

September 13, 2020

Exodus 3: 1-15

Matthew 16: 13-17, 21-25

Who Am I?
The Reverend Dr. Richard E. Spalding

I've never been to the North Pole – but I've heard that if you stand precisely at magnetic north and take out your compass, the needle will spin helplessly around the whole dial – because from there, all directions are south. The force of nature drew you unfailingly to the pole – but now it's restless for you to move – and every direction is onward.

I have a little bit the sense that something like that happens to Moses in the wilderness of Midian when he suddenly finds himself at a pole so charged with holiness that all directions from there are toward the will of God. What do you do in such a place? I guess you begin by taking off your shoes.

It does seem to me that whenever this story from Exodus is read, it moves us to different ground. Maybe as we think about it we should start by taking off our own shoes. Has any biblical image ever captivated us quite so effectively? Who among us has ever seen such a bush, or heard such a voice? – and yet there it is in our imaginations, blazing away. It's almost as though – well, *how else* would God speak in the middle of the wilderness to a herdsman minding his own business? What else would you do, in the face of the dueling wonder and terror of it, but take off your shoes so as to let the soul and the soles absorb the moment?

Moses, you may remember, first enters the biblical story as an Israelite baby born into slavery with his people in Egypt (Exodus 2:1ff.) – a child who narrowly escaped state-mandated extermination thanks to the ingenuity of some midwives (the business with the basket floating in the bulrushes) who contrived to get him secretly adopted into the royal household of Pharaoh. But by the time Moses was a young adult he wasn't finding it easy to keep his Hebrew identity under wraps: one day when he came upon an Egyptian taskmaster brutally beating a Hebrew slave, he killed the Egyptian and ended up having to flee into the wilderness of Midian for cover – which is where our story this morning picks him up, tending a borrowed flock that was, we can assume, much easier to manage than the one he was about to take on.

Whatever else you may have forgotten from Sunday School, odds are you remember the burning bush and what happens when Moses asks God for a name he can use when he tries to explain all this when he's back among his people trying to build a movement for freedom. What God says, we think, is something like "I AM WHO I AM" – three almost-untranslatable Hebrew words that might also mean "I WILL BE WHAT I CHOOSE" or (I like this one) "I AM WHO I WILL BE." The name is so holy that many of Moses' descendants don't say it out loud to this day. Here at the bush that burns but is not burned, the God who has a name but cannot be named speaks to a hero who is chosen but is not willing, commissioning him to take on a tyrant who says he will relent

but does not relent, in order to free a people who, once they finally escape, are farther from home than they've ever been. The compass needle is spinning helplessly; we're on holy ground for sure.

The voice within the flames first gives tender testimony to God's attention to the suffering of the Hebrews in bondage. "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 ... and to bring them up out of that land into a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey... So come (God says to Moses), I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt." Already I'm remembering that The Name is coming, and I wait for it, hanging on the question that Moses will ask to elicit those holy, inscrutable, unpronounceable syllables from the midst of the fire – "and whom shall I say is sending me?" But this time through the story, I've noticed something I've never paid attention to before. Moses has a question that comes first: "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" *Who am I?* Before Moses gets that glimpse into the mystery of who God is, there's a moment when he has to stand there with his needle spinning, suddenly magnetized by the foundational mystery of himself.

Yes, wherever the journey is going that begins from that mystical pole in the wilderness where all directions lead down deep into the future, it will unfold in the company of a God who has a name that's full of being and doing and causing and willing.

But before that journey can begin – Moses has to ask, "who am I?" He has to leave the place paying attention to what he hasn't understood about himself. And I think the moment that that question finds its way to his lips is the moment that everything begins in this story.

The question "who am I?" comes out of Moses' deepening sense of alarm that God has chosen too small a person for too big a task. You may remember that we only heard the beginning of that exchange between God and Moses as the bush flames on; it burns through several more layers of protestation from Moses before he finally says, "O, my Lord, please send someone else" (4:13). The bush may not have been consumed by the fire of God – but Moses' defenses get demolished layer by layer by the relentless re-assertion of the meaning of the divine name: *I will be, I will do, I will cause, I am, I will.*

There is a place in the Confessions of St. Augustine where Augustine, perhaps having stumbled near a pole of his own, writes an earthquake of a sentence: "I have become a question to myself."¹ At the bush, suddenly, Moses is a question to himself – and all the directions that lead from there begin with that "I" – and the "we" that it will very soon become. Who am I? The bush that flamed impossibly got his attention and pulled him aside; and now, standing there in his bare feet, comes the first step: to get grounded in the truth and the possibility of himself.

As part of getting grounded he can notice, for instance, the truth that the suffering and danger that he has run into the wilderness to escape are nonetheless part of the meaning of his "I": he is himself a resident alien, an immigrant, a victim of the same system that he had watched murder his kinsman. And he can notice the possibilities that are part of his stature: for instance, that as a member of Pharaoh's household (thanks to that ruse in the bulrushes), he stands taller than others, his height augmented by the accident of privileges he didn't earn, safety that others don't have. And he can notice that he has power to say things, power to do things that he hasn't discovered yet, or hasn't admitted to himself. God said, "Moses, take off your shoes and make yourself at home in my project – for we have work to do" – and Moses, drenched with holiness, took off his shoes, maybe hoping it would keep him from bursting into flames himself, at least for a while. But now, he has caught the fire

¹ St. Augustine, Confessions - X.XXXIII

of the question he must become to himself. His incendiary moments are coming soon enough - and they'll burn bright enough to light his people's way into all the time to come, down to this day. Soon enough they'll all have to become questions to themselves, too – all of them, as they pick their long way through the wilderness.

But for now, Moses, put your shoes back on – for the ground is sharp and the years are long and all directions from here lead into God's future, and the work before you is holy work, and the first piece of it is to live your way into figuring out who you are.

And maybe now it's time for us to put our shoes back on, too. Maybe now, if we're going to get to the place of promise we've been yearning for, we need to become a question to ourselves. As a church.

Now we'll have to be a little careful, as we walk along with Exodus this fall, not to slip into any simple equation of ourselves with the enslaved. Not that there aren't struggles and anguish among us; not that the Holy One *who-will-be-what-will-be* and *who-will-do-what-will-be-done* has not known our suffering and heard our cries. But few of us in this church have been victims of systems designed to crush us the way being enslaved and impoverished does. We can read about being refugees, as the news from the eastern Mediterranean this weekend insists we must – but few of us know much about their first-hand agony. Flames are particularly vivid around us these days – the ones fanned by the winds of our inattention to the planet's climate, and the flames of outrage fanned by vivid glimpses of what the systems that crush people look like. We've been called aside, and are having to pay attention to things that we really need to know. Which, come to think of it, makes Moses' query more than a little germane to the furtherance of our journey. Who am I? in the midst of everything that's going on? Who are we – what don't we understand that we need to understand about the human race in which we hold citizenship? It's a question that we're going to need an answer to by the time we get where we hope we're going.

And before we dismiss the language of slavery as over the top, for us, we might also ask: what holds us prisoner? What are we in bondage to? How, for instance, are we at the mercy of an obsession with accumulating personal wealth – instead of accumulating social justice, amassing equitable access to education and opportunity and health care and food? How do the shackles of rugged individualism keep us from being able to reach each other? How does our habit of possession shrivel our freedom – how do the things we own retaliate by owning us? Who am I to insist on my personal liberty if I don't understand the tyranny being experienced by others around me? Who are we to think we're free if we haven't taken our shoes off to feel how sharp is the ground on which others stand? "Who am I? Who are we?" is the question that launches the journey to the place of promise, and sooner or later it will insist that we stop and become a question to ourselves – whether we are weary and heavy-laden or whether we stand tall in our ostentatious freedom.

The name by which God was introduced in the flame of the bush came to have such resonance that, when you come across it in the New Testament, it raises eyebrows. When Jesus says "I *am* the good shepherd" (John 10:11) and "I *am* the bread of life" (John 6:35), the compass needle starts spinning. And even in the conversation between Jesus and his closest friends on the road to Caesarea Philippi, maybe we're meant to feel

the rumble when Jesus asks, “Who do *you* say that *I am*?” It was ostensibly Simon Peter who got closest to the right answer when he says (more or less), *you are who you are, you will be what you will be*. But, of course, the question Jesus asks is only incidentally about himself; as much or more, it’s about the rest of them – the rest of us. Who do you say that I am? *Who are you*, in relation to this project? And, make no mistake: all directions from there lead deeper into the project of God. Take up the cross, he says; gather the flock and make your way into the future, toward the place of promise. Along the way, if you try to save your life for your own sake, you’ll probably lose it; but if you’re willing to lose your life for what matters, you’ll find it.

So, as we make our way through the story of the Exodus this fall – the story of *getting there*, getting to the place of promise, and along the way learning how to live with ourselves, with each other, and with great I AM – I want to make a perhaps odd but earnest visual suggestion. We don’t have a compass in this sanctuary, exactly, to tell us where we are and point us onward. But we do have this processional cross. This is, after all, a cross designed to be *taken up*. In the days before COVID we followed it every week into this room, our magnetic north, to pool our prayers and praises – and then we followed it out again at the end into all the directions that are deeper down into our future. And then, right there on the cross ... there is this little branch. I notice that it is not consumed; it looks fresh and alive. But now, if I look a little closer, I notice that – it’s glowing. Blazing, in fact – full of the energy of the presence of the ineffable, timeless I AM that this church conducts. The cross and the bush together light the way to wherever it is we’re going, together. And, before anything else, together they put before us the question that stopped Moses in his tracks in the wilderness, the questions that mark every direction we choose to go, together, from here: who am I? who are we? who do we say that he is? We should turn aside over and over again and see this marvelous thing, this sign of presence which is not ever consumed; it glows with the name of the One who goes with us with every step of the way: I AM WHO I WILL BE – the only name to whom be all the honor and the glory and the praise, forever and ever. Amen.

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