

13th Pentecost

Proper 17

St. Anne's Episcopal Church

September 3, 2017

Who am I?

Yesterday, as I was sitting in the first light of morning on my screen porch listening to the birds and feeling just that hit of a breeze that whispers fall just might come back, as promised, I could not help but thinking God is in his heaven and all's right with the world. It was just a moment of tranquility that pushed all that has been, and all that will be, away—at least outside the screen porch—at least for a moment. For just a moment, there were no phone or television screens lighting up with incomprehensible human struggles and tragedies, no looming storms, no sickness, no destruction, no loss or stress or worry. For just a moment, there seemed to be nothing more important than just sitting in the awareness of the everyday beauty of Creation, and appreciating the privilege of being alive to witness it.

At the risk of romanticizing the life of a shepherd in the time of the Pharaohs, I wonder if Moses, as described in our reading today, could have been having one of those same kinds of moments out beyond the wilderness on Mount Horeb. Just Moses—with his father-in-law's sheep in the pasture—smelling the grasses and his freedom, pondering his blessings of having escaped from Egypt to Midian, finding a wife, a family and a livelihood. Perhaps just for moment, Moses could let go of the past, with its trauma of having been raised as slave's child in a royal household, estranged from his own kin. Perhaps he could even release the fear of the future shadowed by being a wanted man for killing a royal guard in Pharaoh's army—no matter how justified. Just maybe, Moses was having a moment of contentment, of security, of peace.

But then, of course, there is *always something* that chases those ephemeral moments away—time moving too fast, things left undone, old obligations to be addressed and new commitments waiting to be made. For Moses, that something was a

great sight that caught his eye and attention—something outside of his experience that cracked open his curiosity—a fire that had no origin and did not spread, a burning bush that was not consumed. And then to his dismay it called his name: “Moses, Moses! Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” The story of the burning bush is one of the most iconic in scripture, on so many levels—because it is strange, and unexplainable, and so very particular in the life of one ordinary man who had already known his share of drama. Moses—whose life was spared in his infancy by being sent down the river in a basket, surviving on the hope of his mother and the generosity of the Pharaoh’s daughter. Moses—who had as an outsider grown up in a royal household—only to become a fugitive for acting impulsively and heroically to save another. Moses—who by this time in his life would have wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of his days raising a family and tending sheep in remote Midian—was swept out of a peace-filled moment by the voice of God, and asked to do something for God’s people. And what did Moses do first? He hid his face, because he was afraid even to look.

What makes this story so compelling and powerful is not the unexplained phenomena of a burning bush that is not consumed, but of God choosing an ordinary person to do an *extraordinary* thing. God chose Moses—to send him back into the belly of the beast he had already escaped—the beast who had almost swallowed him up—to save God’s people and to bring them out of Egypt. Moses, God bless him, when he *could* look up, was awestruck—but not so much that he blithely agreed. *Who am I* that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? says Moses. *Who am I?* Note that God did not answer Moses with a list of his biography, character traits, achievements, notoriety, or any other identifiable reason that he was chosen. All God said was *I will be with you. I will be with you. OK, but who exactly are you?* said Moses. And God answered, *I am who I am.* Well OK, then, how much more clarity does one need? So, Moses took off his shoes, stood on holy ground, changed course, went home and packed his bags and got going. He went back to Egypt, stood up to the Pharaoh, got his people out of Egypt, and delivered them to the promised land. And *I will be with you* got him through countless setbacks, struggles, and frustrations bordering on despair.

As familiar as it when that *always something* that disrupts our moments of serenity—sometimes even sweeping in to turn our lives inside out and upside down—recognizing a burning bush in the process is not so easy. Signs of God’s presence are not usually delivered in direct words on the tongues of angels, or in signs and wonders to us common folk in this day and time. And if we *did* believe we were hearing the voice of God out of an unexplained phenomenon, would we not hide our faces, afraid to look? Holy Scripture is full of stories of ordinary people called by God—people who answered as Moses did with *Who am I?* and then somehow after hearing *I will be with you*, managed to rise to the occasion and step into the unknown. Some of them changed their world. Abraham, Jacob, Samuel, Saul, Amos, Elijah, Jonah, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, Mary, Peter, John, Nicodemus, Paul, and all the disciples of Jesus, tax collectors, centurions, widows and orphans, sick people, lame people, blind people, lost people. Each story is one of a human hearing the voice of God—in wind, water, or fire, in a bolt of lightning, in the voice of an angel, from the belly of a whale, or from the mouth of Jesus. Each one called said *Who am I?* Each one followed the voice that said, *I will be with you*, and *follow me*. Each one found the courage to say *here I am, Lord*.

Sometimes the presence of God comes in on a hurricane or a flood, where *I will be with you* is found in the powerful witness of sacrifice and risk to save and comfort others. Not everyone is called or destined to some expression of heroism that goes viral on social media—even Paul said we are not to *outdo one another showing honor*. A promise of *I will be with you* does not mean that we should drive to Texas today with all good intentions to help disaster victims. Though we *could* be called—from our dry and comfortable homes with our dry and functional vehicles in the driveway—to send from our abundance some of our money to reputable organizations that will serve the victims of Hurricane Harvey, because that is the thing that will help them the most. And we are *all* called to prayer for everyone who will struggle and suffer from the effects of this disaster and many others around the world every day.

Sometimes the presence of God whispering *I will be with you* is heard as subtle as a nudge to reach out to someone close by who could use some prayer, or reassurance,

or companionship. Sometimes that presence of God is telling us to speak up, to tell the truth, or to seek forgiveness, or to build reconciliation in our lives and in the world. Sometimes the call of the burning bush makes us ask not only *Who am I?* but *Who should I be?* When that happens, and we find ourselves looking down the road into the great unknown, we find ourselves the good company of all the saints, and we can rest assured that our journeys are covered by the love and prayers of those who have gone before us. Some have even drawn maps for us, such as the one offered in Paul's letter to the Romans we heard today:

- Hold fast to what is good; hate what is evil
- Love one another with mutual affection
- Extend hospitality to strangers
- Bless those who persecute you, do not repay evil for evil; feed your enemies and give them something to drink
- Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer

There is Good News in these stories of call and response. *I will be with you* is Good News. And it is Good News that each time we gather together as community, and as church, to share in the Eucharistic feast—the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving offered to us in Jesus Christ—we remind ourselves and each other that we are *all* chosen—each and all. No one of us ordinary folk just trying to get by as best we can in our neck of the woods is left out—or exempt—from being called—sometimes as abruptly as from one moment to the next—into the work of the kingdom. Jesus told the disciples that those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for his sake will find it. And though like Peter we cry out “God forbid it, Lord!” we know deep down that our salvation lies in setting our mind not on human things, but on divine things. Let us pray that even as we cherish those sacred moments of peace in our lives, we are listening for our names to be called and ready for our answer to be transformed from *Who am I?* to *Here I am!* Thanks be to God. AMEN