

I SAMUEL 3:1-9;15-20

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room. The lamp of God had not yet gone out and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" and Samuel ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call you; lie down again." So Samuel went and lay down. The Lord called again, "Samuel! Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again."

Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go lie down and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. *(At this point, Samuel has a vision that the Lord is about to punish Eli's house because of his blasphemous sons).*

Samuel lay there until morning. Then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." Samuel said, "Here I am." Eli said "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told Eli everything and hid nothing from him. Then Eli said, "It is the Lord. Let him do what seems good to him."

As Samuel grew up, the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord.

I AM: PART II

WHO I AM

I Samuel 3:1-9;15-20

I am a 1971 graduate of *The Miami University* which now, to its embarrassment, owns the rank of second “party-est” college in the nation. Well, at least we can beat in O.U. in something! And I am just one in a long line of Miami grads in my family. My grandmother went to Western College (close enough) while my mother, two uncles, my brother and sister, my older son and two nephews also graduated from Mother Miami. So as my younger son was growing up, I blithely assumed he would go there as well and from the time he was about three I began to groom him in that direction by taking him to football and basketball games, exposing him to campus—which he obviously loved. So when the schedule was favorable, I would always ask him, knowing in advance what the answer would be, “Hey, you want to go to the Miami game today?” So one Saturday when he was probably about 5, he asked me, “Are we going to *Your-Ami* game today?” (You may have to think about that for a minute).

He certainly gave *My-Ami* a whole new definition with his unwitting play on words. But I think he was on to something because we have a lot of different ways in which we are defined by others and define ourselves. Whenever we utter the words, *I am*, we are offering the world a self-definition by what follows. If we say, *I am excited*, or *I am depressed*, or *I am a pastor* or *I am a teacher* or *I am retired*, we are engaged in self-definition. It tells others—as well as ourselves—something about who we are. And any time we define ourselves, we are actually engaged in a spiritual exercise; that is, if we understand ourselves to be more than just a body. For this *I-Amness* goes into the deeper truth of who we are. If someone wants to get to know you beyond your appearance, they will listen closely to your *I Am* statements.

Last time, I began a three part series based upon several of the rich scriptural passages containing those two critical words. And as a theologian (*I am* a theologian) and as a spiritual practitioner, I believe that any endeavor to enter into a communal experience with the Divine

must begin with the Divine itself. With Whom or What are we wanting a relationship? So in Part I, we wrestled with our definition of God and explored the wonderful account of Moses' encounter with the Burning Bush. God speaks to him from the bush giving him instructions about the mission he is sending him on to negotiate with Pharaoh for the release of the Hebrews from Egyptian custody. Moses, of course, wants to know with whom he is speaking and inquires from this Entity his name so that he can tell the Israelites who sent him. God's response was, *I Am who I Am. Tell them I Am sent you.*

And when we further investigated the meaning of those words, the best interpretation available to us is that God is Presence. *I AM* fully encompasses everything and God is therefore known through existence itself. While the Divine can never be known in Its entirety, (as Paul says, "We see in a mirror darkly") we still see God through God's creation and we therefore know God can never be absent from what God has created. With this in mind, we now turn our attention back to ourselves. Who are we? What is the *I Am* that is you? That is the question for today. In Part III, we shall look into the way in which the *I Am* that is God relates to the *I Am* that is you and the *I Am* that is me.

Our scripture lesson for this morning contains no less than five *I Am*'s. And in all five cases, it is linked to the word "Here": *Here I am.* We have been talking about the act of being present and that is precisely what is meant by the word "here." If I am *here*, I am not there; I am present. When teachers or leaders take attendance and your name is called, you can either respond with "present" or "here." They are interchangeable. We will take up the act of being present next time. But for now, I would like to focus on *who* is here. Who's on first? Who are you?

And I find it significant that in our scripture, while Samuel gave the same answer every time he is called, there is an intervening event that altered Samuel's consciousness each time he responded. In other words, he not only changed, but became more aware of who he was as the story unfolds. For he begins as a simple temple custodian and servant to Eli and assumes

at first that it is Eli who is calling him. Eli is old and he must have had some need that required attention in the middle of the night.

But after it is established that Eli has not called out for him, it becomes apparent to Eli that it must be the Lord on the line. And this changes everything in Samuel's identity. Now he understands that if the Lord is speaking directly to him, he must be a person of importance. And following the vision, he is on the path to becoming a respected prophet. Not only did his public perception change, his *I Am* had evolved from servant to spokesperson for the Lord to all of Israel. That is quite a bump in his identity.

And that raises a question for us as we explore our own sense of who we are. Are we the same person we were a decade ago? Thirty years ago? Fifty years and for some of us 70 years ago? I doubt it. I hope not. If we are, we have not learned a thing!

In fact, research has actually been conducted on this issue. In 1950 (years and years before I was born!), a team of psychologists began a long-term study on how much people change over the years. It originally involved 1208 14-year-old students who were assessed on specific personality traits including their self-confidence, originality, perseverance, conscientiousness, stability of moods and desire to excel. After 62 years passed, 174 of these erstwhile 14-year-olds who were now mid-70-year-olds, agreed to be assessed once more. After comparing the results, the researchers found that there was virtually no resemblance between the participants' current personalities with those they exhibited when they were 14.

We do change and we change a lot. I look at myself and when I was in my mid-twenties to mid-thirties, I was an in-your-face, take-no-crap-from-anybody type of person. I mean, I was into road rage. I recall an incident when when my wife was driving and we were stopped at a light in the left lane when the driver next to us threw a half-eaten hot dog into the street while she laughed hysterically. I jumped out of the car, grabbed that hot dog still oozing with mustard and catsup and smeared it all over her windshield. Good thing she didn't have a gun!

I had to go through that phase to grow out of it. It was actually part of my therapy because I was allowing myself to be pushed around and manipulated. And I believe the turning point was when my counselor asked me “Are you a big jerk (and that is not the word he used) or a little jerk?” And I sheepishly answered, “A little jerk, I guess.” And he replied, “Well, I guess we need to figure out how to make you a *big* jerk.” We did! All of that stored up anger I had swallowed came out. I am probably lucky to be alive. But that is not me anymore. I rarely get angry and if I do, it is only because I play golf and am a Browns’ fan.=

So who are *you* now? Who is the *I Am* that wishes to commune with the eternal ***I AM***, the ***I AM*** that never changes? Let your own words about yourself be your guide. What do you say to yourself about yourself? If we are constantly criticizing ourselves, we are actually disparaging God’s creation. Sure, we all make mistakes, but we have to remember that we are all in this world for a purpose. And part of that purpose is making mistakes because that is how we learn—should we choose to do so. As Mark Twain said, “Failure is inevitable. Learning from it is optional.” So in the process of that journey of self-discovery, making mistakes is critical to the learning curve. All of the great mystics have taught the same lesson. They universally agree that the soul (another word for *I am*) is on the pathway of experience or self-discovery that is working its way back to its heavenly home. Civil Rights activist and poet, Marcus Garvey, said, *God and Nature first made us what we are, and then out of our own created genius we make ourselves what we want to be.* Or as Lily Tomlin said, “*I always wanted to be somebody and now I understand I needed to be more specific.*”

I am certain we do not want to be who we were when we were 14. But given everything we have been through since then and taking into account all of the lessons we have learned, who is it that we want to be now? And as we continue in our service to God, how do we wish to give expression to our own *I Am*?

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