

## Answering the Call of the Great I AM

Exodus 3:1-15; Mark 1:9-15

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on the First Sunday in Lent, February 22, 2015]

### I

A particular church was looking for a new pastor.

The Pastoral Nominating Committee had been going over resume after resume in hopes of finding the ideal candidate,

but so far none of the candidates had been a good match.

Tired of the whole process, they were about to call it a night when they came upon this letter of introduction from a candidate:

*To the Pastoral Nominating Committee: It is my understanding that you are in the process of searching for a new pastor, and I would like to apply for the position.*

*I wish I could say that I am a terrific preacher, but I can't—actually, I stutter when I speak.*

*I wish I could say that I have an impressive educational background, but I can't—no college or seminary, just the school of "Hard Knocks."*

*I wish I could say I bring a wealth of experience to the job, but I can't—I have never been a pastor before (unless you count the flock of sheep I have been shepherding).*

*I wish I could say I have wonderful pastoral skills, but I can't—sometimes I lose my temper and have been known to get violent when upset. Once I even killed a man, but, gracious folks that you are, I am certain you will not hold that against me.*

*I know churches these days want young ministers to attract young members, and I wish I could say that I am young, but I can't—actually, I am almost 80...but I still FEEL young.*

*With all that against me, why am I applying for your position? Simple. One afternoon recently, the voice of God spoke to me and said I had been chosen to lead. I admit, I was a bit reluctant at first, but... So here I am. I look forward to hearing from you and to leading you into an exciting new future. Yours sincerely,*

The PNC members looked at one another.

The chairperson asked, "Well, what do you think?"

The rest of the committee was astonished.

A stuttering,  
 uneducated,  
 inexperienced,  
 old,  
 arrogant,  
 obviously neurotic,  
 murderer as their pastor!?

Somebody must be crazy!

The chairperson eyed all of them, then said,  
 "It is signed, 'Moses.'"

## II

Today's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures tells of Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush.

It is one of the most mysterious stories in the entire Bible.

The bush was probably an ordinary bramble bush,  
typical vegetation in those parts.

The fire itself would not have been unusual since spontaneous combustion is not unheard of in a hot, dry, desert country.

But a fire that burns and does not consume?—  
that is something else altogether.

Moses turns aside to investigate.

His curiosity is aroused.

He wants a closer look.

It was this *holy curiosity* that brought Moses to the burning bush,  
which turned out to be so much more.

It parallels, in a wonderful way, God hearing Israel's cries.

They were a nation of slaves...  
making bricks for Pharaoh...  
a pitiable people, really...

Certainly not a people who one would expect the Creator of the Stars of Night to pay attention to.

But, in a sense, it was a merciful curiosity that drew God to this suffering people.

God would work through Moses, the shepherd, to set the people free.

The story of Moses' encounter with the Holy is also our story,  
for it is often in the wilderness moments of life that God comes to us,  
speaks to us,  
and calls us to new pathways of ministry and mission.

## III

Moses sees the bush burning,  
turns aside to see this marvel,  
when suddenly, he hears his name called:  
**Moses, Moses!**

The voice is coming from the bush.

I can picture Moses leaning in, his head tilted to one side in wonder.

"Here I am," he says.

The voice speaks again.

*"Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."*

Remember, just moments before the ground had been ordinary ground,  
just as the bush had been an ordinary bush.

It reminds us that we do not have to go away to a designated sacred place to have a divine encounter.

You do not have to be standing on the shore of Lake Tahoe at dawn,  
or on the rim of the Grand Canyon at sunset,  
or on top of Glacier Point looking down on Yosemite Valley  
as the stars come out at night.

You don't have to be in such wonderful places.

You just have to keep your eyes and ears open wherever you are.

Moses, looking as bewildered as you or I might,  
fumbled around with the thongs that held his sandals in place,  
removed them,

then looked quizzically at the bush again.

The voice speaks once more:

*"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."*

Moses responds by shielding his face,  
because he knew no one can look on God and still live.

*God says, "I've taken a good, long look at the affliction of my people in Egypt. I've heard their cries for deliverance from their slave masters; I know all about their pain. And now I have come down to help them, pry them loose from the grip of Egypt, get them out of that country and bring them to a good land with wide-open spaces, a land lush with milk and honey..."*

This is all well and good.

One wonders, however, why it has taken God so long to notice, considering it has only been 400 years that the people have been enslaved, but that is another story.

The present problem is God's choice of a leader—  
this eighty-year-old shepherd who is wanted on a murder charge.

#### IV

It is interesting to note Moses' first objection.

It's a question of identity: *"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"*

Moses is reluctant to take on the role that God asks of him,  
but really, who better than Moses?

Born a Hebrew, raised an Egyptian, Moses is the perfect person to confront Pharaoh for the sake of the Hebrews.

He also is driven by a deep sense of justice and fairness that had moved him earlier to intervene with the Hebrew slave who was being abused.

And note something else—

God never defends the decision,  
never explains why God chose Moses, of all people.

In answer to Moses' "who am I?" objection,  
the response is simply,  
**"I will be with you."**

Moses was right—who WAS he?

A nobody!

No matter...God still says: "I will be with you."

And that is what ultimately counts.

Notice the "sign" that God promises:

*"...and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."*

In other words, the only sign you will see is in the rear-view mirror...hindsight.

One day, when you are back here on this mountain,  
worshiping with your brothers and sisters,  
you will think back to this moment and realize  
that God was with you all along,  
just as God had promised.

That was, of course, no guarantee of success,  
but it was the assurance of God's unfailing providence and care.

## V

At this point you are probably thinking that God's promise to be with Moses should be enough.

Most of us...

being assured of God's providential care...

would be willing to go ahead and do what God asks of us.

But not Moses!

He keeps arguing with the Almighty,  
keeps raising objections...

"If the people ask me who sent me, what am I going to tell them?"

God's answer: "I Am Who I Am...Tell them I AM sent me to you."

The four Hebrew consonants that form the Divine Name come from the root of the verb "to be."

So the Divine Name, pronounced *Yahweh*, speaks of a God who is and who will be with the people in their moment of deepest need.

Later biblical writers would use the Divine Name to describe God's further revelation.

Isaiah would describe a child to be born as "Immanuel," "God with us."

The Book of Revelation would describe Christ as "The Great I Am."

And in John's Gospel Jesus speaks of himself numerous times using the phrase "I am"—

*"I am the bread of life..."*

*I am the light of the world..."*

*I am the good shepherd..."*

*I am the true vine..."*

*I am the way, the truth, and the life..."*

*I am the resurrection and the life..."*

Over the next six Sundays we will be considering each of these "I Am" sayings of Jesus—

what they tell us about Jesus—

the ways in which God can be known through Jesus—

and what they tell us about ourselves.

Today we simply note that the same Divine Name that gave comfort and assurance to Moses and the children of Israel is available to you and me.

Strangely, Moses is still not satisfied, and the conversation goes back and forth for the rest of chapter 3 and most of chapter 4.

Remember who the participants in this conversation are —

the Holy God, whose glory fills all creation,

and Moses, who has the most chutzpa ever recorded in human history.

(Those who say "we mustn't question God" need to re-read this story!)

On he argues, "What if they won't believe me if I tell them you sent me?"

*"Well, then, I'll give you some signs you can show to them. And if the signs with the snake and the hand turning white with leprosy won't impress them, then just take some water from the Nile River and pour it on the ground and I'll turn the water into blood."*

That is still not enough for Moses.

His heels are dug in deep against his destiny.

"Lord, you have forgotten something. You have forgotten that I am a very poor public speaker. When I open my mouth, I sound as if I have marbles in there. I'm slow of speech. My tongue doesn't work well."

The Lord had only one nerve left, and Moses was standing on it.

*"Moses, have you forgotten that I am the one who gives speech in the first place? I will be with your mouth."*

Finally in exasperation Moses cries out: "O Lord, please send someone else."

If I were God, I think I would have given up on this old boy.

Astonishingly, God answers,

*"All right...I'll send that silver-tongued brother of yours—Aaron, the Levite. He'll do your speaking for you. Now pick up your staff. The people are suffering. They're waiting for you. And only you. You are the one I have chosen."*

Finally...Moses stops arguing and gets moving.

## VI

Here is the question this story asks each of us:

**Where have you encountered the God who is the great I Am?**

When have you turned aside for God's voice calling you to do something to make a difference in the lives of God's suffering children?

In a simple yet profound sense, the third chapter of Exodus invites us, the church, to be curious about the world around us.

The mission field isn't always right in front of us.

Sometimes we need to follow our instincts...

get off the path...

turn aside in order to get a closer look.

And sometimes when we do,

we just may hear the Voice of God.

In ministry we are called to look more closely...

listen more intently...

search out the nooks and crannies of the world around us,

and hear the cries of people we might normally not hear.



To you who have strayed from the straight and narrow path and now want to find your way back, Jesus says,

**"I AM the Light of the world."**

To you who feel that you cannot get back to the path because you have strayed so far, Jesus says,

**"I AM the Good Shepherd."**

To you who have been drained of any joy in life by depression, despair, and grief, Jesus says,

**"I AM the True Vine."**

To you young people who want solid guidance in your life choices—school, career, mate—

Jesus says, **"I AM the Way."**

To you who are wrestling with the ethical puzzles of a confused and confusing world not sure what is right or wrong anymore, Jesus says,

**"I AM the Truth."**

To you who are coming near the end of this earthly journey and wonder what lies ahead, Jesus says,

**"I AM the Resurrection and the Life."**

## VII

So I invite you,

as we begin the 40 day journey through Lent,  
to carefully scan the mountainsides of your life.

Be alert...listen quietly.

The voice that spoke to Moses is still speaking to you...

speaking to you in...  
a verse of scripture,  
a word of prayer,

a moment of fellowship,  
a line from a lesson,  
a sentence from a sermon,  
the touch of a hand,  
the warmth of a smile.

The great I Am is calling you.

**It is enough to give you goose bumps...  
or at least cause you to stoop down and take off your shoes.**

Amen!

Sources:

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