

EXODUS 3:1-15

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 Horeb, the mountain of God. 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. Then Moses said, "I will just turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up."

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." Then the Lord said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 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.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry on account of the taskmasters. Indeed, I know their suffering, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey....

So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? 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 worship God on this mountain."

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?" God said to Moses, I AM has sent me to you. God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, 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.'"

MATTHEW 25:34a-40

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

I AM: Part I

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

EXODUS 3:1-15

I keep thinking there is something more that I want to know. And it is not knowledge—not that I have enough or could ever have enough. Neither is it more information or more technological skill to navigate through the complexities of the cyber world, although that would be nice. Rather, it is the *knowing* itself that is important. It has to do with a depth of awareness and understanding, a higher level of consciousness of the spiritual connections between our human selves and the Great, Universal and Unseen Presence that permeates every single atom everywhere from which everything that exists gains its energy and its physical form.

Am I alone in this desire? I think not. I suspect most people who practice a religion

share this yearning. When we engage in worship, isn't there something that we are looking for, whether or not we can actually put a finger upon it? But when we are touched by it, we know it. We feel it. We experience it. It inspires us. And we want more of it. This is what I am seeking. It is not knowledge. It is not skill. It is not information. It is an awareness of God's presence.

While I believe there are multiple paths that can lead us there, I have chosen to focus upon a specific theme that is presented in the Scriptures that nearly leaps out at you when you investigate it. It is the concept of *I AM-ness* to coin a term. It may be the closest we can come to deepening our understanding of who God is and what sort of response to God will bring us into closer communion with the mind of Spirit that has created and sustains us all. So in my next three sermons, I would like to take you with me on a journey through selected *I AM* passages that give us insight into who God is and how we can more fully respond to God's presence.

Remember the old song from "The King and I", *Getting to know you, getting to know all about you?* I believe Moses may have authored the lyrics to that ballad. His encounter with God in the Burning Bush episode was his introduction to this deity with whom he had never consciously interacted. You have to remember that he was not brought up in a religion with ready made creeds and statements of faith that had long been in formulation—generally accepted truths. He was starting from scratch and did not have a faith structure from to operate. It also left God with the task of Self-introduction.

It was an interesting choice of revelation to be sure and a startling experience for Moses. It certainly did the job of getting his attention without frightening him away. Wouldn't your curiosity be aroused if you discovered a bush burning without being consumed? What the heck is that? Trying to figure it out, *Moses said, "I will just turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up."*

His attention now focused on the phenomenon before him, the next verse begins, *When*

the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to see... I must confess to you that when I proofread my initial copy of the scripture, I noticed an error in my transcript. I had typed it to say, *When the Lord saw that Moses had turned aside to wee...* Like you, I laughed out loud, but consider this factoid: in those days, “To turn aside” was a euphemism meaning to go off the trail to relieve oneself. Let us remember that people largely traveled on foot and there were no rest stops or porta-potties along the way. And the original meaning of the scriptural account may well have been understood to mean that Moses attempted to extinguish the burning bush by...well, weeing on it. Why not? He was a shepherd for heaven’s sake, a man of the earth. That was about as scientific of an investigation that he could make.

In any event, the ensuing dialogue between the Lord and Moses offers us rich insight into the nature of who or what God is. It also gives us a starting point for understanding what an enlightened response to God might look like. For when God calls to him out of the burning bush, Moses replies, “*Here I am.*” Translate: “I am not going to run away. I am present.” And as we shall see as we proceed through this series, the power of that statement is crucial to understanding the most significant characteristic of not only healthy human relationships, but most certainly our relationship to God.

For today, however, we are focusing on the nature of the Divine. Initially, God only identifies Itself as *I Am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.* At this point, the purpose of God’s visit with Moses becomes clear—namely that God has selected Moses to represent the Hebrew people before Pharaoh. This leads Moses to return to another *I AM* question when he asks, *Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*

After God assures him that he need not worry because Spirit will be with him, Moses then asks the critical question of the ages regarding the Divine. *Who shall I say sent me...what is your name?* Recall from a prior sermon during Lent concerning Jacob’s wrestling match with the angel the significance of knowing the name of another...it gave you a sort of handle on

them. Being now put squarely on the spot, God responds to that pregnant-with-meaning inquiry with the answer that really does say all that we can say: *Tell them I AM sent me to you...This is my name forever.*

Perhaps we find this answer confounding. Indeed, sometimes the answers to difficult questions do leave us scratching our heads. I don't know how many of you remember Douglas Adams' trilogy, *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, which features a super computer by the name of Deep Thought which worked continuously for a hundred years to determine "the ultimate answer to life, the universe and everything." For decades, everyone breathlessly awaited the result and when it was finally announced that Deep Thought had completed its task, the entire universe excitedly tuned in to hear the answer. It was "42"...exactly!

In contrast, when we dissect the answer that Moses received in Exodus, we find it to be slightly more profound. And it is not just those who authored the Pentateuch who arrived at this conclusion. In the Upanishads, which is the book of mystical writings of Hinduism, it says, *In the beginning was (God) alone...his first words were "I AM."*

When we attempt to define the nature of the Deity, we cannot go beyond this because as soon as you add a noun or an adjective to the *I AM*, you have automatically placed a limitation on what you are describing. The more specific you become, the further you get from the truth because you have now introduced a concept for which you can think of exceptions.

Why would we need to add to this? Does not *I AM* say it all? In its context, it is a verb and its translation is simple. It means no more and no less than Presence. And what it allows us to do is not constrict, but to expand our notions of God. If we are stuck on envisioning God as a vengeful judge or a rich uncle who, if we just ask in the right way, will sometimes grant us favors and sometimes not—or some other personification we have carried with us since our Sunday school days, then maybe we could benefit from updating our theology.

If God is Presence, then we really do not have to search for God. God is here. It is impossible for anything to exist without God. When we look at a mountain, we see God.

When we look into the heavens, we see God. When we peer into a microscope, we see God. When we look into the face of anyone, we see God. How else can you interpret Jesus' words in Matthew? Whatever you have done for my family—which is the entire human family, of course—you have done it for me.

The bottom line is knowing God is a matter of opening our eyes. And when we can allow it to get inside of us, life will change dramatically. It will no longer be me against the world or us against them and we wouldn't even think about poisoning the air or water to make a tidy profit. Everyone and everything is a piece of God's heart. If we all understood that, just stop to think about the difference it would make in our world and in our own lives.

I challenge each of you to try this out. As you go through your life the rest of today and beginning again tomorrow morning, practice seeing everyone you encounter—including that image in the mirror—to be the Presence of God. It might just lead you to the joy in life you are seeking.

I look forward to continuing on this journey with you in the weeks ahead.

Reverend Thomas Dunlap July 16, 2017