



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
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Knowing Who I Am

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.
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The heart of Lent – these days in which we fast and pray as Jesus did for forty days in the desert – the heart of Lent is self-examination in the interest of serving the needs of others and the world. Who am I and what am I called to be doing right now? What activity has my name on it? What activity does not have my name on it?

Thomas Merton reminds us that to take on work that doesn't have our true name on it is to do violence to ourselves and to others. All those sages that you and I admire and want to emulate in our own particular way and time are known to have had significant struggles with these questions. It is a question with which I struggle every day. It is the question about which I have the most conversations and emails about with others. It was the central question of our Vestry/Staff Conference the past two days. It was the central question my retreat director kept assigning me to pray about while I was on retreat in Philadelphia last week. Who am I and what am I called to be doing is the question at the heart of this morning's first lesson – the story of Moses and the burning bush. (Exodus 3:1-15)

After the Hebrew people had gone through the harrowing and exhilarating experience of being freed, of being delivered in the Exodus experience from the constrictions of oppression and slavery to the Pharaoh in Egypt, being brought through the Red Sea – this is the paradigmatic story for all Jews and it shapes the contours of the Easter story for Christians – after that event had taken place, some writer decided that he or she needed to record what they considered to be the building blocks and turning points that allowed that miraculous liberation to take place.

Central to that overall story was this moment in Moses's life when he was simply minding his own business one day, tending the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro. In a sacred moment, something out of the ordinary got his attention. Now, please don't get hung up on exactly what was this bush that was burning and not consumed. It's an experience that shouldn't be reified or set in the concrete of literalism or fundamentalism. Once I had a college student who came to me when I was a University Campus Minister who said to me, "Ed, I've never seen a burning bush. Hell! I'd be satisfied with a smoldering pot plant in my dorm room!" [laughter] Whatever it was that got Moses's attention that day, it was one of those moments in life when Moses "turned aside" a powerful and beautiful biblical phrase that means something like, "went to another mental state" – a state of prayer or a state of reflection or a state of coming to oneself or a state of staring into space or listening deeply to the Whispers of Mystery both within and in creation.

What is important is that God told Moses that there was some work that needed to be done – some action that needed to take place – some activity that had Moses’s name on it. But before moving forward, God and Moses have a little heart-to-heart conversation (what Christians call a “come to Jesus moment”). Since it was between Moses and God it had to be a “come to Sinai moment,” I guess. But it changes the course of Moses’s life, and it changes the course of history.

In the conversation God says to Moses, “Moses, I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their slavemasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.”

God is acutely aware of the sufferings of any people this morning who are in misery no matter where they are. Rabbi Heschel noted about this passage, “Here is the Judaic concept of what a human being is: a human being is someone who lives with the certainty that God is involved in human life. This means that the primary task of a human person is to realize that God has a stake in his life or her life. [‘In every human life there is something sacred at stake, in every human moment there is something sacred at stake’ Rabbi Heschel wrote elsewhere].” Rabbi Heschel continues, “We also believe that the Jewish people are not the same since Sinai. They are called upon to carry out the commandments of the Torah, the Law. A human being is by his or her very being a person in travail with God’s dreams and designs.”

(Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Interview at Notre Dame,” *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 386)

In this story, I think, God makes it clear that God is not the God of the Deists who has set the cosmos moving like a great clockmaker and now sits back to watch everything tick. No, God hears every human cry of anguish and is emotionally involved. Then in the story God reveals something even more amazing about the Divine. In verse 10, God says to Moses, “Now, You Go.”

“In one brief utterance, the grand intention of God has become a specific human responsibility, human obligation, and human vocation.” The work of the Divine has become the actual work of you and me. “It is Moses not God who will do what God says to do and Moses who will run the risks that Yahweh [God] seemed ready to take. The connection of God and Moses, of heaven and earth, of great power and dangerous strategy – all of that is carried in the statement ‘Now, you go, I will send you.’” These are Walter Brueggemann’s words. He continues, “After the massive intrusion of God, the exodus has suddenly become a human enterprise. It is Moses (not God) who will actually have the meeting with Pharaoh. It is Moses (not God) who will actually ‘bring out’ (*yasa*) ‘God’s people.’ It is Moses who acts in God’s place to save God’s people. Again, this is the odd joining of God and human history. The joining is done through the vulnerable, risk-taking personhood and body of Moses, on whom now everything now depends.”

(Walter Brueggemann, *Exodus, The New Interpreter’s Bible*, p. 713)

My friends, this story means that it is up to us not God, although I believe it to be God’s heart, to provide health care for those who are dying this morning without it. It is up to us not God, although I believe it to be God’s heart, to bring an end to spending trillions of dollars on war. It is up to us not God, although I believe it to be God’s heart, to insure that every child

receives an effective education. It is up to us, not God, although I believe it to be God's heart, to reverse global warming, to end poverty, to ensure marriage equality, and join the resistance against every other force that dehumanizes any member of God's family.

What this means is that no one in this room lives an uncalled life – no one. You may not be aware that you are being called by God to do something for God's world, but you are. The issue for you in Lent is *awareness*. Are you *aware* that you are living a called life?

And now we come to the radical moment in this story. Not only does this story claim that God actually right now is listening to and hearing the cries of those in pain throughout the world and in this room, and not only has God made that project of doing something liberative, freeing about those cries, but now we get to the most radical and the third beat of this story – God is actually *in* you and me to strengthen our spine and expand our courageous heart when we get scared breathless about doing what we have to do to make the needed Exoduses in life happen.

After God says to Moses, “Now you Go.” Moses says back to God, “You have got to be kidding!” Me? And then Moses gets down to the crux of the matter, “Who will I say sent me? What is your name? I need your business card to give to Pharaoh. I am not going up to Pharaoh and telling him to let Your people go without some kind of certificate of authorization in my hand. Who in the world are you?”

And God answers, “I Am I Am. Tell Pharaoh that I Am has sent you and I will be with you Moses.” “What? I Am I Am? What kind of name is that.” “Moses,” God replies, “I Am I Am; Know that I Am has sent you.”

The key to life, I think, and the most beautiful thing in life is to know who you are. And who you are is that “I Am,” the Source of all Being, is in you and is with you. God or Yahweh or the Great I Am sent Moses to Pharaoh. Jewish commentators have pondered how Moses mystifyingly got past all those guards guarding the Emperor so that Moses could get into Pharaoh's courtroom to speak his truth to Pharaoh's power and say, “Let my people go.” Some Jewish commentators have said that the way he did that was that Moses was so drastically transformed by being told that although apparently alone, he was actually taking I Am I Am in with him. And it was such a powerful transformation that Moses had the divine power to work his way in outflanking the defenses of the guards.

Eckhart Tolle writes a great deal about Jesus and speaks to that biblical sentence in Christian scriptures that has mostly been used to exclude rather than to include, to condemn, rather than empower. I'm speaking about one of the biggest obstacles in the entire New Testament text that says, “No one comes to the Father but by Jesus.” (John 14:6) Tolle says, “When Jesus said, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life.’ He was saying I Am is the way and the truth and the life. Jesus speaks of the innermost I Am, the essence identity of every man and woman, every life-form, in fact. Jesus speaks of the life that you are. Some Christian mystics have called it the Christ within; Buddhists call it your Buddha nature; for Hindus, it is *Atman*, the in-dwelling God. [St. Paul says, “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives within me.” Galatians 2:20] When you are in touch with that dimension within yourself – and being in touch

with it is actually your natural state, not some miraculous achievement – when you are in touch with it all your actions and relationships will reflect the oneness with all life that you sense deep within your soul. This is love. Laws, commandments, rules, and regulations are sometimes necessary for those who are cut off from who they are, the Truth within. They prevent the worst excesses of the ego, and often they don't even do that, but what our goal is is to be aware that the I Am is inside you right now. And Augustine says, "Love and then do what you will." (Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's purpose* p. 72)

I believe that one of the greatest misinterpretations of Christianity about Jesus is the claim that Jesus felt that he was the only way to God as opposed to Jesus trying to tell you and me that the "awareness of the I AM" is the way to God. It is the *universal* way to God. That is why there are people who know their way to God in other religions and some who are also atheists who know the way to Ultimate Reality – they accessed the I Am within. "The ultimate truth of who you are is not I am this or I am that, but the ultimate truth of who you are is I Am." (Tolle, *A New Earth, Chap. 3, pp. 56-57*)

God or Yahweh or the Great I Am sent Moses to Pharaoh. God or Yahweh or the Great I Am sends you and me to current day Pharaohs. You and I never get too old for the need to access the I Am that is the very same I Am who confronted Moses in the burning bush, the same I Am who created all that is, who is the Source of All Being, the Eternal Word, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit who is breathing right now in your breathing in this room and that I Am is about to help us make Eucharist – the greatest Burning Bush experience there is for followers of Jesus.

And you never get too old for this accessing the I Am. I was speaking with one of the older members of our faith community lately. She was telling me of a great ordeal she had been through with her health. She had had to go up against some forceful energies of the Pharaoh (any Oppressor) within her own body. The medical procedures she had to endure were harrowing. She told me that she had learned that she could be brave. That is different from being courageous she said. Bravery is a choice you have to make in the moment when you are face to face with Pharaoh. Then she said there was a Bravery "in me that rose up in me and I accessed it and I came through it."

Martin Luther King, Jr. in one of his spiritual crises heard the great I Am speak to him. Martin King was about to throw in the towel when he heard the voice of the great I Am say, "Martin, go forward; you are never alone. No never alone."

My friends, if this Lent we can access the Great I Am that is living inside of you and me to be brave on behalf of freedom, to be brave on behalf of emotional, physical, relational, and spiritual health, be brave on behalf of God's project of excavating the Beloved in every one of us – that Beloved that is buried by ourselves and society, if we will access that I Am we will know what we are called to do and what we are not called to do, what has our particular name on it. We will be instruments of peace and reconciliation, and justice and resurrection.

And my, my, what an Easter we will have!

Amen.