

I Am Who I Am

First in Lenten Series: Who Do You Say I Am?

by

The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶He said further, "I am the God

of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷Then 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, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

¹¹But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” ¹²He said, “I will be with you; 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.”

¹³But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

¹⁴God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” ¹⁵God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

God chooses a rather every day and ordinary place to be revealed to Moses. There is no temple nearby where Moses might anticipate a divine appearance. There is no sign that this pasture where the sheep graze is holy ground. Moses is about the business of his daily routine, and you remember – at this point in the narrative he is actually living as a stranger in a strange land.

After being pulled up from the bull rushes as a baby by Pharaoh's daughter, and growing up in Egypt, he has become a fugitive from justice. Earlier back in Egypt, he saw an Egyptian brutally beating a Hebrew slave. Moses killed the man and then fled some 200 miles to the land of Midian. He has married a Midianite woman and plans, presumably, to hide himself from the Egyptian authorities for the rest of his life. It is a comfortable exile, considering. He has everything he wants, including a son, and his father-in-law, Jethro, a well-to-do priest with plenty of land and livestock has given him work.

Today, the narrative finds Moses tending Jethro's flock and minding his own business. Suddenly he sees a bush out in the middle of nowhere, burning for all its worth. Glowing like coal beneath the flames, however, the bush is not diminished, and so Moses leans in to take a closer look.

Even people only minimally acquainted with the Bible know something about this scene: the sheep pasture turned holy ground, the fire that does not consume the bush, the voice coming from within the fire. The story is bound to capture our imagination, because our own real life experiences of God, though sometimes oddly mysterious, are never quite so vivid and colorful as flames of fire in the midst of green leaves. Sometimes it feels more like God speaks to us in barely perceptible whispers rather than a full-blown conversation as with Moses who responds to God with some demands of his own!

So it comes easy for us to say, “Those were the good old days: burning bushes, angels of the Lord, parted seas, manna dropped from

heaven to eat, all those unmistakable signs of the presence of God. What we wouldn't give for one burning bush to call us by name, and offer just one compelling insight about the clear identity of God and God's distinct call upon our life. Seldom, it seems, is the presence of God so clearly revealed to us as it was for Moses.

But... wait a minute... What about God is being revealed here? Two very important things, but neither can be described as "crystal clear." First, God cares deeply about human suffering. I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them." God sees people in misery. God hears the cries of those who suffer. God delivers people from oppression and pain. But how God goes about this is not always so clear.

Secondly, this God who sees, hears and delivers, also refuses to be pinned down by a name. Anyone who has ever given a name to another knows what a big responsibility that is. A name bears resonance – the sound of it can spark deep and reverberating emotion. A name conjures up memory of others so named – a favorite family member; a treasured forebear or friend. Knowing a name gives us power. Call it and a head will turn. Curse it and expect a solemn, annoyed response. Say it with love, and what comes back but affection.

Further, in the ancient world – as in ours – names carry with them a certain meaning. Moses, for example, means "pulled out" or "saved from the water." We know why that is! Sarah means "princess", the noble woman who began to give birth to the family of God. Joshua means savior or deliverer for he's the one who led the Hebrews into the Promised Land. So when Moses, I imagine stalling for time before he returns to the country where he's on the Most Wanted list, asks the Voice from within the burning bush, "Who will I say has sent me to rescue the Hebrew people; What is your NAME?" God says: "I am who I am."

In Hebrew, this response is obscure as it can be variously translated as: I am who I am. I will be who I will be. I will cause to be what I will cause to be. I will be who I am and I am who I will be. When Moses demands that God give him a name before he goes off on the risky mission of saving his people from slavery, God answers with a phrase that consists entirely of variations on the Hebrew verb, “to be.” As one biblical scholar says quite plainly: God’s name is a verb.¹ Or to put it another way, God’s name is “I am the One who will keep showing up for you.”²

That’s not much of a name, is it? A verb... A complete sentence... It would not fit the space on a birth certificate. It’s kind of vague; it discloses little as far as names go. In essence, it is not a proper name at all but more of a promise: I AM the One who will keep showing up for you. For Moses, God showed up in an ordinary sheep pasture on an otherwise boring day and said to a man hiding out for his life: I have seen suffering. I hear the cries of my hurting people. It is time to go deliver them and I need you to help me.

I wonder how that verb of a God is looking upon the pain of those freezing in Texas without enough water or heat? I wonder how I AM is figuring out this pandemic and the suffering it is causing in the world today. I wonder what I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE is going to do about the gun violence in our city that resulted in a Subway Stop spree this week with seven shot down in the broad daylight. Well, here’s the deal. God didn’t act alone back then. God enlisted Moses to go into Egypt for him. The Great I AM needs and calls human partners to attend to the suffering of the world.

¹ Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus: Interpretation Commentary*, p.62.

² Tom Long, “The God of Good Appearances,” in *Preaching the Incarnation*, by Peter K. Stevenson & Stephen I. Wright, p. 17.

Mary Doria Russell's book, *A Thread of Grace*, is a novel based on a number of true stories about how Italians of every stripe protected Jews in the midst of the Holocaust. One of her characters, an elder named Iocopo delivers this reflective affirmation about the good, albeit dangerous, work they were called into. Iocopo says: "The sages offer us a way to understand the terrible times when we are driven into exile, when we are beaten and enslaved, when we are being killed... The Holy One has made us His partners, the sages teach. He gives us wheat, we make bread. He gives us grapes, we make wine. He gives us the world. We make of it what we will, all of us together.

When the preponderance of human beings choose to act with justice and generosity and kindness, then learning and love and decency prevail. When the preponderance of human beings choose power, greed, and indifference to suffering, the world is filled with war, poverty, and cruelty. Bombs do not drop from God's hand. Triggers are not pulled by God's finger. Each of us chooses, one by one, and God's eye does not turn from those who suffer or from those who inflict suffering. Our choices are weighed. And, thus, the nations judged."³

Friends, according to this biblical story where the name of God is revealed to Moses: God sees human suffering, God hears the cries of hurting people, and then God engages human partners to go to their rescue. God gives human beings the capacity to choose a better future: Either power, greed and indifference to suffering; or justice, generosity and kindness.

³ Mary Doria Russell, *A Thread of Grace: A Novel*, p. 158-9, quoted by Walter Brueggemann, in "Destiny, Not Fate," sent to *Journal for Preachers* community 11/5/2020.

Today, on this first Sunday in the Season of Lent, as we begin our journey toward the cross, we are mindful of how the God mysteriously named “I AM” chose to become available and vulnerable in Jesus of Nazareth. In these weeks to come, we will consider what Jesus is telling us about God when Jesus likens himself to the Bread of Life, the True Vine, the Shepherd and Gate for the Sheep, the Way, the Truth, the Resurrection and the Life. We will also consider who Jesus is calling us to be as partners, as purveyors of these symbols, each of which uniquely and variously gives credence to God’s name: I AM the One who will keep showing up for you. I am the One who will keep calling you into partnership for the sake of the world of suffering people.

AMEN.