

Sermon: September 3, 2017 – Exodus 3: 1-15
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

In my growing-up years in the 1960s, stories of the Bible were still pretty widely known. Church-going was reasonably common, Bible readings were part of opening exercises at school – for a couple of years, anyway - and Biblical expressions like, “that person has the patience of Job” were part of everyday conversation, because the stories, phrases and vocabulary of the Bible were part of our common experience.

I recognize, however, that much of what we learned about the Bible in those days tended to be pretty superficial: we learned the *form* of the Bible stories, but not necessarily the *content*. Like mis-remembered lyrics of a popular song, I could recognize a lot of Bible stories, particularly from the Hebrew scriptures, but I couldn't necessarily tell you what they meant: Daniel in the Lion's Den, Joseph and his coat of many colours, Ezekiel and the wheel a-turnin' way in the middle of the air - I could tell you instantly that those were Bible stories, but what did they mean? Regardless of whether you approach these as legends, or allegories, or as historical, what did these stories tell us about human life, and what did they tell us about God?



This morning's account of Moses and the Burning Bush, the second of our Sundays exploring the book of Exodus, is one of those stories that everyone would have known as “an important story in the Bible”, back in the day – important enough to be on our United Church Crest - but might not have been able to name WHY it was important. So what about this age-old, curious story, of a conversation between a guy looking after his relative's sheep, and a bramble bush that not only burns without being consumed, but appears to have the ability to speak? Well, let's start with **what it tells us about the identity of God.**

Most times that I have preached on this passage over the years, I've focused on verse 14, where the name of God is revealed to be “I AM WHO I AM” or perhaps more accurately “I AM THAT I AM.” Given our human tendency to focus on what God DOES rather than who God IS – a sense that God needs to be an effective deliverer of services in order to be revered – this verse gives us a most helpful corrective. It reminds us that our relationship with God and, in fact, our approach to our own lives, rests first of all in BEING rather than DOING. It reminds me that in the same way that my value as a human being is not earned by the tasks I am capable of carrying out, neither can God be described in merely functional terms. I am beloved, simply because I am a child of God, and God is the ever-and-always that I can count on no matter what.

That distinction between “being” and “doing” is so important for us to hear. This week, however, we have other layers of meaning to consider as well. For example: in biblical Hebrew, tense is a funny thing – it's hard to convey the difference between an action you are doing now, an action you will be doing in future and, to an extent, actions you have already completed. Seminary professor Victor Hamilton, suggests, then, that this ambiguity is what God was trying to convey; not just that God is “the one who exists” but the one who exists beyond our notion of time. He further states that it would be legitimate to translate what God said to Moses as any one of nine different combinations: (1) 'I am who I am'; (2) 'I am who I was'; (3) 'I am who I shall be'; (4) 'I was who I am'; (5) 'I was who I was'; (6) 'I was who I shall be'; (7) 'I shall be who I am'; (8) 'I shall be who I was'; (9) 'I shall be who I shall be.

Just ponder that for a moment: when Moses seeks a specific, small name for God, so he can tell his neighbours whose authority he is under, the answer is anything but small. God is this big interconnected web of existence, from past, present and future – the God named in the book of Revelation (1:8) as “[the one] who is, and always was, and is to come.” God is the God of being and becoming, of imagination and of memory, of the moment in its fullness and of the creative urge that brought us to this moment. God is the fidelity that stretches from the beginning to the end, and beyond, God is the one who makes my existence possible: each encounter I have with creativity, or imagination, or memory, each encounter with reality is an encounter with the eternal One. This stretches and squeezes and snaps my grey matter in ways both intriguing and uncomfortable, but I think that this is precisely what God was up to in this mysterious response: God is I AM THAT I AM. God, is the fount of existence.

One scholar with a different view was Ludwig Koehler (see Childs, p.69) who saw this answer to Moses' question not as an enigmatic, philosophical reply, but as evasive. By Koehler's reasoning, Moses asks God an unnecessary question – he'd already been told God was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - and receives a blunt answer. Moses, unwilling to do what God has requested of him, tries to wriggle out of it by saying, "well, who are you anyways?" to which God curtly replies, "I'm the one who's calling you, that's who" or "who I am is none of your concern, just do it." This strikes me as similar to an exchange between a frustrated parent who wants their kid to turn off the X-Box and do some chores, and an adolescent pushing back with "well, who made you the boss of me, anyway" – which from my recollection is a good way to win no argument with a parent, ever, anywhere. While I am more drawn to seeing "I AM THAT I AM" as a complex and nuanced and huge response, Koehler's got a point: there are many points in our relationship with God, that the key thing is not to seek further information, but to get busy sharing God's love for the world. More on that, later.

So at the burning bush, we learn something about God through the existential response, "I AM THAT I AM." Now we turn our attention to the other party in this exchange: **what does this encounter tell us about the one who is called?**

Last week, we delved into the terrifying yet inspiring story of Moses as a baby in a basket, saved by the midwives who defied the Pharaoh, nurtured by a nursemaid who was actually his birth mother, and much has happened in his story since then. Raised in the Egyptian court though Israelite by birth, Moses learned the ways of the royal family of Egypt but then his anger changed this course of his life. Seeing an Egyptian abusing one of the Hebrew people, Moses killed the abuser – then ran for his life. By the time we meet up with him in today's reading, we are meeting up with someone who could have had all kinds of earthly power, but was instead living in another land, a fugitive from Egyptian justice, in a settled life but doing menial work. And not a particularly young man, either. While I tend to think of Moses as either the boy wonder, growing up in the Pharaoh's household, or as the great leader who led his people out of bondage and into the promised land, that's not the Moses whose name got shouted from the burning bush. Anglican priest Robert Warren sees God in this story as a sort of Parole Officer who has managed to track down Moses, who has been living a new life in a new land, doing what one needs to do when life has gone bad in a big way: doing his job and not drawing any attention to himself. God tracks down Moses, partly because of his unique insights as both a child of an Israel and a child of the Egyptian court, partly because of innate leadership abilities, but also because of his brokenness. God needed someone who was ready to live a more meaningful life, someone with an innate sense of justice, and someone willing to take his eyes off the flock of sheep for a moment, and pay attention to what the burning bush has to say. God didn't need perfect; God needed human, and Moses was nothing if not human.

This is a reminder that we could bear to hear every week, or at least I need to hear it over and over again: neither God nor the world is served, if we figure we need to be perfect in order to carry out God's will. God is well aware of the character quirks that limit our effectiveness and the deep dark secrets that we try to conceal, and in that awareness, calls us to love RIGHT NOW. Not later, after we are pure or fixed or experts, but now. We learn how to love by loving, we learn about God by living as children of God, we share Christ by walking with Christ, we express gratitude to the great I AM by celebrating our own gift of existence. God seeks us out, aware of our gifts and limitations, and uses both the things we embrace and the things we try to hide or avoid.

So the call comes from God, the I AM who is existence itself, to Moses, who had thought that his life was going to stay nice and small and simple. That describes who was calling and who was receiving, but doesn't tell us why. **What was the purpose of calling Moses?** Was the whole point of the story to get Moses to recognize God, or was there another reason for grabbing his attention like this?

Fortunately, the answer is right in front of us, in verses 7 to 10: "Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them...and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.... The cry of the Israelites has now come to me... So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.'"

And here, the story of the burning bush emerges from that vast collection of "familiar Bible stories with unknown messages" and stands loud and proud. Yes, this story gives people of faith some important knowledge about the identity of God, "I AM THAT I AM" who is and was and is to come. Yes, it is

significant that some of the most famous leaders in God's narrative are people with huge flaws and big barriers to service. But the reason that God bothers to call Moses, the reason that God continues to call us, the yearning that is calls to our very existence by the great I AM, is for us to stop thinking about God's love and start being God's love. God needed to extricate the Hebrew people from their enslavement, and if that was going to happen, Moses needed to stop quibbling and start acting!

God's agenda, always, is about freedom – liberation – new life that has broken free from bondage, whether it is the bondage of self-limiting behaviours, or envy, or addiction, or poverty, or oppression, or actual slavery, or war. We see it in the story of Moses and we live it in the story of Jesus. God does not come to us, simply to make us feel calm or happy or self-assured in life, God's approach to us needs an active response from us, a response that brings God's changes into reality. God is life itself, God is the power of reconciliation and freedom and new life, God is the bold actions we undertake on behalf of those who are oppressed, God is my meaning and my opportunity and my hope. God is no mere theoretical construct, but is found right in the midst of those practical things that can be the difference between life and death. The God who grieves the loss of 1,200 lives in flooding in Bangladesh, India and Nepal, and the havoc created by 27 trillion gallons of rainfall over Louisiana and Texas, is the compassionate force of life moved by the cries of the world, and by the aching needs of souls which cry out for freedom, and calls us to BE the gift of love in the midst of such great need.

Doug Bratt, a Christian Reformed pastor in Maryland, sums up the whole matter before us:

"no matter how we translate God's answer to Moses' question about God's identity, it's an answer that reflects God's faithfulness.... God insists that Moses and Israel can count on God to always be who God is, that is, among other things, faithful.

"That, in fact, is why God both hears Israel's groaning and is concerned about Israel. God is what God is: faithful. That is why God will rescue Israel from her Egyptian slavery. God is what God is: faithful. That is why God will plant freed Israel in the land God promised her ancestors [Abraham and Sarah]. God is what God is: faithful.

"God, in fact, cares not just about those who suffer but even about those who inflict their suffering. After all, Jesus Christ came to reconcile all things to himself. So he's God's sign that God hears not just the cries of the oppressed but also the cries of needy oppressors.

"God hears the cries of oppression, grief, fear or doubt. Because God is faithful. God's people can walk into whatever this new week, new month, new school year has in store for us. Because God is faithful. We can look forward to a home in God's presence in the new creation. Because God is faithful."

A story that started out unusual – a bush that burns without being consumed, a voice that calls – reaches out to us today in these most grounded, foundational ways. Children of the living God, may the God who is our very existence, rise up in us as practical, transformative, hope-filled love. May God capture our attention, that we may find life, and be life, and bring new life in Christ. May God's unquenchable desire for life, shared with all the world, be the reason for this day and each day. Amen and Amen.

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