

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost- July 23, 2023

Scripture lesson: Exodus 3:1-15

AT THE BURNING BUSH

The Bible gives us amazing, fascinating stories of encounters with God. On Pentecost Sunday, at the beginning of our current church season, we pondered one of the best-known in all of the New Testament- namely, the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' first disciples with the sound of a mighty rushing wind and the appearance of tongues of fire on their heads. Today with our continuing summer focus on Old Testament stories and passages, Diane has just read for us perhaps the best-known of all such stories in the Hebrew Scriptures- namely, of Moses at the burning bush. What does his encounter with God reveal?

It shows us first that God has a name, and that God knows our names. Moses is out minding his own business, tending Jethro's sheep, when off to the side he sees a bush burning. Intrigued, he goes over to check it out and God calls to him by name, "Moses, Moses! Take off your shoes for you're standing on holy ground. My chosen people are enslaved in Egypt, and I'm ready to set them free. Guess what? I want you to lead them."

Moses is taken aback and tries to get off the hook. Part of his ploy is to press God for God's name. He takes the same sort of approach that adults sometimes take in asking a famous person for an autograph. To protect against being refused, we say, "It's not for me. It's for my son; it's for my niece. It's for a precious child who would *really* like to have it."

So, Moses says, "This *isn't* really for me. But if I go to those people and claim to be their leader that You have sent, *they* will ask me, 'What's the name of this God?' If I don't have a good answer, they won't believe a word that I say."

God replies, "I AM WHO I AM . . . (S)ay to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Granted, this is not a common name. Then again, it is *God's* name. It's personal. It's specific. It's the name that God speaks to Moses to let all of us know that God isn't some vague cipher that we can take or leave as we prefer or turn into what-ever we want. God has a definite name and a particular identity.

And yet like Moses, we're often tempted to try and keep this God at bay. We have other forms of God talk that can help us to forget or ignore I AM WHO I AM. We're tempted, for instance, to invoke God as if God was merely a grand, old-fashioned way to buck up certain ideals that we already have for other reasons. For example, 'In the name of Gohhdd, we pursue freedom, justice, and the American way.'

Or we think of God abstractly as a kind of giant number, way out there beyond the quintillions, yet just short of infinity- like the way, I'm embarrassed to say, that I and some of my friends used to occasionally list our return addresses when we were younger and way too full of ourselves- Kurt Kirchoff, 1330 Sacramento Avenue, Apt. #37, Berkeley, CA, 94702, USA, North America, the World, the Solar System, the Galaxy, the Universe- and after the universe, you could add Gohhdd.

Or we use God as an exclamation point at the height of some especially intense experience- let's say, of anger or sex or aesthetic wonder. You're spitting mad or you're orgasmic or you're

at the Grand Canyon for the first time. You say with the inflection that fits the particular moment, “Gohhdd.”

But this isn’t the God who meets Moses at the burning bush. This God is deeply personal and longs to communicate with us, but will not be minimized or shrunk down by any of our boxes or labels. This God is I AM WHO I AM.

As this morning’s story continues then in the next chapter, Exodus 4, Moses keeps trying to beg off. In various ways, he says in effect, “Look God, this is so unreasonable. You’re setting me up to fail. I’ve never done anything like this before. You’ll make me look bad. I wouldn’t have taken this class if I’d known it was going to be so much work. I’ll report you to the Dean, to the Provost, to the President, or to whoever else I have to because this is *so* unfair.”

I suspect that we can identify with Moses along this line, too. Think, for instance, of how we can often be when we enter a new situation- a new school or a new social, work or family circle.

I go to my first class in a subject that I’ve never studied, or to the first tryout for a sports team that I really want to be on, or to my first rehearsal of the new band or orchestra that I’m part of, or to the first party of the dorm I’m in, or to my first meeting of the parents of my boyfriend or girlfriend. We enter new situations like these and tend to be of two minds.

Part of the time we think, “I’m such a fraud. I wonder if anyone here will notice how geeky I am or how pathetic my social skills are. How long will it be before they discover that I faked my way through most of high school, that I’m clumsy and out-of-shape, that the band I played in before wasn’t very good, or that this is actually my first or my twentieth girlfriend or boyfriend? It’s by dumb luck that I’m here at all, but how long can that last? I’m sure they’ll soon find me out.

That’s the way we think some of the time.

Much of the rest of the time, though, we’re more like: “Hey, I’m not as question-able as that guy over there. I’m not as weird as this nobody who’s sitting next to me. Actually, these losers are lucky to have me around. In fact, I’m bummed out by how many dullards there are in this student body or this family, work social, church, or whatever group it is. I deserve much more and much better.”

In other words, half the time we’re sure that we’re not good enough for anyone else and half the time we’re sure that no one else is good enough for us.

It’s similar, I think, in our relationship with God. Half the time, we feel like we’re nobody and are astonished that God hasn’t already crushed and blown us away. The rest of the time we think, “I’m so special that even God is lucky to have me around.” Moses spends half of his time cowering from God (“God, don’t make me do this”) and half of his time challenging God (“God, if *you’re* so special, then prove it to *me*”).

But thankfully, what Moses finally learns is that what he thinks of himself doesn’t matter all that much to God. God says, “I will be with you,” and THAT is what counts. God wants us to know and to believe in God, yes- but what matters far more is that God knows and believes in us. “I will be with you,” says the great I AM. Hallelujah.

In meeting God, Moses also discovers that God wants to set him free. The book of Genesis first proclaims God as the Creator of all things. The book of Exodus then gives us God as the great Liberator, the Holy One who is determined to set all things free.

God has not only made us but wants to do for us what God did for Moses. God wants to take away our fears and grow our imaginations so that we can take in the wonder of everything that

God has in store for us. God wants to open us wide so that we can receive great and glorious tasks to do in God's strength, joining with God ultimately to set all things free.

Which, by the way, is the best reason for us, as the church, to always pray as passionately, learn as broadly, and think as deeply as we possibly can. We do that in order to understand better and better how to join with God in the service of *true* freedom. That's not the freedom to do whatever we want whenever we feel like. It's the freedom instead to live in accord with God's holy image in us, the freedom to live with abundant love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It's the freedom to reap a marvelous harvest of the Spirit's fruits.

The greater our imaginations are, the fuller our understanding can be of the wonder that God is and of the work that God calls us to do. The deeper our insights are, the greater our confidence can be in joining with God to set ourselves and others free. The sharper our wisdom is, the better we can grasp the numerous, difficult, and subtle ways that we often stay trapped in our chains- chains, for instance, of family ghosts, of crazy busyness and overwork, of idle leisure and numbing comforts, of money and possessions, of style and looks, of media manipulations and political illusions. The clearer our knowledge of these chains and others becomes, the better equipped we are to strike them off- off both of ourselves and of other people.

To repeat- at the burning bush Moses learns that God has a specific name and a particular identity- I AM WHO I AM. He learns that God's purpose for us is to join with God in setting all things free. He learns that God will not take no for an answer when it comes to pursuing this ultimate divine purpose. And he learns that in every challenge that we face in carrying out this holy pursuit, God will be with us.

For God's heart burns with an eternal fire. It's the fire of God's infinite passion which burns white hot, but never consumes. It's the fire of God's unconditional love that burns forever but does not destroy. It's the fire of God's pure holiness which grabs Moses' attention at the burning bush and will not let him go.

As this blessed season of Pentecost continues, let's pray that we will increasingly warm ourselves in this fire. Let's pray that it will loosen us up and draw us out into the sacred calling that God has for us. Let's pray that it will brand us forever with our true identity, freeing us to live with all the love, joy, peace, and purpose that God has made us for.

Warmed, loosened up, drawn out, and branded, let's strain forward to that great day when on fire for God just as God is for us, we will, all of us, at last become *all flame*. Amen.