

Up Close and Personal
Exodus 3:1-15
September 3, 2017 - Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost

The story of Moses and the burning bush is a rich story indeed. You know the story. .. Moses has run from Egypt, traveled across the Sinai, traveled to Midian, run away from Egypt because he had murdered an Egyptian whom he saw abusing a Israelite slave. So Moses is in Midian, tending his father-in-law's sheep, minding his own business when he witnesses a bush, ablaze, but not being consumed; and he goes to investigate. Suddenly, out of the bush comes a call: "Moses, Moses!" And Moses replies, "Here I am." "Don't come any closer," says the Lord from the bush; "Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground."

I had a friend in seminary that seemed to always be barefoot. It didn't matter how cold it was, she was barefoot. Oh, when the ice and snow finally fell outside, she'd put a pair of boots on; but, as soon as she entered a building, she took them off and was barefoot. Needless to say, many of us found this a bit strange; and some of us questioned how healthy this practice was; but one day she explained. She was seated in her church and she heard a call, a call to approach the altar and dedicate her life to God. And then these words echoed in her ears: "Take off your shoes for you are standing on holy ground." She went on to say that she has continued to find a certain connection to God's creation, a certain connection to "the Holy" by placing her bare feet on the ground at all times and in all places. Now, I need to tell you that you will not find this pastor coming to church barefoot. But I understand the spiritual connection she experienced. I lost touch with her after I graduated. I don't know if she's still going barefoot, but I'm quite certain that she still feels connected to the Holy. And that's what this scripture is all about - connectedness to the Holy.

So Moses takes off his sandals and hides his face. He was afraid to look at God. But then he hears a call, a call to go back to Egypt and lead his people out of bondage. And Moses says, "Woe, woe, woe ... Not me. I can't do that." But God says, "Yes, you can!" Then come some words that too often get skimmed over when considering this passage, "I will be with you." When God issues a call, God does not abandon us. God accompanies us; God strengthens us; God gives us the resources to answer the call. But Moses is still balking. He says, "But wait a minute. When I go to lead these people out of Egypt, they're going to ask who sent me. What should I tell them?" To that, we have the giving of the sacred name. God said, "I AM who I Am. Say to the Israelites I AM has sent me." Those of you who know your grammar know how special and how powerful the verb "to be" is. And certainly Shakespeare comes to mind, "To be, or not to be, that is the question." But in Hebrew, that verb, "I AM" breaks down into four letters. Scholars call it the tetragrammaton. That word simply means "having four letters," but these four

letters form the sacred name of God - Yahweh. It's a name that's considered so sacred in Jewish circles that it will not be pronounced. When Jews are studying the Bible and they come upon the word *Yahweh* they will usually substitute the word *ha shem* which simply means "the name." In liturgy, they'll frequently substitute *adoni*, the word for "Lord." Now, I need to tell you that, while I don't think it particularly sinful to pronounce the proper name of God, I've spent enough time in Jewish circles that, when I pronounce or hear the name *Yahweh* pronounced, I do get a bit of a jar. You see, not only do Jews feel that the name is too sacred to pass human lips, there is also a sense that to know and speak one's name is to control one; and certainly no human can control the Holy One.

But I like to look at this differently; because, while I have spent significant time in Jewish study and while I have a tremendous respect for the Jewish religion, I am also profoundly Christian. And I like to see God's giving of the sacred name to Moses as an invitation to relationship. If I want to be in relationship with someone, the first thing I do is ask their name; and I try to use it.

This might be a good time for a nametag promotion. I will again ask everyone here to please wear your nametags; because others in this church, myself included want to be in relationship with you. We have a lot of newer members; and frequently someone has asked me, "Who is so and so?" But I need to say that most of our newer members do wear their nametags. Thank you for that. But our newer members can't get to know those of you who have been here for 30 or 40 years if you don't wear your nametags. And it's not just about new members. Some of us are getting older. I've now been at the church for a little over six years. I have known the names of every member of the church, but it still happens. .. I look at someone and think, "I should know their name, now what is it?" Forgive me, and help me out. Wear your nametag. This would also be a good time to announce that we will be doing a new church directory this fall so, in addition to wearing your nametag, sign up to have your picture taken.

But back to Moses and the sacred name. God gives Moses the name, so that Moses and the Israelite people can better come to know God. Jesus also claimed the sacred name. Thus, in the Gospel of John we have seven I AM sayings. Jesus says, "I AM the bread of Life"; "I AM the light of the world"; "I AM the door"; "I AM the good shepherd"; "I AM the resurrection and the life"; "I AM the way, the truth, and the life"; and "I AM the true vine." Don't hear those I AM's as simply connecting verbs. No, they are, in fact, statements of Jesus divinity which is why the Pharisees found these statements blasphemous.

But part of the reason I strongly proclaim Christianity as my faith is that Jesus wants an "up close and personal" relationship with me, and with you, and with everyone of us. I love the burning bush. It is light and warmth. Jesus said, "I AM the light of the world." When we come into an "up close and personal" relationship with Jesus Christ, we experience spiritual light and loving warmth. I love the giving of the sacred name. Jesus used that name seven times to invite us to

know him better. And in between the light and the sharing of the name is a call. In Moses case it was a call to do the hardest thing he could imagine - to go back to Egypt, that land from which he had escaped; go back to Egypt to lead God's children out of bondage.

I also believe God has given each and every one of us a call. It may be as difficult as going to a strange land to be in mission, or it may be as simple as helping out around the church or even just offering a smile, a kind word, or an invitation to a stranger. But no matter how difficult or how simple the call may be, there are those wonderful words God told Moses, "I will be with you." And how often have I told this congregation, the most important verse in all the Gospels is that last verse of Matthew. Jesus said, "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age."

Amen.

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