



Sunday's Sermon

I Am and I Will

Exodus 3:1-15 and Romans 12:9-21

Rev. Melody Young

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Skyline Presbyterian Church

When God calls us to do super-human tasks, God promises to be with us, even when we still have questions.

This scene has been in the movies umpty-ump times. Let's face it, burning bushes are impressive on the big screen. I think the movie sound technicians just like to play with God's voice, making it reverberate and resound in some very god-like fashion. And who (of a certain age group) does not picture Charlton Heston covering his face in fear. I know, some of you are saying who's Charlton Heston, but that just means you somehow got delayed in getting born. Do you realize that that *Ten Commandments* film was released more than sixty years ago (1956)? Anyway....I want us to look at the original story in the Book of Exodus, not the movie.

Let's see, who are the players? Well, God and Moses. And you know Moses' story, how he was raised in Pharaoh's palace then sees the plight of the Hebrew slaves and kills an Egyptian who was cruelly abusing one of them, and runs away into the desert to avoid the repercussions. He's found a home in Midian, married, has a family and responsibilities...but even so, a refugee who cannot escape his past.

So we've got God and Moses...oh and I guess the Israelite slaves back in Egypt, after all, they instigated the whole thing by crying out against the oppression they are suffering. And God is responsive to the pain of the people and has worked out a strategy to deliver them.

Now you know what it's like in the desert: dry, barren landscape, unremitting heat (maybe like we're going to have this week), the kind of place mirages are likely to appear. So when Moses sees what looks like a burning bush he moves closer to get a better look.

"Moses, Moses...!" You know that *reverrrrrberating, resounding* voice. And God proceeds to tell Moses to get himself back to Egypt and free God's people.

What!? You want me to do what? Are you insane? Well, actually he didn't say that, but here is God in effect passing the buck to Moses. It's not only intrusive, it's a dangerous call. *God* isn't going to Pharaoh—*Moses* is. *God* isn't going to save the Israelites—*Moses* is. It's *Moses'* life that's on the line here. No wonder he isn't jumping up and down with eagerness. Who can blame him? Here he is, a murderer on the lam, and God wants him to return to the scene of the crime. But more than that, Moses simply sees the task as way too daunting. *Who am I?* he asks. *I can't do this. I just can't!* Moreover, *"Who are you?" No one will ever believe me.*

Actually, through the entire story of his encounter with God, Moses comes up with five excuses for why he's not the right person for the job. *"Who am I? that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"* In this simple question we can relate to every fear and self-doubt we have ever had.

I remember my first call to formal ministry. In fact it was to the United Methodist Church in Anacortes and I was amazed to learn that North Puget Sound Presbytery would actually ordain me for a six-month long Methodist call. Go figure!

Well, I went to a Council meeting at the church to accept the position, accompanied by a Methodist pastor friend of mine. When he and I walked back out to the parking lot afterwards I exclaimed, “*Help!!! I don’t have a clue what I’m doing here.*” Who am I to come to this church and preach the word of God? Who am I to speak to their need? Who am I to discern the will of God for these people?

And just like God did with Moses, God was ready with the assurance, “*I will be with you.*”

It is interesting to note that while God gives this reassurance to Moses after each of his objections, never once does God tell Moses how wonderful he is. When Moses says, “*Who am I?*” God does not say, “*Why Moses! You are just the best thing I ever created! You have all the gifts and talents needed for this job!*” Later, when Moses says, “*I am slow of speech; I can’t talk very well.*” God does not say, “*Who are you kidding, Moses? You are the most articulate Hebrew in Midian!*” God doesn’t comment on Moses’ qualifications at all.

I have often wondered what criteria God uses when calling us into service. It would seem God has a habit of calling people with questionable character. Abraham tried to pass off his wife as his sister. Sarah laughed in God’s face. Rebekah helped her son Jacob cheat his brother out of his blessing. David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband killed in battle.

Lest we get smug because God has called us by name, we would do well to remember that we stand in a long line of deceivers, cheaters, and thieves. Yet somehow God is able to love us and work great things through us in spite of how far we fall short of God’s glory.

But that’s a concept Moses doesn’t understand, so he turns to his next tactic. “*They’re just not going to believe me unless I know Your name.... unless I can hand them Your personal business card!* Ancient people believed that knowing the name of a god filled them with that god’s power. (In a way I guess we still do!) We get kind of obsessed with names—all sorts of names for God, names for Jesus, names for the Holy Spirit—and not one of them is adequate, nor are all of them put together.

So the name God gives that day on the mountain presents Moses with a real conundrum. What kind of name is **I AM**? The Hebrew word used here (*YHWH*) can’t be specifically defined. It means something like ***I Am Who I Am, I Will be Who I will be, I Am Being***. In hearing this, Moses and all of us are put on notice that this God is elusive....giving a name that is not a name...a moving target, not a fixed onea God who is not here, not there, but everywhere. So much so, that in pondering God’s answer, Moses is forced to deal with a larger question. And he learns that only God can ask *this* question, and that the only answer for Moses or any of us is to give over the control our lives. It is as though God were saying, “*If you want to know my name, come with me and spend the rest of your life finding out.*”

You see this story isn’t really about Moses, or the enslaved Israelites. It’s about who our God is. Answers like the one Moses sought, trying to pin God down, can be dangerous to our faith. When it comes to our relationship with God, the answers we seek or think we already know have a limited shelf life. Better for us to live with the questions—provided they are the right questions—those grounded in the mystery of the name **I AM** and in the promise **I WILL** be with you.

Elie Wiesel tells of once getting this advice: “Every (ultimate) question possesses a power that does not lie in the answer.” There is always more to the answer than we are capable of comprehending at any one time. This is why we must learn how to live with the questions. And perhaps, someday far in the future, we will gradually, without noticing it, live our way into the answers.

In our faith we will always find both large and small questions. Some are cosmic in scope and some are everyday mundane. How then shall we conduct our lives? Ray read another scripture a few

moments ago—from Romans in the New Testament—in which Paul literally pummels the reader with mandate after mandate about how to live. Do this; don't do that. On and on....about 30 in all. It's a truly daunting list of demands on our lives.

As Christians....as Presbyterians....a lot is expected of us. Listen to this section from our Book of Order:

God sends the Church to work for justice in the world: exercising its power for the common good; dealing honestly in personal and public spheres; seeking dignity and freedom for all people; welcoming strangers in the land; promoting justice and fairness in the law; overcoming disparities between rich and poor; bearing witness against systems of violence and oppression; and redressing wrongs against individuals, groups, and peoples. God also sends the Church to seek peace: in the Church universal, within denominations, and at the congregational level; in the world, where nations and religious or ethnic groups make war against one another; and in local communities, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and homes.

OK, now, that's what I want you all to do. Go out there and get busy doing every one of these things to perfection. Go on now! And don't come back until you've got it right!!

How discouraging it would be to even *think* about trying to do all this by our own power, our own steam. Discouraging and exhausting. And impossible. But it certainly means we have to work diligently and courageously.

We can come up with all kinds of excuses like Moses did; we can try to remain in our complacency, in our comfort. When crises happen in our communities, our country, our world, we can sit back and let someone else take care of it.

We can stay in our own territory, herding our sheep day in and day out. Except for the fact that WE ARE CALLED...to lives that are different...to lives that make a difference.

Yet who are we to even attempt such monumental challenges?

Who is God to be asking such a thing?

Sound familiar?

Thanks be to God who said to Moses, "***I Am and I will.***"

Who says to us I Am God of all time....and I Will be with you always and especially when the tasks required of you are overwhelming.

Pray with me....

*O God, you made us in your own image
and redeemed us through Jesus your Son.*

*Look with compassion on the whole human family,
take away the arrogance and hatred
that infect our hearts,
break down the walls that separate us,
unite us in bonds of love.*

*Give us courage to stand up to falsehoods,
to welcome the lost,*

*to aid victims of hurricanes and of bigotry.
And, through our struggle and confusion,
work to accomplish your purposes on earth;
that, in your good time,
all nations and peoples may live in harmony;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen*