

“Who am I?” “I will be with you”

Sermon preached at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA
by The Rev. Thomas C. Pumphrey, February 28, 2016
The Third Sunday of Lent (year C): Exodus 3:1-15, (Luke 13:1-9)

Exodus 3:1-15 (NRSV): *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. There 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. Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.” When 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.” Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” He 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.*

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 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. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” He 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.” But 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?” God 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.’” God 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.

Today’s Gospel reading is fitting for Lent. Jesus shows us both the seriousness of sin, and God’s patience and persistence in helping us bear good fruit for him. We can’t succeed on our own. But just as the gardener tends and nourishes the fig tree, so also Jesus gives us his grace and calls us to bear fruit for him. Our abilities and failings matter less when we rely on God’s power and God’s presence in our lives.

We can see how this works when we examine the scene in today’s Old Testament Reading. God is up to the same thing in his encounter with Moses. This is the famous “Burning Bush” scene, forever linked in many minds to the great film by Cecil B. DeMille, “The Ten Commandments.” God calls to Moses from the bush that burns, yet is not consumed. God tells Moses that he is sending Moses to Egypt to deliver the Israelites from slavery. And Moses replies “Who am I?” “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” Who am I? And the Lord replies to him “I will be with you.”

Now this seems like an odd reply—Did the Lord really answer Moses’ question? This was a daunting task that God asked of him. Moses had fled from Egypt. He had no power to face mighty Pharaoh. Egypt was the greatest nation on earth! Moses was from the lineage of slaves. He would be the representative of a foreign God—the God of slaves. The Egyptians would laugh at such a threat—after all, in their eyes, their gods made Egypt mighty—what could the God of

slaves do to them? Who was Moses in their eyes, or in the Israelites' eyes, or even in Moses' own eyes? "Who am I?" Moses asks the Lord.

One can easily see how Moses might have an identity crisis. Moses was a Hebrew—but not really a Hebrew, he was raised and claimed as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He was an Egyptian—but not really an Egyptian, for he was born from a Hebrew family. He was an Egyptian and a Hebrew—but not really either, for he was in exiled from both peoples. He was a failure in the eyes of both. Now he was a shepherd for his father-in-law, Jethro. Who was he—who was Moses, after all?

Of course, identity crises are not rare, and daunting vocations are not rare either. Many people have wondered who they are to be cast in unlikely roles. Many have been called to challenges way above their capabilities. Many of us have asked "Who am I" to face the challenges of raising a family, or starting a new career when a job has failed. Who am I when I lose my health or my youth? Who am I when I lose my wife or my father? Young people entering or leaving college are asking "who am I" and where am I headed? How do I find meaning in my life, how do I find meaning in an impersonal world?

There are generational differences as well. Many generations are shaped by a common formative experience. The World War II generation was shaped by World War II of course, and perhaps the Great Depression that preceded it. Baby Boomers were shaped by their experience in the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War. But the younger generations have not had that same common formative experience. Our world is more disjointed and disconnected. Though we are more electronically connected, we are more personally isolated, and unmoored from tradition or extended family or place.

People often pursue shallow and fleeting sources of meaning and identity. We pick false identities in the labels of political parties or other factions. Some find their sense of worth in physical beauty, according to the standard of someone in their 20s. But what happens to their identity in their 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s? Some seek meaning in their material wealth, or their physical strength and health, or their career or accomplishments. But we find disillusionment if all our identity is wrapped up in these things, and we become all too aware of our sense of failure. When we fail in our career or in our family, or when we lose the dream we once had for ourselves, we ask ourselves—and we ask God if we are bold enough: "Who am I?"

Moses asked the Lord the same question for all the same reasons, on top of being called to such an impossible task. Moses goes on to make several excuses not to accept God's call. He doubts his abilities or his odds for success. God doesn't give up on Moses. Neither does God withdraw his expectations of Moses. "Who am I?" Moses asks. And the Lord answered Moses "I will be with you." I will be with you. The better question for Moses turns out to be "*whose* am I? *To whom* do I belong? Who has claimed me?" Moses' identity is all about who he is in relation to God. And God's claim on Moses is what truly matters in Moses' life. "Who am I?" Moses asks. "I will be with you," The Lord answers.

God takes action in Moses' life. God calls out to Moses where he is, even in exile. God calls Moses by name. The Lord says 'I am your God—the God of your father.' God tells Moses who

he is in relation to the Israelites. ‘I have heard their cry. I know their sufferings, I have come to deliver them, I will give them a rich land, I will send YOU. I AM! I AM yours forever!’

God claims the Israelites as his own, whether or not they claimed him. God claims Moses as his own, even when Moses is still bewildered and afraid. God emphasizes not the world’s claims on Moses—the world’s ideas of strength and power and prestige and status. God emphasizes who Moses and the Israelites are in relation to God—who they are in relationship to their Lord.

God sees our identity and meaning in our relationship with him. As God came to Moses, so God comes to you and to me. God calls you by name, God claims you as his own, God knows you—better than you know yourself. God cares about your life, God takes action to make a difference in our often challenging and confusing lives. It’s not about whether you are strong or weak, or popular in the eyes of others. What matters is God’s call, and God’s power at work in us.

A friend of mine from Pennsylvania faced a challenging call by God. Jim and his wife Susan discovered that their daughter Janie had Downs Syndrome. They had no training or skills in parenting a special needs child. Susan was in her 30s and Jim was in his 40s. Who were they to give what it takes to help and support Janie? Then they had to pick up their family and move to a new state. By then, they had four children, and the transition was not easy. Then Jim lost his job in the recession. “Who am I to handle all this?” they must have asked God.

But God was with them. They constantly reminded themselves of who they are as children of God, and each day they set about facing the life to which God had called them. Janie and her brother and sisters flourished. Jim and Susan did not let their hardships or their needs define them. Rather they served God in their church and blessed the lives of others. Who were they to face these challenges? God is with them. And God’s presence is more powerful than any challenge they face.

When we ask “Who am I” or “who am I to face this journey?” God answers “I will be with you.” ‘I have called you by name. I have heard your cries and I will be with you.’ God is there with you in all the challenges you face, in all the journeys to which God calls you.

When we search for meaning in our confusing and disjointed world—when we face the changes of our lives and ask “Who am I?” God answers “I will be with you.” ‘You are my beloved child! You are the one I lived and died and rose for! You are the one I forgive, the one I will bless!’ God says to you and me ‘You are mine and I am yours and who you are starts and ends in our relationship together, and that relationship will never end. That is my promise to you!’ says the Lord. As God empowered Moses and Jim and Susan, so God will empower you to endure and thrive.

“Who am I?” Moses asked God. “Who am I?” we ask God. And God replies “I will be with you.”