



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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AUGUST 31, 2014
THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

What's Your Question? Exodus 3:1-15; Matthew 16:13-20

I imagine a day much like the ones we enjoyed this past week: cool in the morning, hot in the afternoon, and cool again in the evening—a perfect summer day. I imagine the sun has not long made its presence known in the East and is still climbing over the mountain peaks ahead. The air is fresh and, after a good night's rest with no threats from dangerous animals, it is a good morning to look for greener pastures.

So Moses herded his father-in-law's sheep through the wild places of the Sinai. He took delight in the day. The warming sun, the contented bleating of the sheep, and the calm sense of security made it one of those days when you are glad to be alive—and he was.

Looking beyond the perimeter of the herd for errant sheep or prowling predators, Moses noted that everything was fine. Scanning the horizon, he marveled at the way the rising sun wrapped its rays around the mountain ahead, almost as if divine arms were reaching out to embrace the world. Then something caught his attention. At the base of the mountain, still in shadow, he could see a blazing fire, small but intense. Questions flooded his mind. Could it be the camp of another shepherd? A caravan that had stopped overnight? A band of thieves waiting for prey? He could see neither animals nearby nor people moving near the fire. For nearly half an hour as he drew closer to the fire, he looked high and low for anyone who might attack his flock.

As he drew closer, Moses noticed that the fire it continued to burn with the same intensity, yet no one added fuel to it nor did it neither spread to other brush. He was puzzled and felt compelled to go nearer. It was a curiosity that would change his life forever because Moses was about to meet God at the foot of the mountain.

Moses' life had already involved quite a bit of drama. In order to avoid losing her baby boy to the murderous order of the Pharaoh, Moses' mother floated him in a basket near where Pharaoh's daughter was known to bathe in the Nile. She contrived to raise her son until he was weaned and then

placed him in the care of the princess who raised him as her own. Drawn out of the misery of slavery, Moses lived a privileged life, but he knew his ancestry and his kinship with the Hebrews. He winced at the abuse he witnessed daily. On one occasion, when he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, Moses intervened and killed the Egyptian, hiding his body in the sand. His adopted grandfather learned of his crime and sought to kill him, so Moses ran away to the desert where he found safety in Midian, a wife in the household of the priest, and work as a shepherd.

Although God had not appeared to any of his people since the days of Jacob, the Hebrews rehearsed the stories of their forefathers and knew there was a God who watched over them. Though raised as an Egyptian, Moses' parents had instilled their faith in their young son and he too knew of the God of his ancestors. As the people groaned under the oppression of Egypt, God heard them and broke his silence. From the strange fire in the wilderness, God greeted Moses and informed him that he was on holy ground and had best remove his sandals.

Imagine the fear, the wonder, the sense of dread and excitement that engulfed Moses at that moment. Quick as lightning, the sandals were off and Moses was barefoot and humble before the brilliant presence of God. A new story was about to begin.

The book of The Exodus records an intriguing interplay between Moses and God, a conversation between the Holy One on whose ground they are standing and one who feels very unholy. After the initial greeting, God engages Moses in an almost casual explanation of why he has shown up at that place and time. God has heard the cries of his people and seen their plight in Egypt. He is going to deliver them so he is going to send Moses to do the job.

Moses, however, is feeling anything but casual. He stands there barefoot and bare-souled before a burning bush which speaks to him of Godly intentions. He is scared out of his wits and the best he can muster when God announces that Moses is his choice for this liberation event is to ask two questions. The first is, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" It is a good question, a fair question, a desperate question. "Who am I?"

Moses had good reason to doubt God's choice of him. He was, after all, a fugitive. He had killed an Egyptian and run away to escape Pharaoh's

wrath. That Pharaoh had died, but another Pharaoh was on the throne (perhaps his adoptive uncle) and Moses was none too happy about returning to face him. He was not certain the Hebrew people would accept him. Likely, some of them thought of him as a traitor. Besides, as we learn later, Moses was not a good speaker. “Who am I to speak to Pharaoh? Sorry, but you have the wrong person.”

We can assume the fire crackled and popped as Moses spoke, but when he finished, the voice from the flames announced clearly and decisively, “I will be with you.” That is all Moses needed to know—God would be with him. He continued to offer excuses, but God would have none of it. “I will be with you.” It was that simple.

But it is never that simple, is it? When God taps us to do something on his behalf, we know that God sees the bigger picture while we are privy only to a snapshot or two of what is going on. God is invincible, but we are vulnerable. God has every resource at his disposal but we have nothing more than the few abilities we have developed. Our inadequacy looms in our minds. God may be with us, but it can feel mighty lonely in some of the circumstances of life, especially when confronting powers and authorities. Who am I to do what God wants? Certainly not the person God thinks I am!

But God knows better. Earlier this year, in an interview with Krista Tippett on the radio program, *On Being*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu talked about the way in which oppression destroys our sense of self-worth and how faith restores the value we hold as children of God. He said,

Most of my parishioners were domestic workers, not people who are very well educated. But I would say to them, "You know, mama, when they ask who are you" — you see, the white employer most frequently didn't use the person's name. They said the person's name was too difficult. And so most Africans, women would be called "Annie" and most black men really, you were "boy." And I would say to them, "When they ask who are you, you say, 'Me? I'm a God-carrier. I'm God's partner. I'm created in the image of God.'" And you could see those dear old ladies as they walked out of church on that occasion as if they were on cloud nine. You know, they walked with their backs slightly straighter. And, yeah, it was amazing.¹

¹*On Being with Krista Tippett*, “Transcript for Desmond Tutu—A God of Surprises, March 20, 2014; available online at: http://www.onbeing.org/program/desmond-tutu-a-god-of-surprises/transcript/6185#main_content.

God let Moses know that he was a God-carrier. Whether he was herding sheep or announcing to Pharaoh that he was taking the Israelites home, Moses could do anything God asked of him because God was with him.

Moses had one other question to ask of God. He knew the Hebrew people understood the Lord as the God of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They knew their heritage and, in many ways, their story kept them alive. They knew of this God, but where had God been? During those long years of silence, of increasing hardship and oppression, what had God been doing? Moreover, in a nation that had an abundance of gods to cover every aspect of life, what could this God do to overcome such a pantheon of gods? What could God do, Moses wanted to know.

The second question Moses put to God was, “When they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” Names then, as now, held special meaning. In Moses’ day, a name was the key to a person’s character. Moses received his name because he was “drawn out” from the water in order to be rescued from death. Abram’s name became Abraham because God promised to make him the father of a great nation. His son was given the name Isaac which means “laughter” because his mother and father laughed at the thought of having a child in their old age. Isaac’s son was named Jacob which means “heal sneak” because he was born holding onto his brother Esau’s heel and used that cunning to maneuver his way through life.

To know someone’s name was to know something intimate about them and to understand their character. God told Moses that his name was “I Am Who I Am.” Moses was to tell the Hebrews that “I Am” sent him to free them. The root of this Hebrew name is the verb “to be.” By claiming “I Am” as his name, God established that he exists and always will. “God is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end,” as John affirms in his Revelation. God’s name is his declaration of authority, the affirmation that God can do anything and will do everything to take care of his people. “I Am.” Nothing else need be said.

Indeed, as Moses’ story unfolds into the story of the Hebrew people, God’s identity is proved over and over. God enacts numerous wonders so that the Egyptian people—and the Hebrew people—come to understand fully his authority over all of life. We know that Pharaoh eventually relents, the Israelites flee Egypt, and God (now represented by a pillar of fire in the sky) leads them to the Promised Land.

There in the shadow of the mountain with fire blazing in front of him and sunlight streaming around him, Moses had only two questions for God: “Who am I?” and “Who are you?” Not much else needs to be known.

Centuries later, these same questions arose again only this time it is Jesus who asks the questions. Matthew tells the story this way:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. Matthew 16:13-20

Jesus is interested in how the people understand him. For centuries the Exodus has been the centerpoint of the Jewish faith. A full history of God’s relationship with his people is known by every Jew. Jesus has come to live among them as the embodiment of God—I Am in their midst. But who do they think he is? Popular opinion is that he is someone other than he is—John the Baptist, Elijah, a prophet—all now dead. Despite God’s efforts to make himself known to his people, even though he has come as “Immanuel,” they still do not know him as the God who is with them.

Then Jesus asks the disciples, his closest friends who have worked and learned with him for three years, who they think he is. Often first to speak up at any time, Peter is quick on the draw and blurts out, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” For once Peter has it right! He understands that Jesus is the Christ, God come down to live among his people. Now that they understand who God is, Jesus tells them who they are. They are the ones who will become the church. On the bedrock of their faith in Christ as the Son of God, they will lead people from bondage and oppression, from ignorance and sin, from hopelessness and despair to the promise of God’s eternal

grace. They know God. Now they know themselves. Now the journey begins.

Throughout the story of God's relationship with us these two questions are most important: "Who is God?" and "Who am I?" Moses, the Hebrews, Pharaoh, and the Egyptians discovered who God is. Moses discovered who he was and what he could do through the presence of God with him. The disciples and all whom Jesus touched experienced the character of God in intimate ways. In the process, they learned who they were and what God could do through them.

I believe that at some point, perhaps more than once, in a lifetime we all encounter some form of a burning bush where God lets us know exactly who he is and calls us to claim who we are. God is with us, present and powerful, near and compassionate. Our question, perhaps, ought to be "Who am I?" The answer will lead each of us to our true vocation as a child of God, empowered to live as Christ in the world. So may it be for each of us. Amen.

August 31, 2014

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

How we would love to be thanking you for making your prophesy a reality, O God! How we long for creation to be at peace! Yet, we know that in places like Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Gaza, Liberia, our own country and even our own city, your creation is not resting in peace. We pray that day will come, O God, and quickly. We pray that war will cease, hatred will come to an end, and all people will finally live in harmony.

Even as that prayer rises from our hearts, we know that its answer lies not only with you, but especially with us. We know that peace is your desire, even your will for our world, but if we do not cooperate, peace will never come. So move our hearts and minds in the direction of peace, of wholeness of body, mind, and spirit, for all people, we pray.

Therefore we thank you, our Heavenly Parent, for the abundance of blessings you have given to us to make this world as you have desired. We thank you for creative minds and imaginative spirits, for generous hearts and helpful hands. We thank you for loyal friends and caring families, for invigorating play, meaningful work, and refreshing rest. We thank you for challenges which call on our particular talents and for opportunities to give of ourselves for the betterment of the world. We thank you for the gift of life and the ongoing privilege of exploring it daily.

We know that true peace, your ultimate shalom, is a wholeness of personhood, so we pray for all who are ill, for all who grieve, for those who worry, and for those who are distressed. We pray for everyone who needs courage, for those who require patience, for each one who desires guidance, for all who need correction, and for everyone seeking hope. We pray that you will not give up on us or your dream of peace, but that together we might enjoy the fullness of life which you offer to us one and all, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.