

I Am With You

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Exodus 3:1-15

Moses at the Burning Bush

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb,^[a] the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³ Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up.” ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” ⁵ Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶ He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷ Then the LORD said, “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, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰ Now go, I am sending you

to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”¹¹ But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”¹² He said, “I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

The Divine Name Revealed

¹³ But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.”^[b] He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ”¹⁵ God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD,^[c] the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’:

This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.

Last week, Pastor Rachel preached about the five daring women who made the story of the great prophet Moses possible. Without the rule-breaking civil disobedience of these women, and Pharaoh's daughter, there would be no Moses story to tell. As you may remember Pharaoh, fearful of the growing strength of the Jews, ordered that every Hebrew male baby should be killed. Into a world that normalized violence against certain types of children, Moses was born.

Four powerless Jewish women, Shiprah, Puah, Miriyam, Jochebed, each did the small, courageous thing they could, to keep Moses alive. The fifth woman, a privileged Egyptian princess, is curiously the only one of the five who goes completely unnamed in the story. She somehow convinces her father Pharaoh to allow for breaking of his own law and saves baby Moses. Moses, whose name means to draw out, as the princess drew Moses out of the water.

In today's story, it is God who "draws out" Moses. When we pick up the story, much has happened in the decades since the story of those five women.

As the adoptive son of Pharaoh's daughter, Moses grows up as a child of privilege. As an adult member of the royal family, one day he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew enslaved person. And one born a Hebrew, Moses is consumed with anger over what he sees.

Looking around to make sure no one can see what he is about to do, Moses kills the Egyptian, hiding his body in the sand. The next day, Moses sees two Hebrew men fighting. When he asks them why they're fighting, one of the Hebrews responds, saying, "Who made you the judge of us? Are you going to kill me like you killed the Egyptian?"

Realizing that the secret of his murder of an Egyptian is out, Moses is terrified, knowing that Pharaoh will be merciless if he learns of what Moses has done. And so, Moses runs away and settles in Midian, about 300 miles away from Pharaoh.

While in Midian, he saves a family of women and their flock of sheep from some abusive shepherds while at a well. When the father of the women hears of this, he invites Moses to his lands. Moses soon marries one of their daughters, Zipporah. And they have a son named Gershom, a play on the Hebrew word for immigrant, for Moses said, "I've been an immigrant living in a foreign land."

After forty years, God calls out to Moses in the familiar story of the burning bush.

Meanwhile back in Egypt, the genocidal king has died. But the Israelites are still enslaved, calling out to God to be saved. The text reads, "God heard their cry of grief, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." The Common English Bible translates it as "God looked at the Israelites, and God understood."

God understood.

In seminary, a professor asked us what our greatest theological rocks were – the very foundations of our faith, what we believed about God and humanity and ourselves. And my most enormous rock, I realized, was that God says, "I am with you," even to the end of the age, as Christ later says.

...and God understood.

When I was growing up, I found myself fighting with my dad on a pretty regular basis. He always seemed to have something to tell me about something that I should be doing to make my life better. Or at least, that's how I remember it. What I longed for most, what many young people long for, was simply to be understood, to not be judged. I wanted my dad to "get me." He tried. He really did. As they say in Nashville, where I grew up, "Bless his heart."

Thankfully, he no longer jumps in with advice and "wisdom" when I share about something I'm going through. He knows that what I need more than anything else when I want my dad is simply that, just my dad. There. Present. With me through whatever comes, like he is now.

...and God understood.

"God looked at the Israelites, and God understood." God understood what the Israelites were going through, knew what they had experienced. Because God is God, God truly and completely understood the suffering of the enslaved Hebrew people.

Then we come to the beginning of our text today. Moses is out tending his father-in-law's flock of sheep near the edge of the desert. He has become a shepherd for the past 40 years. He comes to God's mountain called Horeb, and later Sinai, the mountain of God. And the Lord's messenger appears to him in a flame of fire in the middle of a bush. Moses sees that the bush is in flames but not burning up. So, Moses goes to investigate.

When the Lord saw that Moses was coming to the bush, God called out to Moses. "Moses, Moses," remember the name sounding like the Hebrew word for "draw out." "Moses, Moses." "Draw- out, draw-out." God draws Moses out of his comfort as a shepherd and into the holy mystery of this burning bush encounter, just as God will draw out the enslaved Hebrews from the land of Egypt.

And Moses responds, "Here I am, I'm here."

Then the Lord says, "don't come any closer. Remove your sandals for the place where you are standing is holy ground."

I used to think of this particular demand from God as an annoyed admonishment, "Take off your shoes, for goodness' sake, this ground is holy!"

What if, I wonder, God wanted Moses to be able to come to him without anything between them, that Moses might be able to be his full self, smelly feet and all? God wanted Moses to feel the ground beneath his feet, the ground that God created and from which God created the first humans. To feel connected to that ground, recognizing that dirt, sand, and loam are holy.

From the bush, the Lord says, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, of Isaac and Jacob." Moses then tries to hide his face, so afraid to look at God. And God keeps talking, saying that God has heard the cry of the Israelites. God says, "I know their pain, and I've come down to rescue them... so get going. I'm sending you."

And God understood...

Moses hears the words and feels what—shock? Wonder? Fear? He responds to God, saying, "Who am I to do this?" Who am I to save the Israelites from slavery?

Have you ever felt that same way? Who am I to do this? Perhaps when you first held your baby in your arms, knowing they were *your kid*, you were in charge. Maybe when you heard the diagnosis of the one you loved the most, knowing it was you who would walk alongside them on that painful road? That moment when you know you are inadequate to the task ahead of you and yet there is nothing to do – when given the choice, you choose this difficulty and this love.

We've all heard the sayings like, "God only gives you so much that you can handle," or "God gives his toughest battles to his strongest warriors."

I wonder how Moses would've responded to those sayings. Or, well, we know—he would say, "Who am I?" Who am I that I should be given this task?

And rather than God reminding Moses of all that he has survived, of the women who made his life possible, of the suffering he's already through, rather than saying, "You got this," God says, something else: "I will be with you."

"I will be with you."

...and God understood.

Sayings like "God only gives you so much that you can handle" can feel dismissive in times of suffering, but "I will be with you" sounds like a hand of support on the most challenging days.

As we read in Isaiah, "Though you pass through the waters I will be with you. And the flames they shall not overcome you. For I am with you. I am the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel, your savior. And I am with you."

All I wanted from my dad was for him to be with me. To listen rather than to try and fix. To simply be *with* me.

Call and response. Our great longing to be understood. "...and God understood."

And for that person who just heard about the diagnosis, who's overwhelmed by what the future holds for their partner, maybe the best thing they can do is just be *with* their partner. Perhaps the best parenting, partnering, friendship, and supportive advice we've ever given is in this story – this idea of being *with*. Of witnessing. Of walking alongside.

In verse 12:15 of our first reading in Romans, we read, "laugh with those who laugh and mourn with those who mourn." Our calling as Christians is to be like God in this small way, to be with those who suffer.

God says from the bush, "I've *seen* my people oppressed. I've *heard* their cry... I *know* their pain." God gives us a model in this story of how to interact with suffering – first, before acting in any way, to *see*, *hear*, and *know*, to learn. So often, particularly as Western people, we go into situations assuming we know best, that our advice or wisdom is all someone needs to get through difficulty. What God models here, what Paul calls us to, is a ministry of with-ness that, before all else, seeks to *see*, *hear*, *listen*, and do everything one can to truly know what it is that the suffering person is experiencing. And then, before any action or advice or solutions, to simply "be with."

When I was a freshman in college, I recall one morning my friend Sarah pounding on my door. I opened it to her tear-streaked face, and she told me that one of our friends had died, who we'll call Anna. Anna had experienced a rough first semester and decided to take a semester off, but now she was gone. I threw on my clothes and went up to my friend Maggie's room, who had been close to Anna. Seven of us all wound up on the floor of her dorm, crying and laughing and singing and talking about Anna. There wasn't anything profound said, but the very act of us being together, holding each other, and being with each other in those moments was profound.

"I've *seen* my people oppressed. I've *heard* their cry... I *know* their pain."

Laugh with those who laugh and mourn with those who mourn.

These profound words from scripture call us to be with those who suffer. We do not turn our eyes away from pain or heartache but move toward it in the confidence that God is with us.

I believe that through the Spirit, God experiences each human life. God knows what it is to struggle with depression, have suffered abuse, and be hurt so deeply that you question life's worth. And not only that, but God knows what it's like to be *you*, live, breathe, and struggle in your skin. If our bodies are temples for the divine, then God is genuinely never farther than our breath.

At last, we come to the climax of this well-known story. Moses asks in his anxiety, "Who will I say sent me?" and God gives God's name; God self-discloses what God wants to be called, the holiest of names for God. YHWH. "I AM WHO I AM." I will be what I will be. Say I AM has sent you.

Professor of the Hebrew Bible Roger Nam writes about it, saying, "Whatever the precise understanding [of the name YHWH] the answer "I am who I am" is not just a declaration of a name, but assurance of God's presence in the call" (*Working Preacher*). Emmanuel, God with us. God, present with us.

Rob Bell talks about the name of God, how the letters in Yahweh are the closest letters the Hebrew alphabet has to vowels, and the breathiest of all the Hebrew letters. Yeh, heh, vav, heh. Yeh, heh, vav, heh (with breathing intonation). Bell wonders, what if when we're born, the first breath we take is actually our first time saying the name of God? And when we die and can no longer say God's name, we take our last breath? What if every breath we take is simply saying the name of the God who is with us always? So close to us as a very breath.

What if all those times we're overwhelmed by anxiety and fear, feeling completely inadequate to the task before us, we're constantly speaking the name of God? A prayer, a mantra, a calling for God to be with us. And then, that God, that holiest of holies is with us. Laughing with us when we laugh, mourning with us when we mourn. Ever present, ever with us in every moment.

The God who is with us, who understands us, who sees, hears, and knows us, closer to us than our very breath, loves us more than we can imagine.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

Amen.