

WHO IS GOD?

TEXT: Exodus 3:1-15

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on March 20, 2022

In the first chapter of Exodus, we learned how Pharaoh's lies to the Egyptian people allowed him to enslave the Hebrews who had been living in Egypt for generations. The resistance to Pharaoh's brutality resulted in the survival of Moses, whose mother, in chapter two, carefully packed him into a waterproof basket and set him afloat in the Nile River. He was found by Pharaoh's own daughter, who pitied the crying baby and took him to raise as her own, bringing in Moses' real mother to be his wet nurse.

We know nothing of Moses' childhood. The next thing we learn about him is when a fully-grown Moses sees one of the enslaved Hebrews being beaten by an Egyptian overseer. Moses kills the Egyptian and tries to hide the body. Pharaoh finds out and Moses flees to Midian, a desert area outside of Egypt, to the east of the Sinai Peninsula. There Moses finds a wife, has a son, and goes to work for his father-in-law, herding sheep. That's where we find him at the opening of chapter three, leading sheep around Mt. Horeb, when a bush on fire catches his eye.

The first thing I think is important in understanding this next part of the story is how this encounter comes about. God doesn't shout at Moses..."Hey, Moses...over here...in the bush. It's me, God." No, a bush is simply on fire and Moses notices.

But it's not the fire per se that draws him closer. Under normal circumstances, the first instinct of a shepherd would be to notice the fire and quickly get the sheep moving in another direction before THEY notice the fire and scatter. But being a shepherd in difficult terrain requires some next-level mindfulness; and Moses has clearly mastered it. Moses sees more than a fire. He notices that the fire is not doing what fires are supposed to do—it's not actually harming the bush. No ashes, no branches dropping off and leaves withering. Nothing. And so, he goes to check it out. Here's why I think that's relevant.

Moses would have completely missed God if he had not been paying careful attention. The bush did not come to Moses; Moses went to check out the bush. I think it's possible that God had already appeared many times to Moses before this, and he never noticed. But over a couple of decades of tending sheep in the wilderness, the Moses who once rushed to violence and killed an Egyptian before thinking it through, had become more careful and curious. I think God may have been appearing to Moses in a variety of ways for years, knowing that the day he was attentive enough to notice was the day that his training with the sheep was complete and he was ready for larger things.

This is a key part of spiritual formation. Jesus says in Luke 16:10, "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much." The wilderness training of God's people, which happens again and again in the Bible, is that principle in action. And a lot of it is accomplished by tending sheep. Spending time as a shepherd is the training for Moses, for King David, for the prophet Amos, and so many more; and if you want to learn to be "faithful in very little," being a shepherd is a great proving ground. It's a difficult and tedious job with tremendous negative consequences if you get it wrong and not a bit of fame or glory if you do it well.

Sheep are not the brightest bulbs. Their reputation for getting into trouble is such that a Scottish veterinarian once told me that a sheep's job is to try to kill itself and the job of the shepherd is to stop him. There are long stretches of boredom as the sheep graze. It's easy to let your mind wander, and then the next thing you know a sheep is wandering off a cliff or there's a predator in the flock taking them out. And those flocks are your livelihood. In ancient times they were both food and capital. A good shepherd

had to learn to pay attention at all times and learn to spot every sign of danger, from the weather, to predators, to the dangers of the terrain, all while making sure none of the sheep strayed from the flock.

I used to care for just three sheep. In just a few years, Bananabell was severely injured and almost killed by a single, fierce dachshund. Another time I left them safely in the fenced pasture in my yard, only to have my neighbor call to complain that Chester was in his garage knocking over paint cans. When I got divorced and could no longer keep the sheep, they moved to a new pasture. Chester was killed by a rattlesnake within two weeks. Now multiply that by a hundred or more sheep in unfenced, mountainous terrain and financial ruin if you lose them.

We can learn from this. We tend to want our spirituality like we want everything else; fast and easy. We'd be happy just to buy it. Show up at a church service every now and again. Maybe read a book or go on a retreat. Then God will fill my soul with joy; I'll know my purpose in life; and God and I will be BFFs. There's not a story in the entire Bible that makes such promises. In fact, it's the opposite.

From Genesis to Revelation, those who are closest to God have the hardest road. They are continuously tested and tried. Why? I think it's at least partly because the hard road requires us to pay attention, to be mindful of everyone and everything around us at every moment, so that we become able to hear God's voice no matter what form it takes and no matter what other chaos is going on at the time. Even in a bush that's on fire while I'm tending a hundred sheep.

Being attentive is necessary, but not sufficient to our spiritual lives; because there are other messages coming at us that are not from God. Like Pharaoh, there are those who try to manipulate and deceive us for their own ends. We have to learn to distinguish God's voice from the voices of others; and to do that, just believing that God exists is not enough. We have to know who God is—to understand God's nature on a deep enough level that we have a sense of the kinds of things God would and would not say or command.

When Moses turns aside to check out the burning bush, it seems he does know some things about God. But this is his first actual meeting with God, and God realizes the setting doesn't make that terribly clear. So, God helps Moses out. "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Remember that Moses' real mother cared for him in the court of Pharaoh, so he knew his heritage. Moses knows those names. But now he's afraid. Did God find out he had killed an Egyptian? Will he be engulfed in flame like the bush? Why. Is. This. Happening?

God does indeed want to talk about Egypt, but not in the way Moses might have expected. God tells Moses about being moved by the cry of the enslaved Hebrews, giving both Moses and us clues about God's nature. This is a God who hates slavery. But there's more. This is also a God who doesn't just swoop down and take care of injustice single-handedly, which, presumably, the God of the universe could handle. But no. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob works in human history through human leaders.

God goes with those leaders—it's not God sitting back doing nothing and just letting people work it out on their own. But where human beings have created injustice; it's other human beings who are called to be the channels for God's loving justice to set things right. In this case, the person God wants to use to free the Israelites is Moses.

Lord only knows what the sheep are doing at that moment because God now has Moses' full attention. And Moses knows that he still really doesn't have a clue who God is. This is the God of his ancestors, okay, fine. And God wants to free his people from slavery; also fine. But Moses has been in exile for decades, and to the degree he was still known among his own people, it would be as the guy who avoided becoming enslaved by managing to grow up in Pharaoh's palace. Moses needs more information. What if the people want a name? All the Egyptian gods have names. What's your name, God? What shall I tell them?

In the answer to that question, God reveals a bundle. The name that God gives is a form of the Hebrew verb meaning "to be." Hebrew is delightfully imprecise as a language, and so the translation of the name varies. The construction of the verb can't be past tense; it can't mean "I was." But it can be either present or future. It can be translated, "I am who I am" or "I am the one who causes to be" or "I will be who I will be" or, my personal favorite, "I am the one who is." Of course, it could also be God's way of saying, "I just am, Moses. You have no business knowing my name. Just head back to Egypt and do what I tell you!"

But I'm sticking with "I am the one who is." God is, simply, the one who exists, the one who is real. When somebody wants to know which God sent you, say, "Duh—the real one—the only one. The one who is, as opposed to those that are not." This is a theme echoed again and again in the prophets as they rail against the senselessness of people worshipping pieces of wood and stone that are nothing but hand-carved objects. They don't exist. The true God is defined and named by existence. God is real. God exists. And thus God's name: "I am."

That is not only echoed in the prophets; it is echoed by Jesus in the eighth chapter of John's gospel. Jesus is teaching in the temple in that chapter, and in describing God, Jesus says in verse 26, "the one who sent me is true." That's another way of saying "the one who is." Existence is reality; what is real is what is true. What is false has no substance; by definition it does not exist. Believing lies put us in danger; they walk us off a cliff because they remove us from what is real. There is no substance supporting us anymore. God, by contrast, is defined by truth; by what actually is.

Jesus then continues on that theme in verse 32 by saying to those who believed him, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Then he talks about how easily people become slaves to sin and how he can set them free. Is Jesus invoking the burning bush and a true God who frees people from bondage here? I think so, because of what follows.

Jesus next addresses his detractors who think he's possessed by a demon. He continues identifying with truth and adds that the devil's nature is lies. Jesus says about the devil in verse 44, "When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies." So now we have, again, God's nature is truth; the devil's nature is lies.

And then in the next to the last verse of John 8, Jesus says the thing that I believe firmly connects this story to Moses at the burning bush. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am." That "I am" at the end is the same construction as the name of God in Exodus 3:14. Here it's in Greek; but in the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the same Greek words Jesus uses here are used for the name of God in Exodus 3:14. "I am." God is the one that exists; the one whose nature is truth; the truth that can set us free if we will do our part.

In John 8, Jesus isn't teaching out in the fields, where he usually made his points with parables and stories. Jesus is teaching in the temple to people who would know the stories of Moses up one side and down the other in both Greek and Hebrew. They knew what he was saying; they knew what he was referencing. They thought it was blasphemy, and in the last verse of the chapter tried to stone him.

So, what happens when we put all those things together? Well, first, don't give me any of that nonsense about the God of the Old Testament being fundamentally different than the God of the New Testament. The God that meets Moses in the burning bush and says "Go free my people in physical bondage in Egypt" is the same God that shows up in Jesus to free us from bondage to sin and death. The God who identifies as the God of Abraham is still doing so in the Gospel of John.

It's all the God who is. One God who takes many forms and answers to many names, but who is only defined by one: reality; existence; truth. The One who is. We can identify God's work because it inevitably leads to freedom for the oppressed. But the truth is not easy to discern. I mean, it doesn't even

take Pharaoh. We keep getting tricked by phishing emails and trolls on social media! How can we protect ourselves from being led down the primrose path?

This story tells us it's by learning to pay attention. By being faithful in the small, thankless things that require mindfulness and care. By checking to see if what we say and write can be verified. By checking the fruit of those trying to earn our trust. And if you're having trouble doing that, get some sheep, because only the truth will set us free. Amen.

None of that makes it easy or risk-free. None of that promises that suffering will end tomorrow or that every individual act of resistance will be successful. Evil is called evil for a reason. The horrors and scale of the suffering can be difficult to wrap our heads around. But it is not true, even for a minute, that we can do nothing or that all our efforts are hopeless. Shiphrah and Puah teach us that. We can refuse the us-and-them division. We can refuse orders to commit atrocity. We can't do everything, but we can all do something. Both stories are there for us. Choose wisely. Amen.