

BEYOND THE WILDERNESS
Exodus 3:1-15

Today, on *Ash Wednesday*, we mark the beginning of Lent. Usually, in a time b.c.—before Covid-19—we would invite you to come forward to the font where we all were ushered into God’s household of faith. Someone some time ago traced the sign of the cross with wet fingers on our foreheads and assured us of the forgiveness of sins and God’s unconditional love. But now that watery life-giving trickle turns to ash. And then we hear the sobering words: “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return!”

This is the journey Jesus himself took. Baptized by John, the heavens rent open, the Spirit descends like a dove on him, and we hear God’s voice saying, “You are my son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.” But Jesus does not get to bask in the glow of God’s Spirit. Before the water has dried on his forehead, his hair still dripping wet, he is cast out into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, where he gets to taste nothing but ash.

This trajectory resonates with me. I don’t know about you, but for me the last twelve months or so have felt like a perpetual Lent. No matter where I

would go, no matter what I would do, no matter which plans I made, it all seemed to turn into ash in an instant. As the children's nursery rhyme goes: "Ashes, Ashes, all fall down." And while the Lenten journey of forty days and forty nights is usually a welcome period of time for me to take stock of things, this ongoing Covid-Lent has been a bit much. I'm done with introspection and ready to come up for air again.

Last week, however, I gained a fresh perspective on Lent and the Covid wilderness experience. I'm a member of a Jewish-Christian study group. We meet once a month—four Jews and four Christians—to read and study texts together. And last Thursday we looked at the *Book of Exodus*. Only Exodus in Hebrew is not called Exodus. The second book of the Torah is called "*Shemot*," "Names."

One day, Moses is tending Jethro's, his father-in-law's flock, and he leads it beyond the wilderness. And what does he find there? He arrives at the foot of the mountain of God and encounters a burning bush. Moses receives instruction to take off his shoes because he is standing on holy ground. Now, a talking burning bush would have sent me running for the hills, letting Jethro's flock fend for themselves. But not Moses. He stood his

ground. "Here I am," he said. To which the voice from the burning bush replied, "I am the God of your father, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Moses goes: "Tell me something I don't know. I can't go back to my people with this. What is your real name?" And God says: "I Am who I Am. I will be who I will be. This is my name forever and my title for all generations."

"Names." In the name of a God with the most enigmatic name, which is no name at all but really a verb, the Hebrew people, all of them slaves without names, are about to embark on a journey through the wilderness. Not that they hadn't been in one before. They had already endured the wilderness of slavery for more than four-hundred years. When an Egyptian would address them, if they were addressed at all, their only name was "slave." And now, freed from the yoke of pharaoh, they would enter yet another wilderness. Forty years their new journey would last. But this time, they would not be anonymous. This time, they would enter the wilderness as God's people whose "Name" would watch over them forever.

We do well to remember this story of the "Names" beyond the wilderness.

We do well to remember them for several reasons. I think as Christians we often get stuck on our individual names and our individual journeys in the

wilderness. It is therefore important to remember that we are never alone. We always travel with a great cloud of witnesses in the name of the one who walks with us forever. This is especially significant as we struggle with our Covid isolations, each of us in our own way. Even this Covid-Lent will not stretch out indefinitely!

As we look beyond this current wilderness, remember—someone in our community of faith walks with you, prays with you and for you, makes intercession for you before our God with no name. This is true, whether you know it or not. The Lenten journey is never mine alone, although it is that, too. It is always and at the same time our Lenten journey. We travel together with all people of every time and place who forever praise God's name, from generation to generation.

Finally, remember *your* name. Not the name your parents gave you. Not George or Sarah or Jim or Jane or Steve or Linda or Bill or Doug, Mel, Courtney, Anne, David or Dieter, or whatever your name may be.

Remember your *true* name—the one you have received in your baptism: *Beloved*. No matter how you may feel about yourself at this moment or at any given moment, when you were baptized, God said to you, as a

member of the household of faith: “You are my Beloved and with you I am well pleased.”

As we are being marked today—literally and figuratively—with a cross of ashes, we also remember that our return to dust is not the end. As Christ was victorious over death and was raised to new life, so shall we: We shall be raised as the beloved children of God living together in God’s beloved community. There, beyond the wilderness, is light. Light everlasting.

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