



Sermon, February 5, 2017
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: Where Do We Go from Here?
“On Fire”

Opening Question “Have you ever had an experience in which you caught a glimpse of God or God at work?”

Scripture: Exodus 3:1-14 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

3 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. **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 broad land, 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** So come, I will send 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 worship God on this mountain.”

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.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’”

To be, or not to be (Hamlet, Act III, Sc. 1)

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end

"On Fire"

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause: there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.

What does it mean to live, to be?

(Take comments from the congregation)

Hamlet is driven to ask questions about what it means to be, what the point of existence is, as a result of the terrifying discoveries he makes about death of his father by the hand of his uncle, and the implied infidelity of his mother in that death. I suspect that not many of us

exercise ourselves with these questions too often, but there are those moments, at least for me, usually in the middle of the night, when perhaps we walk the floors pondering these questions.

How do we find our way through that burning question?

If you find yourself in a library or bookstore, what section do you go to if you want to build a house? If you want to bake a cake? If you want to balance your checkbook? If you want to find out what happened during the Civil War? If you want to find out the meaning of life?

Religion and philosophy are all about the big life questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is this wondrous universe all about? These are the sort of burning questions that religion seeks to address. That is what a religious community should be about: helping people know who they are at the core of their being, and how their life matters, and has significance.

Moses and the burning bush, and burning questions

In the Bible Study this last week, we learned that this story about Moses and the burning bush is what is called a *theophany*: which the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines as “a visible manifestation of a deity.” This is the self-revelation of God to Moses. God has a task for Moses: to speak for God as God frees the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt.

Now it is important to keep in mind that at this time, the Israelites, also known as the Hebrews, did not know God particularly. They knew of a variety of gods, and they had preserved perhaps some traditions that there was a “God-of-Abraham,” a “God-of-Isaac,” and a “God-of-Jacob,” but every clan had their own clan god, and they were surrounded by a panoply of gods in Egypt. 6-800 years they have been in Egypt, and there is no evidence that they knew God as the One who becomes known in the pages of the Bible. But this self-revelation to Moses is hugely important, because God is starting the long process of showing this people, and us, that there are not a bunch of little gods running all around. There is only One God. That message starts here, on this hillside, with Moses tending sheep.

God as being and God as becoming

So, there are two parts to this message:

1. God hears human suffering, and raises up people to end it.
2. God is not only a divine being, but is *being itself*: “I am that I am.”

The Hebrew has multiple translation possibilities: “I am that I am,” “I will be what I will be,” “I am what I will be,” “I will be what I am,” etc. this is absolutely brilliant. God is not some little capricious local deity that you can slip into your back pocket and run around with. God is the very foundation of existence itself. Take that in for a moment. Then take this is: God is also the foundation of the possibility for things to change, to evolve, to transform: God is the source of what will become: “I will be what I will be.”

Of course, this is too much for Moses and for the Israelites to completely comprehend. It’s too much for us, as well. But it is a revelation, it is the shining, glorious “face of God” that Moses glimpses. It is the core of the revelation that he receives, and the mystery he carries with him, and that gets passed down through time, to us. What are we going to do with it?

Questions for reflection and comments:

- What has been revealed to us?
- What task has been given to us as a result of revelation?

To understand our own being and our own process of becoming – God says “I am that process, I am that struggle, I am that journey of discovery.” “I am with you” – we don’t struggle with these questions alone. Indeed, it comes down to this: when we seek to understand who we are, and what life is all about, we are, in fact, seeking to know God. And God likes that.