
Who is God?

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Third Sunday in Lent – Year C**

Do you want to know who God is? Do you want to know whether there is even a God?

If so, follow this story. Follow this story, from the Book of Exodus, that we heard this morning. It is the story of Moses out in the wilderness. If you want to know who God is, follow the footsteps of Moses.

Moses ventured into the wilderness. It is uncertain whether he deliberately chose this wilderness or not. He may have been fleeing. He may have been fleeing something embarrassing in his life. He may have just been trying to get his act together. He fled into the wilderness. He may have been looking for a wife. Well, he found a wife in his flight, Zipporah. And his sister, Miriam, was out there with him, too; she would be his dancing companion for life.

Moses danced, too. He knew when to be fast and when to be slow.

One day, he was practicing being slow. He stopped to study a bush that was on fire. When you practice being slow, you find God. It was only because Moses was being still that he noticed something. Anyone could have noticed the fire, that the bush was on fire, but it took time to notice further, that nothing was being burned up by this fire. The bush was on fire, but it was not being consumed.

Follow Moses, and you will find God. Go slow. Pay attention. Pay attention, maybe, to ordinary things, and they will become fire for you.

Moses heard a voice from the flames, declaring that space and that time to be holy. “Take off your shoes,” said the voice. It is meet and right to be empty before God. Don’t try and go anywhere else; listen to the voice of God.

And Moses was rightly in awe. The voice, the presence, touched something deep and personal in the soul of Moses. Moses realized that the voice was connecting Moses back with his own family. “I am the God of your father,” said the voice, “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

“Oh my,” realized Moses, “those are my people, my own people, whose stories I have been told since I was a child.” If we want to find God, we will listen to those stories, too, the stories of our own pasts, our own personal stories. God was present in those stories, even if our ancestors were not specifically named Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They may be named Mary or Martha or Elizabeth or Juliette.

The way God identified himself to Moses was by identifying with Moses’ family, with Moses’ past. And it is the same with us. If we want to find God, God appears in our families, and in our histories. Sometimes this presence is too powerful, full of embarrassments and shames as well as happinesses and joys.

The inner truth of each of our lives, our past and our history, is where God resides; and that awareness can overwhelm us. Moses was suddenly aware of this power and this awe, and he turned his face away from the presence of God.

“Moses,” said the voice, “I have heard my people in misery. I have seen their suffering. I have come down,” said the voice, “to deliver my people from the oppressors. And, the way that I am going to do that is, I am sending you. I am sending you to deliver my people from oppression.”

If we want to find God, we will listen to what God is hearing. God is hearing people in misery and in suffering. If we want to find God, if we want to believe that God exists, we, too, will listen to the cries of the oppressed. That is the side God chooses in the struggles of this world, the side of the oppressed.

And God acts. God sends leaders into the struggles of the world so that oppressed people can be free. God sends us. If we want to find God, we will go to the oppressed. We will follow Moses.

“What?!” asks Moses. And he stammers. He resists. He questions this request. He even questions himself. “Who am I?” he asks, “who am I that I should go bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

“So what if I say that the God of my ancestors has sent me? What is that to them? What do my ancestors have to do with anything? They will simply ask me, ‘What is your God’s name?’ What should I say to them then?”

At that moment in the story, God transforms identity still again. Remember: this story is about who God is! We are following Moses in learning about who God is. We have learned that God is present in the wilderness. God is the fire that appears when we are still. God is the fire that burns but does not consume. God is the presence who is in our histories, who is in our past, who is with our ancestors, whomever they might have been.

Moses asks God further, “What is your name?” and a mighty answer comes forth: “I Am who I am.” It is a strange phrase in almost any language. It is only four letters: Y-H-W-H, the word we now know as Yahweh. The name “Yahweh” means, “I am who I am.” And the phrase can also mean, “I am becoming who I am becoming.”

Okay. Does that help identify God for us, and for those we speak with? Yes, it does. That awesome phrase identifies God with life itself, with existence, with Being itself. God is the God of Being. God is wherever life is.

With that answer, we learn that God is not only with our own individual histories and stories, the stories of our own ancestors. God is in the stories of everybody else’s ancestors, too! God is the God of being and life, wherever there has been being and life. God is not just close and intimate with us. God is close and intimate with everyone; that makes God transcendent, too. God is both immanent and transcendent.

“I am who I am” Further, “I am becoming who I am becoming.” The life of God, and our lives, is not even finished yet. It is becoming who we are becoming.

The power of such an identity of God is overwhelming. Such transcendence is an overwhelming mystery. That is why some religious traditions refuse even to write down the name of God. They return to consonants only, leaving out the vowels. The power of God’s identity is so awesome that it cannot even be verbalized, cannot even be written.

One person, a man named Rudolf Otto, once described healthy religious experience with the Latin words, *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*. God is the mystery which is tremendous and fascinating. We want to be close to that mystery, so close that there is nothing between us and it. We take off our shoes so that we can be close to its reality. That is why we call that presence “holy.” It is holy awe. It is awesome in the fullest way.

But there is a final element to the story. If we want to find God, we follow Moses through these experiences. We find God in the wilderness, in the stillness, in the fire, in our ancestors and personal stories. We find God in the holy awe of transcendent mystery. But there is a finish.

The experience of Moses and the burning bush finishes when Moses is sent, when Moses is sent back in his mission. However, the voice has returned Moses from majesty and transcendence, back to the particular, to particular people, to particular places of oppression. The identity of God is in the transcendent burning fire on the mountain, yes, but that identity returns to a particular people, too.

“Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am’ has sent me to you. And, also, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has also sent me to you.” Both are the identity of God! “This is my name forever,” continues the voice, “my title for all generations” (Exodus 3:14-15).

Do we want to know who God is? Today, following the story of Moses, maybe we learn a touch more. “I am who I am.” I am the God of fire in the wilderness. I am the God of all Being, and the God of your story. I am the God of the oppressed. I am the God who sends you forth, with my power, to set people free.”

AMEN.

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