

I Am Who I Am

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
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22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Exodus 3:1-15



When I was a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School, my advisor was Sallie McFague, a feminist theologian who was known as one of the toughest professors around at that time. I never saw her that way, because from early on she treated me with such kindness and grace as I tried to navigate my way around what could be an intimidating environment. One aspect of that kindness was her insistence that students call her Sallie. For her, it was a way of battling against the often-hierarchical nature of higher education. No Dr. McFague for her; Sallie would suffice.

I was sitting in class with another renowned teacher at the divinity school, preaching professor David Buttrick, when one of my first-year colleagues asked during introductions if he could call Dr. Buttrick by his first name. Maybe he thought if one allowed it, all did. He Buttrick, a tall, no-nonsense New Yorker, looked down at the student and said, “Of course you can call me David...when I shake your hand at graduation, and not a day before.”

Both Sallie and Dr. Buttrick understood something about the power of names. Each gave expression to that power in different way, but both recognized it was there.

A name is powerful. Powerful also is a bush that burns but is not consumed. Moses is drawn to it, not knowing why. “I must turn aside and see this thing,” he says. He is perceptive, curious, awake. We may say, “Well who wouldn’t turn aside at such a sight?” Well, it is easy to walk through life half-asleep, looking down, caught up in our own concerns that we miss the flames, the miracle, the presence of a God who is always being revealed. So it is here – the bush is burning quite apart from Moses seeing it. But when Moses sees it and turns aside, turns from the way he was going to go toward it, it becomes clear this is not about bushes that burn without being consumed, but about the call of God.

God understands the power of names. “Moses, Moses,” says the Lord. Saying the name twice is a consistent part of call stories – “Abraham, Abraham...Samuel, Samuel...Saul, Saul...”

The call is simple – Go to Pharaoh and confront him. Moses knows that Pharaoh is worshiped as a god, and everyone knows his name. So Moses responds that if he goes and says to the people that he is going to Pharaoh to demand your release in the name of the God of your ancestors, the people are going to want to know your name. All gods have names.

Moses could have left the burning bush, reported the conversation, and announced that Shaddai, Baal, El, Re, or any one of a number of other deities in the area, had spoken, and it would not have altered the message. “God, however you understand God,” he could have said, “has spoken, and has heard your cries and wants to free you.”

But Moses knows it won’t work, primarily because the people will know that none of these other gods, nor any god they can fathom, cares about the cries of the oppressed. They care about power, and not in the service of justice, but in the service of more power. So, if they are going to follow, they are going to want to know the name.

The bush relents and gives a name. YHWH is how it would appear in the Hebrew, since there are no vowels in ancient Hebrew. Yahweh is how we pronounce the name – “I am who I am,” or “I will be who I will be.”

The long-awaited name of God is, in other words, not a name at all. It’s like if you ask your child as they head out the door, “Where are you going?” and they respond, “Out” or “I am going where I am going.” It is both an answer and not an answer. It is far from satisfactory.

It has proven to be a frustrating name for those among us who like their God nailed down and completely understood. It is frustrating for those who would like to substitute their own ideology for God. It is a frustrating name for who would prefer a God who wasn’t always talking about freeing the oppressed and making us uncomfortable. What this story reveals is a God whose name continually goes before us into the future. I will be who I will be. I will be liberator of the Hebrew slaves. I will be redeemer of enslaved humanity.

Walter Brueggemann says that it is plausible that the entire Exodus narrative is a working out of the name YHWH. Everything that follows in Exodus is the continuation of that open-ended name. Everything that happens in the Old Testament, everything that happens in Christ, in the church, in our church, this church, is also a continuation of that open-ended name.

God is still calling people to be part of God's mission in the world. The bush is still burning. Do you feel the tug of it, on your heart, in your mind, a fire burning within you, a calling welling up inside of you?

Church, are we awake enough to see what God is doing? In Christ, through the power of the cross, God is loving and reconciling and making new. God is doing it right here in the love poured out when we weep with those who weep, when we make a phone call to someone who is isolated, when we hop on yet another Zoom call to stay connected, when we act in the world with love and grace, refusing to give in to fear and hate.

The bush is burning in Kenosha and on the Gulf Coast and in hospitals and homes across this land where people are sick and at the side of the dying and those who grieve. Let us walk with our heads up and let us turn aside to see this God who is fiery love and grace. We are part of the I Am; we are part of the I Will Be. We are those who know the name of the one we follow, who have been summoned to a life shaped by justice and love. We are awake, we see God at work; let us turn aside, give our worship, hear our call, and then join in God's ongoing work of emancipation.

We know the name. What a gift! What a calling! What hope, for us and for this beloved world. Amen.