Exodus 3:1-15 NPMC

Mother’s Day May 12, 2019

I AM who I AM

The peace of Christ be with you… It is a delight to be speaking to you today, a gift that we stand up freely in this place of worship to preach without fear of violence, censorship or exclusion. It is no small thing that we can interpret scripture with openness and even a spirit of playfulness and inquisitiveness; considering together the nature of God and humanity, never at any time fearing for our safety. As we revel in the various names for God in these next weeks, we are completely free to express our faith understandings without restriction. Many around the world do not have that same freedom and opportunity. The peace of Christ, as we just spoke to each other, lived out on a global scale would make it possible for everyone to testify to their faith without fear. May we work together toward that end.

Today I have chosen a name for God that appears early on in our scriptures, from the second book of the Old Testament, Exodus. “I AM who I AM” is a name that God shares with Moses when Moses wants to know what to call God. It is a great ‘meet and greet’ story that has always provoked a sense of awe in me. The name “I AM who I AM” is to me, deeply mysterious, yet open-ended and at the same time distinctly contained.

We begin our reflection on this name for God within the story that is given to us in Chapter Three of Exodus. This is an account of the beginning of a people, Israel; it is a family story. Imagine some of the family stories we know today; that large family or branch of Mennonite folk, who escaped South Russia almost a century ago. Most of us can go back to some foundational story that sets us up in a particular place at a particular time seeking to explain who we are and why we are what we are today.

So too the story of Moses meeting God in this their first encounter, setting the stage for a wholesale escape from Egypt. This is a pivotal moment in the biblical family story of God’s people because for the first time the descendants of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, are now more than just an extended family but rather have become a whole people, a fledgling nation. They have new identity. Today’s story begins with an encounter between Moses and the God who chooses this tiny band of Hebrews, to make of them a people, a nation, with whom God delights to dwell. In a time where many and various tribal bands worship their tribal gods Israel will do something new and radical by giving their hearts to ONE God. The escape that God is planning for this people Israel and the gruelling forty-year drama and detour through the wilderness that will drag on and on cements a relationship over time and fashions a people who are God’s own.

So enter Moses, a rather ordinary man tending the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro. Well Moses was no ordinary man really because right from the beginning his story was quite unusual. He was rescued from death, from Pharaoh’s murderous campaign to do away with all the Hebrew male newborns. (What a story for Mother’s Day!) Many of us are familiar with the story of the baby Moses, floating in a basket hidden in the bulrushes by his mother, discovered by Pharaoh’s daughter, raised in the royal court eventually returning to his own people. As a result of the encounter told in our story this morning Moses is chosen by God for a spectacular rescue mission.

God and Moses meet at the foot of the sacred mountain, Horeb. In an awesome moment God appears as a flame of fire within a bush that burns continuously. Out of the flames God calls to Moses and Moses responds, it appears, without hesitation, “Here **I AM**.” And God echoes “**I AM**” the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” And then Moses hides his face. Holiness overwhelms him. He knows not to look upon God. So much for initial introductions.

God outlines a plan: the Israelites will throw off the burden of their Egyptian slave-holders and will escape to a land, not empty, but populated with Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. It will be a land of plenty into which Moses is to lead the people. And now in a reversal of Moses’ earlier declaration he says, “Who **AM I**?” that I will do all these things. These are intriguing exchanges about identity. God and Moses telling each other who they are. Now Moses asking who am I? and God coming back with the promise to be with him all the way. The climax of this story comes with Moses’ questioning, “who is going to believe me that I, Moses met you, God? And what am I supposed to call you? What is your name? How will Israel know that you are authentically the Divine Creator?

“**I AM who I AM**.” God reveals a name. Well that sounds rather anit-climactic, self-evident, wouldn’t you say. We are all who we are. Does anyone remember Popeye the Sailor Man’s, “I yam what I yam?” No disrespect here but on one hand it would appear to be a no-brainer to say that “I am what I am.” But truly this is genius. God is not only giving a description, God is giving a name and as a name, “**I am who I am”** is astounding!

A name calls forth an image and to me the image of “I AM who I AM” is a circular and self-contained one: God coming around to God. “I AM who I AM”: God coming back to God as in the movement around the circumference of a sphere. The movement of God the Creator is that of God to God, no other being created God or interfered in any way but rather God is the beginning and the end: I AM who I AM, there is no other. some translations give the name: I am **what** I am or I am **that** I am. To me these have a similar impact.

All of this to say that God reveals the name which is on one hand all-encompassing yet on the other, rather murky, partial and insufficient. We want to know more in a name. What are you like God? Where did you come from? Where do you live? I AM who I AM and that is it? I hear the name Joanne Ewert and I immediately know a lot. Her parents were Nellie and Edwin Bartel, one of her brothers is Stan Bartel. Her husband is Ted Ewert and her children are Wade, Jay and Elan. She originally comes from Drake and is related to scads of people…. on and on it goes. I know a lot from just hearing that name. It would be helpful to be given a name that offers a few more clues to the nature of the Divine One.

From within a bush, a flame of fire introduces the arrival of the Holy. Moses removes his sandals, hides his face. I AM who I AM is revealed in a holy place. I AM is Moses’ God, the God of the ancestors, the one who will now lead a liberation movement. I AM is mysterious, a promise, a companion for all time, the Holy One who will not be pinned down. No one name, will suffice to describe God. That is the beauty of it! All of our human names and images for the Divine can be found within this great I AM. For example, God is beyond gender. We use male and female images for God but recognize that I AM who I AM is far more than these. Many of our other images and names like rock, mountain, shepherd, fire, cloud, are beautiful descriptors but fall far short of the completeness of God. So, we use these names to express our devotion and our connection to God and they are good but they are partial, incomplete and much too small on their own.

And all of this is a huge relief! It is a reminder that we are not in control of the universe. We are not responsible for using one exact or correct name for God or even understanding what it all means. We do not need to tell God, God’s business. The encounter of Moses with I AM who I AM is shrouded in mystery, in the holy and in the truly unnameable. But that is not where it ends. Within this story of naming and identity and revealing comes forth the desire of the Divine to be connected to humanity, to us, to you and to me.

In naming something or someone a relationship is created. Adam names the animals in Genesis. He is to tend and care for them. We name our children when they are born and often spend significant time choosing just the right name that will connect us for a lifetime. Look at the situation this last week in the naming of the new royal baby, Archie. As if there hasn’t been debate over that name and what it does or does not stand for. When a couple marries, they sometimes take on one name or fashion a new one between them to describe their partnership. For Harry Potter fans, the character of evil, Lord Voldemort, is often referred to as “He Who Must Not Be Named”. In this story The One Who Will be Named, I AM, out of love and compassion, desires a relationship with humankind.

Enjoy the story: it is the beginning of a great relationship that proves to be tumultuous, dramatic and testy. Moses and I AM who I AM get to know each other, they expose their identities and establish their credentials. Moses isn’t certain that he is the person for the job of leading Israel out of Egypt but God insists that Moses will do just fine, for he will be accompanied. They establish a partnership, I AM who I AM and Moses, a working relationship that will make the difference for the survival of a chosen people who learn about faithfulness along the way. Just a note, that “chosen” here means, through **this** people the revelation of God will be given to the rest of the world, to be dispersed and shared far and wide. Israel is chosen, given the responsibility for the introduction of the great I AM to the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites… well, you get it! Israel is not set aside as superior or exclusive but rather tasked with developing a relationship and a mission.

I AM who I AM goes on to make a covenant with Israel and gives the Ten Commandments as a guide to faithful living. We read the continuing story of this relationship over a couple of millennia. All too often the people turn their backs on God, forget the covenant and live violently and insularly, tribally. I AM who I AM steps in repeatedly reminding Israel of their commitments and promises and their responsibilities. And as the writers of the Old Testament tell these stories they are laden with trouble and faithlessness. Therefore, this story has much to say to our world today – to us.

We too live in a time of tribalism and violence all around, where interest groups form and use rhetoric that is meant to instill fear in the hearts of the “other”. This is a time for patience for people of faith. It is a time to remember and a time to return to the promises of God. I AM who I AM, the name that implies a deep connection will yet again remind us that in the midst of fear and uncertainty there will be a new way forward. In a world where ethnic cleansing is ongoing, gun violence takes young lives, where radicals of all religions fight for supremacy and as our earth is being polluted, we nevertheless rest in the full, yet mysterious depth of I AM who I AM. There is reconciliation and redemption in that name: invitation, faithfulness and lovingkindness that lasts an eternity. As my favourite hymn declares, “God’s name is love and that love will remain holding the world forever.” This is the patience we embrace as God’s people, now. It leads to action and to justice, to the central truth of the essence of “I AM who I AM” - which is **love**.

On this Mother’s Day when we all celebrate our mothers who gave us life and love we have a great image to guide us. Many of us have rich and meaningful associations with the name, Mother. Mothering and motherhood is wonderful but it is not everyone’s experience of course. All of us are by no means, mother and some of us have had fractious relationships with our mothers. That in no way diminishes the name of Mother or the wonder and delight and beauty that is a part of mothering. As a name for God “Mother” is evocative and warm – for many of us - but in itself it is not complete. Neither is the name “Father” a complete description of love. But on this Mother’s Day as I value my mother I also remember my father. These are the names that gave me life and joy and a solid foundation. Can we remember the same when it comes to names for God? Can we use many names and not be confined to just one? Are we able to celebrate the diverse ways we get at the meaning of a relationship, either human or divine? On this Mother’s Day let us be joyful for we have been awesomely and wonderfully made! Thanks be to God, the Great I AM!

Prayer – God of many names, you who have created us to be close to you, bless us today, strengthen us to be messengers of love in daily things. Your love is strong and deep and everlasting. We rest in your great goodness. AMEN