

I AM

Exodus 3:1-14

Romans 12:9-21

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I have two sisters and their husbands who live in the desert. Actually, they live in greater Phoenix and although disguised by sky scrapers and tract housing, it is still the desert. The predicted temperature for today is 108. My sister who lives in Chandler has a small swimming pool in her back yard. She doesn't go into it because the water is too hot. In a few months when the temperature will go down to the 70's, she won't go in because the water is too cold. Massachusetts born and bred, she forgets just how cold the ocean is. When I visit, I intend to swim. I always wanted a hot tub big enough to swim in.

I understand the appeal of the desert because in the quarter of the year when the air is cool and the skies are crystal clear, it is beautiful. Who wouldn't want that. But, those other three quarters would - I don't know - make me want to live in Vermont, even with mud season. Nothing is perfect.

There is a reason for my introduction. This morning we are focusing both on the desert experience of Moses and the city experience of Paul. Thousands of years separate them but they are linked by the all-encompassing mystery that is I AM. I begin with this Exodus passage, one of the beloved stories from the Old Testament that most of us grew up knowing. Having run away from Egypt, Moses found home, family and contentment in the household of the Jethro, the priest of Midian. He put aside the memories of his people in captivity and would have happily spent his life as a shepherd, disappearing into the mists of history and mythology, but God had other plans for him and the descendants of Abraham and Sarah.

In October, when the Arizona temperature will only be in the upper 80's and low 90's, Neil and I will join my sister and brother-in-law in a visit to the ancient lands of the Navajo and Hopi people. I expect that I will see similarities between the landscape surrounding Moses and that of twenty-first century Navajo shepherds who are the the proof that it is possible for life to thrive in desert conditions. Like those native shepherds, Moses needed to take his flock where they could find plants on which to feed and streams of water to drink. Thus is the miracle of life sustained.

We know the story of the burning bush but let's unwrap it a bit. The bush on fire yet not burning; the Angel of God appearing in the flames; the curiosity of Moses; the voice of God calling Moses; Moses answering; the command of God to come no closer and to remove his sandals for this was holy ground. Mt. Horeb is called the more familiar Mt. Sinai in another tradition. In the later story, this mountain will be the site of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. There is very little in these accounts that does not have some symbolic connection to another event. Thus, regardless of the name, the mountain was known to be a holy place. That Moses, the shepherd led his flock to this holy place is the first stage of the transformation from Moses the confused runaway caught between two cultures into Moses the liberator. He came as a simple shepherd and left that place as the Shepherd/leader of God's sheep/people. This shepherd would come again, leading the freed people to receive from God the Commandments that are still the foundation of basic human morality. So, before there was

David, the shepherd king, there was Moses the shepherd/law giver who brought God's sheep to the promised land.

But for that moment, there was Moses, the confused. Not having been raised by the people of Israel, Moses probably knew little of the traditions and the beliefs of his people. God needed to provide some remedial education before getting down to business. "I am," God said, "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, The God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face. In that moment, he learned the reality of God and the reality of who he was within the community of God's people.

God announced to Moses that the cries of the people were heard and he was to go back to Egypt and be God's chosen instrument for their liberation. In that moment, Moses' calm, untroubled life was over forever. Fearful both of Israel and Egypt, he asked the obvious. "Who am I that Pharaoh will listen?" "I will be with you and put the words in your mouth," God said. "What about the Hebrew people? What if they ask for your name?" The answer: "I Am Who I Am."

This divine response is not only for Moses or for the Hebrew people. This answer is for the ages. And, it is not an answer. It is not a definition. It is The Reality. God, the all-encompassing essence; the undecipherable entity; the eternal presence will not be defined; cannot be defined. Words limit. Imagination balks. Certainly, this passage sets the stage for the transformed Moses to lead his people through the wilderness and into the promised land. But, nothing about the burning bush is as critically important as those words: I Am.

Throughout history humans have placed names on the Divine; perhaps thinking that a name would bring the Divine closer to human imagination, or to give humans the ability to grasp some of the essence of the attribute of the Divine that each cherished or even, to have power over the Divine. Yahweh, God, Adonai, Allah, Ganesh, Zeus, Gaia, Kwan Yin are but a few of the names that humans have given I AM. And throughout the ages, humans have grown in wisdom and understanding of so much of creation, but humans have never entirely grasped not only the immensity but also the intensely personal aspects of the Divine. I AM pulses through all that is, from the miracle of birth to the miracle of the cosmos. Throughout the centuries artists have tried to capture the uncapturable essence but have come close only in the abstract. That incredible work of art created by Michaelangelo in The Sistine Chapel is breathtaking and has been venerated throughout the years. The Sistine Chapel is the site of the election of Popes. Locked in that space it may give them perspective in their deliberations. However, despite the artistry, the texture and the color and the realistic portrayals, the portrait of God is a cartoon, a powerful cartoon, but a cartoon. God is pictured as a superhuman being. How does one draw pure spirit? It is impossible and when we imagine God, we have only one model, ourselves. Thus, God is the old man with the long white beard.

Human Imagination cannot contemplate ineffable. Perhaps it is only in the spires of a medieval gothic cathedral or in the sounds of a sublime piece of music or in the eloquent words of a poet that we humans can grasp minute echoes of I AM.

Mary Oliver, one of my favorite poets, senses I AM in the wonder of nature that surrounds her in the wetlands and seascape of Provincetown where she lives. She writes:

Mysteries, Yes

Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous to be understood.
How grass can be nourishing in the mouths of lambs,

How rivers and stones are forever in allegiance with gravity
while we ourselves dream of rising.
How two hands touch and the bonds will never be broken.
How people come, from delight or the scars of damage,
to the comfort of a poem.
Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers.
Let me keep company always with those who say
“Look!” and laugh in astonishment
and bow their heads.¹

Paul writes about the eternal Mystery in First Corinthians 13, “For now we see through a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”²

Paul, whose transformation from persecutor to believer; from Pharisee to Christian saw in Christ the reflection of I AM that invited humanity into loving intimacy with the Divine. In Christ’s teaching and action, Paul found a connection between the unknowable and the everyday. In his ministry among the diverse population of Roman cities, he realized that I AM was intricately woven into each individual giving them worth. For Paul there was no separation between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female because all were a part of the whole; all were embraced in the eternal Mystery.

In emulation of Christ, he gathered together communities, many of whom had nothing in common. Those neophyte Christians were Diaspora Jews, Greek slaves, Roman citizens and merchants from cities around the Mediterranean coast. They were men and women, young and old. They were wealthy and middle class and barely making it. On the streets of their cities, they would not have come in contact with one another. Together, they were something new.

Paul took these disparate communities, introducing them to one another, to Christ and through Christ to I AM, although indirectly. And how best to be in communion with I AM is through participation in the resurrected Christ. And how best to be in communion with Christ? Paul was pragmatic in his teaching. To live the teachings of Christ in all ones actions, within and beyond those disparate communities was to be in union with the ineffable. Thus Paul taught: Let love be genuine...love one another with mutual affection...Bless those who persecute you or criticize you or take advantage of you...share in the joys and sorrows of all, being caring and loving and supportive to all...open yourself beyond your comfort zone to those whose lives are different from yours.... humbly listen for the wisdom that resides in each person...forgive those who have hurt you and find your own peace.

Paul’s invitation to participate in the Christ-life is, in a certain sense, an invitation to enter into communion with the Divine Mystery. Paul’s very human Christian communities were a part of a Divine Whole. They were not perfect. We are not perfect. Yet when we open our eyes to our own inconsistencies, we are opening our eyes and our hearts to the strengths and weaknesses of all those others and we discover that we are all a part of the wonder. We are each

¹ from Evidence, p. 62.

² First Corinthians 13:12

a miracle. With Mary Oliver, we do not ask why. We laugh in astonishment and bow our heads for we are in the presence of I AM.