jesus. I remember when we were serving in Russia and I had just gotten back to Moscow for a brief visit with Stacy and the girls who were in Seattle for much of that summer. It was August and it was that summer when the wildfires were tearing through Russia so the whole city of Moscow was filled with smoke. It was terrible. They had just redone our floors so I was putting furniture back together again at midnight when the phone rang. It normally isn’t good news when the phone rings at midnight.

 It was the US embassy telling me that they had a 19 year old American man who had been kidnapped in Russia and could we put him up in our shelter. We had the only shelter system in Russia for non-Russians. I said of course and asked where he was and they said they had to go get him. The head of the American services was a member of the church and I knew in this case he would be going to get him so I called him and asked him if he needed another person to come along. He said sure. We drove away from the embassy and he tells me that this kids is lying in the grass at an exit to a subway station so that no one would see him. This is now almost 2 in the morning. He says, when we get near I’m going to slow down, I was sitting in the back, and when I say now you open the door and he will come running in and then we will go off. We do, I do, and the kids jumps in. We took him to our shelter and the in a few days the embassy flies him home.

 This trip by Nicodemus was very much of a secret mission done covertly within the cover of night. Like Moses living under the witness protection program, Nicodemus could absolutely not have anyone know he was coming, so verse 1 tells us clearly he comes by night and so as not to be seen. Jesus makes himself available, Nicodemus then pursues this initiative to encounter Jesus.

 The conversation is a bit frustrating. Here is Nicodemus, a leader of his people, he has an M.Div from Princeton, he has all the head knowledge and knows all the laws and the history and the way things have always been done in the church, but he has no idea what it means to have a personal relationship with God. In fact he had always been suspect of that language. Until he meets Jesus, then he wants to know more, which sets up this encounter.

 I’ve done all the right things, but God still feels distant. Jesus, I can tell you have a personal relationship with God, what does it take? I love the fact that Nicodemus doesn’t actually ask that question, but Jesus gives him that answer anyway. If you want to have a personal relationship with God, if you want to have eternal life, you have to be born again. Now there is a small debate as to whether this is born from above or born again. I honestly think that it is a result of the bad label born again has received.

 I have no problem in using the term born again. I have been born again in Jesus. You cannot have eternal life unless you are born again. There is no salvation unless you have been born again. Let me ask you women a question. When you had your babies, how much did that baby do to help you out in the birthing process? How much did he or she contribute? I didn’t think so.

 The reason born again has gotten a bad name is because somehow it has turned into something we did, as if we can take credit for it. I am born again, I believed, I earned my salvation my coming just as I am. Listen to John 3:16 again, for God so loved the world. There is that word Agape again. The emphasis is not what you have done right or wrong. God loves you because he wants to love you. Not because you came to church today, but because he simply loves you.

 Encountering the Savior this Advent is all about a relationship with God who became one of us. Jesus made himself accessible to Nicodemus, and he makes himself accessible to us. But while John 3:16 is that famous verse which seems to be predicated on our decision making for and against God, this entire Scripture also constantly reminds us that we do have a choice between light and darkness, good and evil. If your life has been one of straying toward the dark for too long, it is not too late.

 You know my oldest daughter will be getting her permit in less than 6 months. There is nothing that scares me more in my life, except my second daughter getting her permit. But your kids getting their driver’s license is a real reminder of mortality for me. So many, too many teenagers and lose their lives within the first year of driving. My cousin was killed when she was 16.

 And there is nothing like mortality to make us realize how badly we need a Savior and that we need to make a decision for our Savior that we have encountered today, the one who loves you unconditionally, or else we could lose our chance once we step out of this church. I’m not into scare tactics, but I do want this Advent to be a time that each of us individually and also all of us collectively as a church, would choose Jesus our Savior, as our Savior.

 We have other encounters coming up. Next week we encounter Emmanuel. You never know where that relationship will take you, but allow Advent to become a relationship with Jesus as Savior that provides eternal life. Amen.